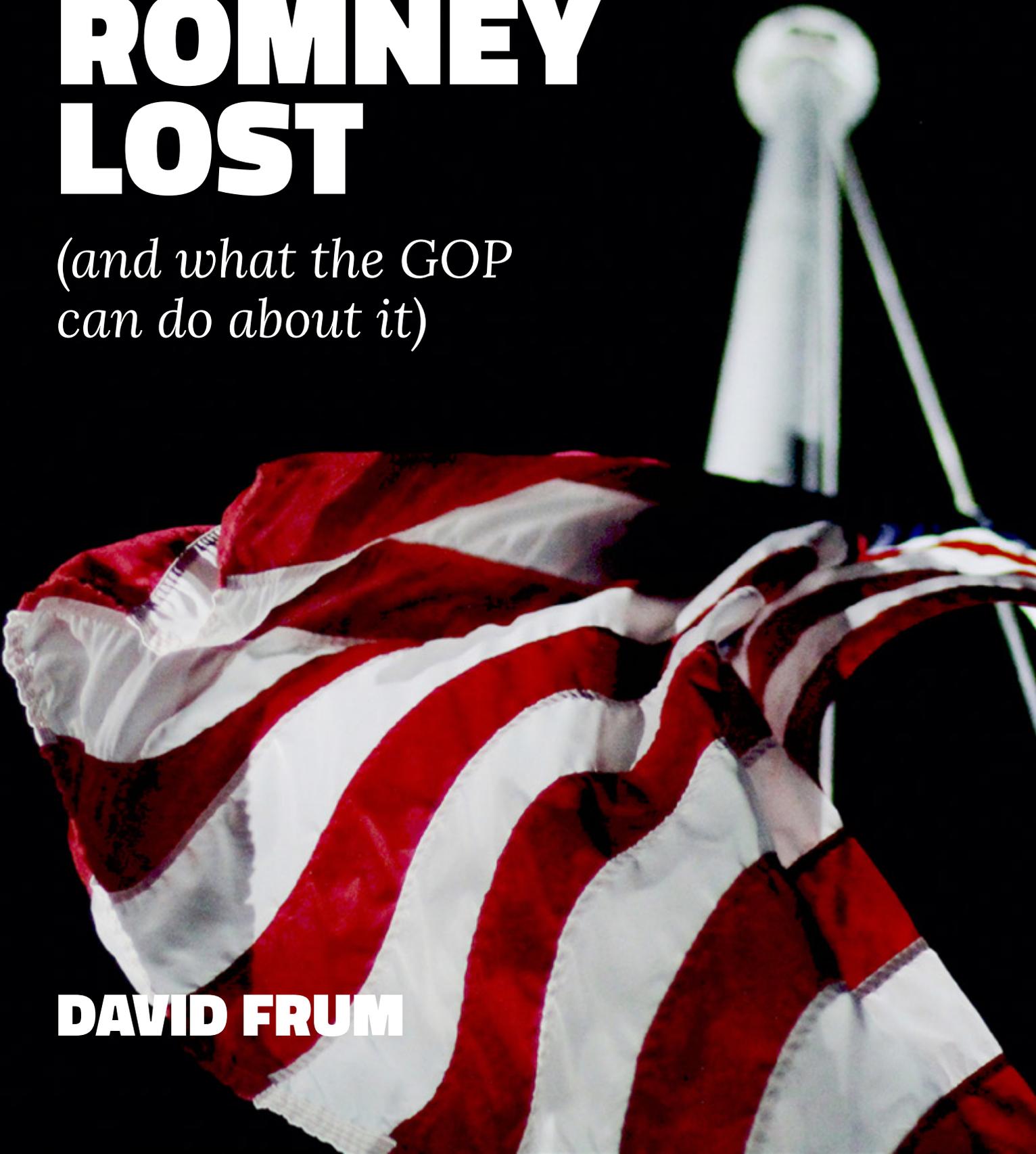


WHY ROMNEY LOST

*(and what the GOP
can do about it)*

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1. DEFEAT

Don't tell me it was close. Don't blame it on Hurricane Sandy or Governor Chris Christie. When economic conditions are as bad as they were in 2012, and the incumbent wins anyway, that's not "close." That's the challenger party throwing away a sure thing.

