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2013: The Republicans

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 4, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The Republican Party faces a fundamental decision in the coming weeks. Will it accept the burden of government or will it serve as a vehicle for an ideological agenda that is not shared by most Americans or by the Democrats who control the Senate and the White House?

The fiscal cliff negotiations were a fiasco for House Republicans. The final deal was worse than the deal they walked away from eighteen months ago during the negotiations to raise the debt ceiling. The deal was worse than several they walked away from in the past two months since the election. In the end, after the Senate passed the fiscal cliff legislation by such an overwhelming margin, the House leadership had little choice but to bring the measure to the floor for a vote, even though it garnered only about one-third of the Republican caucus. Had they failed to approve the measure, they and they alone would have borne the full brunt of criticism for failing to govern. That is not a position any responsible political leader can be in.

Conservative Republicans complain that no measure should come to the floor without the support of a majority of the GOP caucus, but there is nothing conservative about that procedural requirement. It was invented only about ten years ago and is known as the ?Hastert Rule? after then-Speaker Daniel Hastert. But, in a legislature older than the U.S. Congress, the British parliament, the governing party at times allows a free vote to its members, not whipping them to support one side of the issue or the other. This practice is at times necessary when a caucus is divided. It is also necessary, as it was earlier this week, when the need to put something to a vote trumps the need to maintain internal party cohesion.

Unfortunately for the GOP, there is no reason to think that the political dynamics will be hugely different in two months when the debt ceiling issue comes round again from what they faced last week. This week, after the debacle of the fiscal cliff negotiations, Republicans were crowing that next time they would have the leverage, but if the leverage is defaulting on the national debt, with unforeseeable consequences for the U.S. and world economy, it is hard to imagine them not caving at the last minute as they just did. You don?t risk the entire economy to make a point, even a very important point, not when there are at least reasonable compromises to be had.

More importantly, for reasons I do not understand, the Republicans seem intent on fighting over the same issue that dominated the election last year, an election they lost. You would think that Speaker Boehner and Senator McConnell would have spent at least a little bit of time figuring out new policy initiatives that would permit them to present a different face to the electorate. The speeches delivered by Cong. Paul Ryan and Sen. Marco Rubio at the Jack Kemp Foundation event last month gave at least some rhetorical hints at a new direction, but they did not elaborate any policies that would allow the GOP to appear like a party that cares about more than the tax rates of millionaires.

There are a variety of social and political ills that the Republicans could address that would simultaneously allow them to highlight their core principles and also appear as new policy initiatives. The pathologies of the

inner city were a constant and real concern for the late Congressman Kemp. He was not allergic to government efforts to ameliorate the poverty of the inner city, but Kemp understood that one needed strong families and communities, and the help of the market, to really provide assistance. What policies could the GOP be advocating that would help struggling families, help new businesses get a start in the inner city, etc.? It is vital that the GOP demonstrate it cares as much about the poor as it does about the rich.

Usually, when a party has a proven track record of electoral defeats, the intellectual re-making of the party starts not with its Washington representatives but with governors. Think of the role then-Governor Bill Clinton, among other Democratic governors, played in starting the Democratic Leadership Council in the 1980s. Surely there is a conservative equivalent of Bill Galston, who remains one of the most creative policy thinkers in Washington, a man who knows the data like the back of his hand, but can also discern a political philosophy in the numbers. The Republicans like to talk a lot about federalism, but what initiatives have their governors actually begun? Are there any successful anti-crime programs, any pro-immigrant policies, anything being done in the hinterlands that might gain traction nationally? The GOP governors we read about in the national papers seem hell-bent on enacting a Tea Party agenda that the vast majority of voters reject. Where is the GOP governor who is thinking creatively about the implementation of the Affordable Care Act? Have any Republican governors taken the lead on an environmental issue?

The fundamental ideological challenge for today?s Republican Party is to decide whether it will constitute itself as a classic, Burkean conservative movement, one that respects the role of tradition and culture and communities and families, or one that will embrace a libertarianism that sounds good (?Freedom!?) but which destroys the communal fiber of any polity and would have horrified Burke. Today?s GOP needs to ask itself whether they really think the unfettered financial sector is good for those other important social goods they care about: social stability, upward mobility, the traditional family. I do not expect them to abandon their pro-business calling cards anytime soon, but just as the DLC crowd challenged the political orthodoxy of the Democratic left, and just so invited voters to give them a new look, today?s GOP leaders need to be willing to challenge some of the received orthodoxies of the political right. And, they can do so in terms that are conservative. The early George Will would or should be embarrassed by some of his more recent writings.

I frankly do not see a truly traditionalist, Burkean conservative wing regaining control of the GOP anytime soon. There are no more Howard Bakers or Bob Doles. The new mantras of the up-and-coming crowd of GOP leaders in Washington are the mantras of libertarianism. They do not want balanced budgets so much as they want to eviscerate the social safety net. They do not consider Social Security and Medicare as the achievements they are, but as things to be done away with, via privatization. They view the ?laws of capitalism? as if they had been transcribed at some economic Mt. Sinai. Their hostility to organized labor is shameful. Their views on foreign policy are jingoistic.

The GOP today needs grown-ups. It needs leaders who will stare down the climate change deniers in their party just as thoughtful conservatives in the 1950s stared down the John Birchers. It needs leaders who devise conservative solutions to intractable problems, not wishful thinking and incantations of the economic gods from Austria. They need a foreign policy rooted in something more ethical than might makes right mixed with Islamophobia. They need to get on board immigration reform or risk being confined to minority party status for at least a generation. Where are the future leaders of the GOP? And when will they rescue the party from the Tea Party fire they created, but which has now burned out of control? Our country needs a vigorous two party system. The health of our democracy depends upon it. I certainly want a check on the ambitions of Mr. Obama and Mrs. Pelosi! But, the check on power must be reasonable, disposed to govern not to grandstand, and willing to examine evidence that challenges party orthodoxies. It remains to be seen whether or not the GOP in Washington can get its act together, but the first few days of the year were far from promising.

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