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## Books in Review

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### Saving the GOP

Grand New Party:  
How Republicans Can Win  
the Working Class and Save  
the American Dream

by Ross Douthat  
and Reihan Salam

Doubleday. 256 pp. \$23.95

Reviewed by  
Daniel Casse

AS THE Bush administration, mired in unpopularity, reaches the end of its eight-year run, there is a surfeit of advice on what the Republican party can do to reinvent itself. David Frum's *Comeback* (2007) argues that important elements of the traditional GOP agenda are no longer relevant to current politics. Michael Gerson, formerly President Bush's adviser and speechwriter, suggests in *Heroic Conservatism* (2007) that conservatives need higher, more compassionate ideals. Newt Gin-

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DANIEL CASSE is a senior director of the White House Writers Group, a Washington, D.C. communications and strategy firm.

grich, the leading Republican figure in Washington during the 1990's, seems to have given up the ghost entirely; *Real Change*, his most recent book, is a populist manifesto that advocates non-partisan solutions to America's problems.

Now come Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam, young editors at the *Atlantic Monthly*, with another assessment of Republican ills and how to cure them. The authors, not yet out of their twenties, prove to be hard-nosed policy analysts and shrewd political observers. *Grand New Party* offers an entirely original critique of how both liberals and conservatives have misdiagnosed the problems of a key American constituency, and why this failure might present the GOP with an unexpected opportunity.

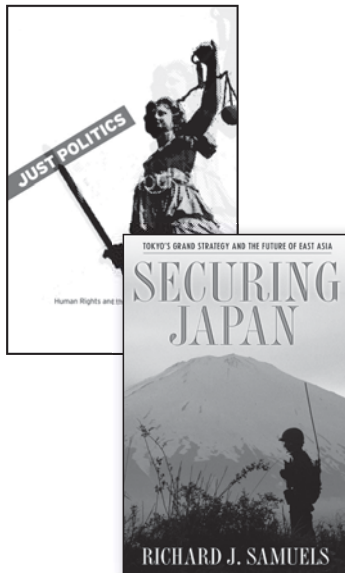
UNLIKE MOST takes on the Republicans, *Grand New Party* focuses on ground more familiar to critics than to supporters of conservative politics: namely, how to develop both a perspective and actual policies that will appeal to working-class Americans. The book is an outgrowth of a much-discussed *Weekly Standard* essay about "Sam's Club Republicans,"

named for the mammoth discount-shopping meccas run by Wal-Mart. These are the predominantly white, non-urban voters who comprised a vital part of the Roosevelt coalition in the 1930's and 40's and of Nixon's "silent majority" in the 70's, and who came to be known as "Reagan Democrats" in the 80's.

Douthat and Salam describe these voters as "working-class," but, as they quickly point out, that term is no longer necessarily attached to a blue-collar job or a union card. Nor are Sam's Club voters the sort of Depression-era victims depicted in the songs of Woody Guthrie. Rather, they are likely to be health-care workers, office administrators, or government employees, and they are far from destitute: a typical Sam's Club voter owns his own home and has filled it with material comforts unimaginable to previous generations. What makes them an identifiable class—and a class in undeniable trouble—is the lack of a higher education, possession of which has become the most important driver of social and economic status in America.

Politically, the Sam's Club voters do not fit neatly into either party,

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instead flitting for the last two decades between Democrats and Republicans. For this reason, no doubt, the mainstream media assume that they must be centrists, hungry for "moderate" policies on trade, the environment, and campaign finance. This dovetails with the diagnosis offered by liberals and leftists, who are eager to blame the problems of the working class on free-market policies that have supposedly pandered to entrepreneurs, corporations, and Wall Street.

Thus, Paul Krugman, the economist and *New York Times* columnist, has made a second career out of claiming that corporate malfeasance and inflated executive salaries are the culprits behind our growing "income gap." In his best-selling *What's the Matter With Kansas?* (2004), Thomas Frank goes a step further by suggesting that a conservative political machine has used red-meat issues like guns and abortion to distract these voters from even recognizing that their economic well-being is in decline, thus keeping them from joining the Democratic party. And so forth.

Douthat and Salam agree that the Sam's Club voter is suffering, but they reject such analyses. Sam's Club voters are not marching for European-style universal welfare benefits or more expansive unemployment insurance. Nor have they been hypnotized by conservatives to ignore their own well-being and become right-wing activists. "The poorest Americans *haven't* turned right over recent decades under the influence of those 'hallucinatory' culture-war issues," write Douthat and Salam. "Instead they've turned left, voting for Democrats more reliably than even in the heyday of the Great Society."

As for the "wage gap" argument, the authors point out that what really unsettles the working class is not the salaries at Goldman Sachs but the insecurity of their own lives. According to recent studies, a significant number of working-class Amer-

icans have household incomes above \$85,000 a year. Their relative affluence, however, has not ameliorated the social instability that characterizes their lives and that manifests itself in higher rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, income volatility, and general economic stress. It is true that the wealthiest Americans have seen their incomes soar as compared with the lower-middle class; but the fault lies not in any corporate conspiracy but in the combination of education and experience that increasingly fuels upward mobility.

LIBERAL OBSERVERS, then, have a skewed view of what ails the Sam's Club voter. But Douthat and Salam are even tougher on Republican strategists—who, they state flatly, have fallen out of touch with their own base. The members of today's working class are culturally conservative, church-going, and eager to improve their lot. They should be the spine of the GOP. If they are not, it is because the GOP has given them no reason to be.