By all rights, President Obama should have lost in 2012. Americans had entrusted Obama with the job of fixing the economy after the crisis of 2008. Four years later, the economy was improving, but was manifestly not fixed. Obama had an inventory of plausible-sounding excuses, yes. So did George H.W. Bush in 1992 and Jimmy Carter in 1980. Voters don't normally accept excuses. They expect results, and if a president doesn't deliver them within a four-year term, they replace the president.

Yet Barack Obama survived. He survived less because he won the 2012 election than because his Republican opponents lost it.

Throughout 2012, Obama's job-approval ratings struggled to gain altitude above the 50 percent mark normally considered essential for re-election. Mitt Romney's job was to convince the disapproving majority that he offered an acceptable alternative, that he would be a reliable custodian of their interests. As the Romney campaign itself put it, "This election isn't about 'the economy.' It's about 'your economy.'"

And here is where Romney failed. In poll after poll, big majorities described the Republican nominee as favoring the wealthy over the middle class.¹ No surprise, therefore, that throughout the spring and summer of 2012, Obama held a multi-point lead over Romney, despite the president's sub-50 percent job-approval rating. Then, in the final month of the election, Romney's team at last released "Moderate Mitt from Massachusetts" from his six-year seclusion. Abruptly the election tightened.

In the first presidential debate on October 3, 2012, Romney disavowed one-by-one the major pledges to which he'd committed himself during the Republican primaries. Romney effectively repudiated his big, across-the-board tax cut, insisting instead that the "wealthy" would continue to contribute the same share of federal revenue after

1. See eg this ABC News poll released in mid-October 2012, in which 57 percent agreed that Romney favored the rich: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/10/enthusiasm-rises-for-romney-obama-has-a-right-track-retort/>

his tax cut as before. He promised that Medicare would continue indefinitely in its present form for all who wanted it, with vouchers offered only as an additional option. He celebrated his Massachusetts health plan, once anathema inside the GOP. He endorsed strong regulation of the financial services industry. He even conceded that if his plan to block-grant Medicaid proved inadequate to cover poor people, “we could step in and see if we could find a way to help them.”² In the last month of the race, Romney reduced his economic program to a five-point plan that avoided any mention of entitlement reform or upper-income tax cuts.

Almost overnight, Moderate Mitt closed a four-point gap with the president and ran neck-and-neck until voting day. “Severely conservative Mitt” would have lost badly—and Romney and his team knew it.

In fact, almost all Republicans understood what Romney needed to do. Back in October, when there was a race to be won, we didn’t hear many conservatives demand that Romney campaign as an “authentic conservative.” We didn’t hear protests against Romney walking back his tax-cut pledge. We didn’t hear pleas for Romney to talk more about cutting Medicare and Medicaid. We didn’t hear advice that Romney release ads about abortion and same-sex marriage. We didn’t even hear complaints about the omission of the central conservative program from the stripped-down five-point economic plan.

Those who will be most adamant post-election that “real conservatism” would have won are likely to be the same people who, pre-election, denounced as “media bias” any report that Romney actually would cut taxes for the richest, actually would voucherize Medicare, actually would multiply the ranks of those without health insurance.

When the presidency was on the line, conservatives awoke from the ideological fantasies of the previous four years. They regained clarity about how elections are fought and won. They granted Romney the freedom of action that they had denied him until the very last minute.

Unfortunately, that clarity arrived too late, and the risk is high that it will dissipate with the election behind us. Despite the record and the facts, we will soon hear that Romney lost because of the moderation that rescued him in October. We’ll hear that he lacked conviction; that he didn’t attack the president fiercely enough; that some different slogan or different advertising messages would have made all the difference. Advisers will leak disparaging stories about each other. Radio and TV hosts will attack the candidate. Conservative intellectuals will despair of the American people.

After-the-fact finger-pointing and blame-shifting will miss the bigger truth. The Republican Party is becoming increasingly isolated and estranged from modern America. In the quarter century since 1988, there have been six presidential elections.

2. <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/03/162258551/transcript-first-obama-romney-presidential-debate>

Only once—once!—did the Republican candidate win a majority of the popular vote, and then by the miserable margin of 50.73 percent. By contrast, of the six elections from 1968 through 1988, Republicans won five. Their average share of the vote in all six, including the unsuccessful election of 1976, was 52.5 percent.

We Republicans may console ourselves that we did win two big victories in the recent past, 1994 and 2010. But those were off-year elections, when 60 percent of America stays home, and those who do turn out are the wealthier, the older, and the whiter. The Republican success in those elections only underscores the bigger problem: the GOP is rapidly becoming the party of yesterday's America.

Seldom, though, has America needed a conservative message more than it needs it today. So much false abuse has been hurled at President Obama that there's a danger of losing sight of the troubling truth. The president is not a stealth Marxist or a concealed Muslim. He's not plotting to impose Sharia law or death panels. But he is the most government-centric president since Lyndon Johnson. Re-elected, he will confirm and complete the most ambitious agenda of government expansion since the Great Society.

At the end of 2012, the tax cuts of 2001 and 2003 expire, as does the payroll tax holiday. In 2014, the tax increases embedded in the Affordable Care Act go into effect. Together, these measures will likely soon boost federal revenues to the highest level of national income since World War II.

In his first term, Obama massively increased direct federal intervention in the economy, especially in the energy sector, favoring one industry over another, one firm over another. He hopes to invest still more, using the continuing federal role in the auto sector as a powerful tool of control.

The president has instituted universal health coverage, a welcome change, financed by the most targeted of tax increases on private investments and high incomes—which are neither welcome nor sustainable. While waiting for the new taxes to bite, the administration will write the regulations that put Obamacare into effect and reshape one-sixth of the U.S. economy at Washington's direction.

The president intends a rapid shrinkage of the U.S. defense budget, even as the Arab spring rapidly freezes into an Islamist winter. Meanwhile, the president persists in his wrong-headed hopes that acquiescing to Islamist take-overs of Middle Eastern states will mitigate Islamist anti-Americanism.

The ratification of the Obama agenda will understandably enrage and depress conservatives. Yet if there is any lesson conservatives ought to have learned from the past four years, it is the danger of succumbing to angry emotion. We've had four years of self-defeating rage. Now it's time for cool.

In the battles over Obamacare in 2009–2010, the debt ceiling in 2011, and the Ryan budget in 2011–2012, the GOP each time chose the course of highest risk, both to itself and the country. The GOP lost every one of those gambles.

Result 1: Obamacare is now securely the law of the land, a hugely expensive new entitlement financed by highly redistributive taxes. Perhaps there was never a compromise available on a more modest program, financed in a broader-based way. We'll never know, because we didn't try. Our Plan B: win the November 2012 election and then repeal Obamacare. That was not such a great plan either: repeal would have been harder than it sounds even with a Republican president. Having lost the presidency, repeal becomes hopeless. By 2017, it will be a heroic labor to make changes that could have been had for the asking in 2010.

Result 2: In the summer of 2011, the debt ceiling fight was halted at the brink of default, disgrace, and disaster. It's amazing to recollect how unnecessary the whole exercise was. Congressional Republicans had several other ways to make their point about debt and deficits. That struggle exacted an immediate political price: a rise in the congressional GOP's disapproval numbers from the mid-60s to the mid-70s between spring and fall 2011.³ Even more catastrophically, the congressional GOP only extricated itself from the fiasco at the price of agreeing to a budget sequester at the end of 2012, which threatens another pointless legislative confrontation to avoid another unacceptable economic body blow.

Result 3: Gerald Kaufman, a dissident MP in Britain's Labour Party, dubbed his party's ultra-left-wing 1983 election manifesto "the longest suicide note in history." The even-lengthier Ryan plan has since usurped Labour's title.

Why did House Republicans feel it necessary to nail their colors to the mast in favor of a budget that had no hope of ever becoming law—and that utterly failed to achieve its advertised goal of rapidly reducing deficits and debt? (According to the Congressional Budget Office, the plan would not have balanced until about 2040, due mostly to the very large tax cuts it contained.) The authors of the plan hoped to force their ideas to the top of the next Republican president's legislative agenda. Instead, they helped ensure that there would be no next Republican president to have a legislative agenda.