For many years, Douthat and Salam write, Republicans have made small government and supply-side tax cuts the pillars of their economic program. The Republican hero has been the small-business owner or entrepreneur who resents government interference in the economy. Such role models, central to Republican speech-making since Reagan, have, however, become irrelevant to the lives of working-class voters, who still need help from the government if they are going to realize the American dream.

How can Republicans reach them? The second half of *Grand New Party* offers a series of proposals, whose common purpose is to help working parents raise children without being forced to make painful economic compromises. The standard liberal response to this dilemma has been universal day care and generous parental leave. To Douthat and Salam, these are really "business-friendly" policies, designed to make

it easier for people to work, not necessarily family-friendly policies, designed to strengthen the home.

For their part, Douthat and Salam would provide government subsidies to parents who take care of children at home and even pension credits that recognize the dollar value of household work. They would also eliminate the payroll tax for working families and, rather than imposing a minimum wage, offer wage subsidies to employers.

Similar ideas have been kicked around for decades in both conservative and liberal policy circles. But Douthat and Salam's ideas, trained on covering the full spectrum of everyday life, are more imaginative. For example, they endorse a public-school funding mechanism aimed not at reducing class size but at rewarding schools that succeed in attracting students. This would stimulate market competition and ensure that good schools have the resources they need. To fight crime, they propose that the federal government help hire an additional 500,000 police officers in local communities, a move that would have the added effect of creating a source of professional employment for urban males. They would also spend much more on urban roads and highways, a proposal sure to anger anti-sprawl activists but one that, if implemented, might actually reduce the time spent commuting—the bane of many working-class families.

ONLY THE most libertarian reader is likely to find this program objectionable in its entirety, though others will surely object to some aspects of it on budgetary grounds. What Douthat and Salam have done, and have done exceptionally well, is to take on the very issues—child care, health care, government aid—that were once the exclusive preserve of liberal advocates and to devise policies addressing them that promote responsibility, independence, self-respect, and individual advancement. This is no small achievement.

Which is not to say that *Grand New Party* is a flawless work of analysis. At times, the authors wax sentimental over the possibilities of a new era of working-class opportunity. Extolling the old-fashioned virtues of the skilled laborer without a college degree, for example, they call for a greater emphasis on schools teaching craftsmanship. Elsewhere, they envision the reestablishment of tight-knit communities in which the local pharmacist will take time off to teach chemistry in an open community school. They also believe they can revive the spirit of the American frontier by funneling government subsidies to dying rural communities. Such reveries may sound lovely, but they are utopian, and they detract from the tough-minded approach of the book as a whole.

The main trouble with *Grand New Party* lies elsewhere: in the decision of the authors to attempt both a policy analysis and a partisan political strategy in one and the same volume. When it comes to the latter, *Grand New Party* is unper-  
suasive.

In response to the GOP's growing electoral strength in the 1980's, the Democratic party tried to make itself more appealing to certain tightly defined demographic groups: urban liberals, Jews, blacks, gays, union members, and so on. Pollsters like Stanley Greenberg and Mark Penn, both of whom worked for Bill Clinton, went further by categorizing voters into "single urban environmentalists," "married minivan drivers," and the like. *Grand New Party* assumes that similar techniques will work for the GOP—that is, that a new coalition can be galvanized into formation by means of a list of bite-sized policies for bite-sized constituencies.

There is scant evidence that this is the case. Indeed, the Democratic effort itself proved unsuccessful when Hillary Clinton, guided by Mark Penn, sought to use it to catapult herself to the Democratic nomination.

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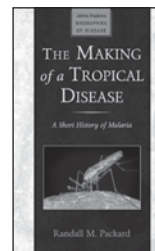
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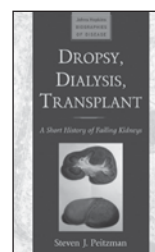
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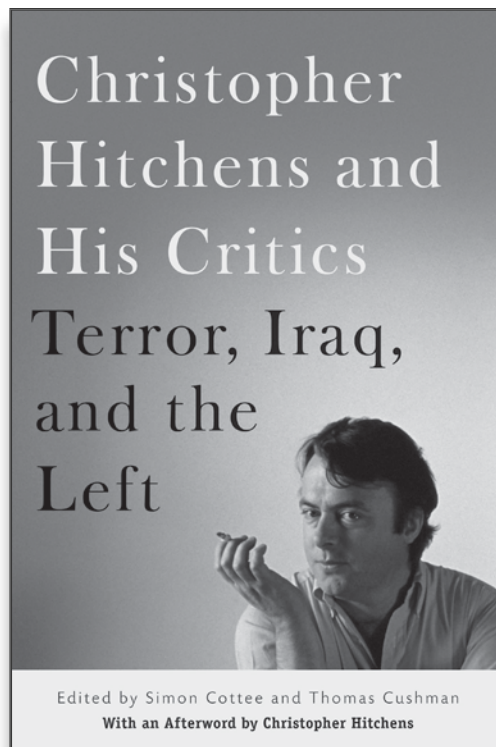
Consider Douthat and Salam's central notion of appealing to families as a powerful voting bloc. Demographically, the United States has an aging population, and most current polling shows that the older voters become, the less interest they have in supporting policies that help parents and children. Nor, despite the strong case made by Douthat and Salam for a governmental help-

ing hand, are voters in general clamoring for an expansion of government services. A May 2008 survey by Rasmussen Reports found 62 percent of respondents preferring fewer government services, with lower taxes. Nowhere does this book present a realistic political strategy for reversing such sentiments.

The innovative policies proposed by Douthat and Salam might indeed

bring about welcome changes for many working-class Americans. To that end, *Grand New Party* can serve as a valuable resource for the next Republican President's domestic-policy team. It will, however, be far less useful as an electoral weapon for this year's Republican presidential candidate.

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