Those who'd blame the 2012 presidential defeat on Mitt Romney's flaws and weaknesses as a candidate should bear in mind that the cerebral, cool Barack Obama is not exactly the second coming of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Presidential elections are not really personality contests. If they were, Richard Nixon would never have defeated Hubert Humphrey in 1968, and Al Gore would not have won the popular vote in 2000. Messengers are always flawed. It's the message that matters most.

3. http://pollingreport.com/cong_rep.htm

Where was the conservative message for the great American voting majority?

America in 2012 had not yet emerged from the worst jobs crisis since the 1930s. And what was the GOP's big job-creating idea? To enact a 20 percent cut in income tax rates—exactly the same kind of tax cut passed in 2001 and still in place when the jobs crisis started. Was it so hard to predict that Americans would find unconvincing the idea that the cure for the disease was more of the same medicine that had failed to prevent it?

Even if taxes were the great voting issue of 2012, how could Republicans fail to recognize that 80 percent of Americans pay more in payroll taxes than income taxes? Their taxes were scheduled to go up on December 31, 2012, when the payroll holiday expired. Yet the GOP had hardly a word to say to them. Instead, we offered a tax plan that bestowed almost all its benefits on a wealthy few. (The Romney promise to eliminate enough upper-income deductions to balance his proposed cuts in tax rates also implied the following politically deadly arithmetic within the category of the “wealthy”: a large shift in the tax burden away from the wealthiest of the wealthy, people earning above \$500,000 a year, down toward the least wealthy of the wealthy, people earning in the lower six figures.)

The American middle class has been losing ground for a dozen years. Even at the peak of the Bush expansion, the typical American family was earning less than it had earned seven years before. In the three years of slow economic recovery since the summer of 2009, 93 percent of the income gains were collected by the top 1 percent. Yet we Republicans had little or nothing to say about middle-class wages—or the most important middle-class expenses, from college to housing to healthcare.

Republicans pledged to repeal Obamacare, removing the promise of insurance coverage from millions who would otherwise receive it. We speculated about retaining the most popular elements of Obamacare, but offered no details on how that would work, or how it would be paid for. There was only one thing that we did make clear: we'd preserve the medical benefits of everybody over age 65, and pay for them at the expense of everybody under age 55.

Republicans made debts and deficits their central issue in 2012. In 2010, Republicans, including the party's vice presidential nominee, had rejected the previous most credible plan to reach budget balance—the work of the Bowles-Simpson commission—because it included tax increases. (Specifically, because Bowles-Simpson would have allowed the Bush tax cuts to expire.) That's a legitimate policy disagreement. Yet Bowles-Simpson would have reduced the budget deficit beneath 1 percent of GDP within a decade⁴; the eventual Republican alternative took almost 30 years to do the same. If your proposal takes three times as long to reach a destination as the leading alternative, you can't claim to be in any great hurry.

4. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3844>

Those who would urge the GOP to double down on ideology post-2012 should ask themselves: would Republicans have done better if we had promised a bigger tax cut for the rich and proposed to push more people off food stamps and Medicaid? Would we have done better if we had promised to do more to ban abortion and stop same-sex marriage? If we had committed ourselves to fight more wars? To put the country on the gold standard?

Some combative conservatives may wish that Romney had talked more about the various plots and conspiracies they believed Obama to have launched upon the land: Fast & Furious, Acorn, Pigford, U.N. bike lanes, Obama's imagined plan to abolish the suburbs. But while this kind of angry talk may gain eyeballs on "Hannity," it's not the stuff that swings undecided voters in Colorado and Virginia.

And deep down, we all know it.

2. DELUSION

Yet if we know that extremism is dangerous, why do we see so much of it?

Winning presidential candidates have always spoken to the entire country and promised to represent all Americans. “I ask you to trust that American spirit which knows no ethnic, religious, social, political, regional, or economic boundaries; the spirit that burned with zeal in the hearts of millions of immigrants from every corner of the earth who came here in search of freedom.” That’s Ronald Reagan, accepting the Republican nomination in 1980. The tragedy of the modern Republican Party is that it remembers Ronald Reagan’s lyrics—the specific policies he recommended for the problems of his time—but has lost his music.

It’s a far distance from Reagan’s sun-lit optimism to Romney’s surreptitiously recorded words in Boca Raton, Florida: “There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it—that that’s an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what ... These are people who pay no income tax ... [M]y job is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives.”

It’s very important to understand that Romney’s words in Boca Raton were not a gaffe, a slip of the tongue. They expressed an idea—an idea that Romney himself may well not have personally shared, but one that his conservative audiences had become very used to hearing.

There are makers and there are takers; there are producers and there are parasites,” explained Mary Matalin on CNN, a month before the election.⁵

“We are reaching a fiscal tipping point. The moral tipping point is even worse and the moral tipping point is, before too long we could become a society we were never ever intended to be. We could become a society where the net majority of Americans are

5. http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=GZA6DX-O4Dc#!

takers, not makers,” worried Paul Ryan in a September 2011 speech.⁶

“Should the 47 percent who pay no taxes even be allowed to vote?” wondered Steve Doocy of Fox News on July 28, 2010.⁷

The line was drawn not only between richer and poorer, but between races and ethnicities.

Former White House Chief of Staff John Sununu sniffed of Obama, “I wish this president would learn to be an American.”⁸

Newt Gingrich endorsed Dinesh D’Souza’s 2010 book *The Roots of Obama’s Rage* arguing that Obama’s worldview was “Kenyan anti-colonial behavior.”⁹ (That book soon became *2016: Obama’s America*, a film that would gross more than \$30 million by election day 2012, the second highest take for any political documentary ever.)

Donald Trump briefly led the Republican presidential contest by repeatedly denying the American citizenship of the president of the United States.

Conservative media scrounged local police blotters to find incidents of black-on-white trouble, disturbance, and crime, to support a narrative enunciated all the way back in 2009 by the loudest conservative talker of them all, Rush Limbaugh: “In Obama’s America the white kids now get beat up with the black kids cheering ‘yeah, right on, right on, right on.’”¹⁰ I could list hundreds of other examples of racially loaded criticism of the president—and of angry conservative impatience with anybody who noticed the racial loading. As Limbaugh sneeringly retorted to his own critics, “no matter what, it’s racist.”¹¹

If conservatives lost their heads, the reason may be the mood of apocalyptic gloom that settled upon them in the Obama years.

“The battle is on, and nothing less than the soul of America is at stake,” declared American Enterprise Institute President Arthur Brooks in his 2010 book, *The Battle*.¹²

6. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrrCk15e6sQ>

7. <http://mediamatters.org/video/2010/07/28/doocy-falsely-claims-47-percent-are-not-paying/168380>

8. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7RMgPa7BNw>

9. <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/246302/gingrich-obama-s-kenyan-anti-colonial-world-view-robert-costa>. The book is Dinesh D’Souza, *The Roots of Obama’s Rage* (Regnery, 2010).

10. <http://mediamatters.org/video/2009/09/15/limbaugh-in-obamas-america-the-white-kids-now-g/154599>

11. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvDqIQ3mUJI&feature=youtu.be>

12. <http://www.amazon.com/The-Battle-Enterprise-Government-Americas/dp/0465019382>

“If Romney loses, it’s lights out for America and we have no place else to flee to,” lamented the columnist Ann Coulter in September 2012.¹³

Republican runner-up Rick Santorum offered up a similar thought in October 2012. If Obama wins re-election, he said, “it’s game over.”¹⁴

The popular conservative writer Mark Steyn foresaw in Obama’s re-election “not merely the decline and fall of a powerful nation but the collapse of the highly specific cultural tradition that built the modern world.”¹⁵

It’s not news that partisans foresee the end of the republic every time they lose an election (although Steyn’s doom-inflation to encompass the end of the modern world may be unique). For example: “[T]he American people have witnessed the calamitous consequences of full and unrestricted Democratic control of the Government. It has been a record of unparalleled incapacity, dishonor and disaster ... Every consideration of public safety and individual interest demands that the Government shall be rescued from the hands of those who have shown themselves incapable of conducting it without disaster at home and dishonor abroad...” That’s from the Republican platform of 1896, but you could adjust a few phrases and it would work just fine on Fox News tonight.

Democrats talked nearly as wild in the Bush years as Republicans have talked since 2009. But when it came time to act, Democrats in the Bush years acted with shrewd restraint: recruiting moderate candidates to run in Republican leaning congressional districts, then building the broadest possible, most moderate-seeming coalition to support their presidential nominee in 2008. Groups like MoveOn.org (which ran a venomous newspaper ad denouncing David Petraeus as “General Betray Us”) were sidelined lest they embarrass party strategists. Republicans since 2009 could not muster equivalent self-control. Republicans did not only say crazy things; they believed the crazy things they said, and they acted on them, too.

At a time when the need to broaden the party’s appeal seemed overwhelmingly compelling, Republicans narrowed their appeal to the most ideological fragment of the conservative base.

Conservative Republicans credit Tea Party radicalism for the congressional victory of 2010. Let’s go to the tape. In 2010, ill-judged Tea Party candidates cost the GOP four otherwise winnable Senate seats: Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, and Nevada. Since the final Republican tally amounted to 47, those four defeated Tea Party Senate candidates wrecked Republican hopes for a Senate majority.

13. <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/coulter-romney-election-obama/2012/09/18/id/456678>

14. <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/10/21/santorum-game-over-if-obama-wins-again/>

15. <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Dependence-Day-6753>

In the House, the GOP did much better in 2010, sweeping an epic 63 House seats and regaining control of the chamber. Yet compare the GOP result in 2010 to the Democratic sweep in another bad recession year, 1982. In 1982, Democrats won 55 percent of all votes cast in House races. In 2010, the GOP won only 51.4 percent. And while Democrats gained only 26 seats in 1982 as against 63, they started from a much higher base, so they won more seats in total: 269 as against the 242 won by Republicans in 2010.

Conservatives credit the Tea Party for winning the House for the GOP in 2010. The 1982 comparison suggests: that's like crediting the rooster's cock-crow for the sunrise. Perhaps any out party will gain votes in any sufficiently bad economic year. If so, you have to ask a follow-up question: what did the Tea Party accomplish in exchange for the winnable Senate seats it undeniably cost the GOP in 2010 and 2012—and for the lasting harm it did to the Republican brand? In an October 2012 survey, the Rasmussen poll, the most conservative-leaning poll of them all, found that “Tea Party” had become the single most negative term in the American political lexicon.¹⁶

Mitt Romney himself showed awareness of the Tea Party danger. He squirmed for months to avoid endorsing Paul Ryan's radical budget plan before finally surrendering in December 2011.¹⁷ He resisted pressure for a big tax cut for months too. In September 2011, he released his campaign economic plan as an e-book and downloadable PDF. A substantial document of 160 pages, including footnotes, introduced by Columbia Business School Dean Glenn Hubbard, the September plan contained almost five dozen policy recommendations. Among them: “maintain marginal tax rates at current levels.”¹⁸ That's in big bold letters on the first page of the section titled “Tax Policy,” on page 37.

Yet as the 2012 campaign wore on, and as the Republican base desperately switched its support from one to another “not Mitt,” the Romney campaign decided it must do more to excite that base. On the eve of the must-win February 2012 Michigan primary, Romney delivered a speech to the Detroit Economic club. In that speech, Romney proposed an additional 20 percent tax cut,¹⁹ but this time, without any of the sophisticated apparatus that supported the September version of the plan. One of the biggest tax cuts in U.S. history was shoved before the public without supporting documents, without costing or modeling: just words in a speech. Criticize Romney as much as you like, the positions that consistently got him into the most trouble were precisely those the party had demanded from him: more and bigger tax cuts; repeal Dodd-Frank; more defense spending; shrink insurance coverage of contraception; cut

16. http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/october_2012/tea_party_liberal_are_still_most_negative_political_labels

17. <http://www.mittromney.com/news/press/2011/12/fact-sheet-mitt-romney-and-medicare>

18. <http://www.mittromney.com/sites/default/files/shared/BelieveInAmerica-PlanForJobsAndEconomicGrowth-Full.pdf>

19. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/election-2012/post/mitt-romney-speaks-to-the-detroit-economic-club-live-video/2012/02/24/gIQAX5vxXR_blog.html

healthcare subsidies for the young; protect healthcare subsidies for the old.

As the famed anti-tax activist and sometime lobbyist Grover Norquist incisively told the February 2012 CPAC meeting: “The leadership now for the modern conservative movement for the next 20 years will be coming out of the House and the Senate ... Pick a Republican with enough working digits to handle a pen to become president of the United States.”²⁰ Republicans demanded a nominee too weak to say “no” to them. What they demanded, they got. The results are as we see.

The Mitt Romney who began seeking the presidency in the early 2000s—the savior of the 2002 Olympics, the author of Romneycare, the man who’d redirected Boston’s “Big Dig”—was exactly the candidate the Republican Party needed by 2012: competent, managerial, pragmatic. Unfortunately, in the interval, Romney had been refashioned into something very different—to the point where nobody knew really what he was; to the point where even he may no longer have known.

Why did Republicans proceed down this wrong path of radicalization and self-deception? Four principal reasons:

The lingering trauma of the Bush presidency.

Republicans and conservatives also suffered in the financial crash of 2008. They also lost savings. They also lost jobs in the ensuing recession. They also suffered home foreclosures. Their banks also cut off credit, their kids also had to move back home, their businesses also went bust.

How were they to make sense of this disaster? It was hard enough to endure an economic crisis without having to wonder whether you might have brought it upon yourself.

The mind has a solution for traumas too painful to think about, and that solution is displacement. Rage that cannot be expressed must be redirected. And so it proved. No president has ever enjoyed so brief a honeymoon with supporters of the opposite party as Barack Obama. Even George W. Bush, who entered office in a way seemingly guaranteed to alienate Democrats, sustained an approval rating among Democrats of about 30 percent for the entire pre-9/11 period. President Obama’s approval rating among Republicans dropped below 30 percent by March 2009, below 25 percent by July, below 20 percent by August, and into the low teens by the end of his first year—never again to rise above 20 percent except during the month of the killing of Osama bin Laden.

Over time, it became almost impossible for Republicans and conservatives to retain accurate memories of what Obama had done and what Bush had done. By the summer of 2010, a majority of Republicans believed that it was President Obama, not President

20. <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/clip/3676833>

Bush, who had signed the TARP bailout of the financial industry.²¹ Fox News made a regular practice in its charts and graphs of backdating the Obama administration to make it appear that the surge in deficits and spending in the Great Recession all happened on Obama's watch.²²

But to the extent that Republicans and conservatives did remember, they needed an explanation that exonerated themselves and the things they believed. The door had to be slammed shut against any line of thought that might lead back to anything they themselves had ever supported. Yet there was that unalterable fact that the disaster had occurred on George W. Bush's watch. How to resolve the tension?

The answer was psychologically inescapable: attack Bush from the right. Conservatives needed to blame him for something, and it was a matter of record that he had substantially increased domestic spending and had run big deficits. So the spending and deficits were retroactively promoted not just as problems for the long term (which they most certainly were) but as important causes of the 2008-2009 crisis (which they weren't).

And suddenly all manner of ideas that had once been acceptable—from the Heritage Foundation's healthcare reform to the need to run deficits during recessions—were anathematized as unacceptable. Deep into 2012, two-thirds of Americans still blamed Bush for the Great Recession.²³ By pivoting right, Republicans and conservatives pivoted away from him—and thereby from responsibility for his record and legacy.

Zero-sum budget economics.

Republicans and conservatives had another, very hard-headed reason to execute a sharp-right turn in the post-Bush years.

President Obama's economic policy accepted colossal spending and deficits in his first term to counter the recession. But Obama repeatedly insisted that he intended to tighten budgets once the recession ended. This policy might make Keynesian textbook sense. But it had large, ominous implications for Republican voting groups.

The Republican Party draws its strength from those groups who suffered least from the recession, but who had good reason to fear that they would pay most to balance the books afterwards.

The GOP is a coalition of America's fiscal winners. Its wealthy donors pay lower tax rates than rich people in any other advanced democracy. Its older, rural, Southern, and military voters benefit the most from federal spending.

21. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1668/political-news-iq-update-7-2010-twitter-tarp-roberts>

22. <http://mediamatters.org/research/2012/10/01/a-history-of-dishonest-fox-charts/190225>

23. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155177/americans-blame-bush-obama-bad-economy.aspx>

As Julia Isaacs of the Brookings Institution has calculated: “Public spending on children averaged \$8,942 per child under age 19 in 2004 ... In the same year, public spending on the elderly was \$21,904 per elderly person, or 2.4 times as high as that on children. The tilt toward the elderly is much higher if one looks just at the federal budget, with an elderly person receiving \$7 for every dollar received by a child.”²⁴

Even before 2008, it was clear that the United States would have to tighten in ways likely to be uncomfortable to Republican groups. President Obama’s “New New Deal,” as Michael Grunwald called it, horribly multiplied those Republican groups’ fiscal risk. The tax rebates and tax holidays for the less affluent would have to be recouped by taxes on the more affluent. The new spending in Obamacare would, at least theoretically, be balanced by reduced spending on Medicare. With every passing week, the likely future burden of Obama’s policies expanded menacingly. Obama not only created a whole new healthcare entitlement, but he revised existing programs in ways that implied a permanently bigger federal government, with benefits significantly reoriented away from existing recipients to new claimants.

Obama supporters described the president as a technocrat more interested in “what works” than bold utopian schemes. But from the point of view of core Republican groups, America was already working just fine—and Obama’s promised changes represented a deadly serious threat to their expectations and entitlements.

Ethnic transition.

In a multiethnic society, economic redistribution inescapably implies ethnic redistribution. When President Obama proposed to cut Medicare to extend coverage to the uninsured, he was proposing to cut a program whose current beneficiaries are more than 85 percent white to benefit a population that is 27 percent foreign-born.

Americans may not know those exact statistics. But they certainly feel their consequences.

Nonwhites made up 36 percent of the nation’s population in the year of Obama’s inauguration, up from 31 percent the year that Bush was elected. Nearly half the population under 18 is now nonwhite, portending the almost inevitable arrival of a nonwhite majority sometime in the middle of the 21st century.

White Americans are not enthusiastic about these changes. As Ron Brownstein of National Journal reports, 51 percent of white Americans tell pollsters that the trends are troubling and are happening too fast. (53 percent of black Americans agree.)

Those whites who regard the pace of ethnic change as “too fast” are the voters who

24. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2009/11/05%20spending%20children%20isaacs/1_how_much_isaacs.PDF

rallied most ardently to the conservative and Republican message after 2009. In Brownstein's words:

[A] 51 percent majority of whites troubled by the changes endorsed the Reaganite sentiment that "government is not the solution to our economic problems; government is the problem." Fewer than three in 10 whites comfortable with the trends agreed. And while three-fifths of the uneasy whites prefer a conservative agenda of tax cuts and deregulation to jump-start the economy, more than three-fifths of the welcoming whites backed a Democratic-leaning approach of public spending on infrastructure and scientific research.

The differences over Obama are equally stark. More than three-fifths of uneasy whites said they disapprove of Obama's job performance; nearly three-fifths of the receptive whites approve. A majority of the uneasy whites said that the president's program is reducing opportunity for people like them; only one-fourth of whites receptive to the changes agree.²⁵

When the Tea Party movement arose, many wondered whether it was more fundamentally a libertarian movement or a social conservative movement. The short answer: it was economically conservative because it was socially conservative. It sensed and foresaw that any new government activism was likely to benefit America's newcomers more than America's old-stock population. So the Tea Party used the language of libertarianism to reject new programs, while using the language of entitlement to defend existing programs.

Uniting both messages was an angry feeling of loss and betrayal—with Barack Obama cast as the representative of the change they feared and resented.

Alternative knowledge systems.

The late Daniel Patrick Moynihan liked to repeat the saying, "You're entitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts." Not anymore. The media culture of the U.S. has been reshaped to become a bespoke purveyor of desired facts.

By deciding what to read and watch, you get to choose your own answers to such basic questions as:

Did deficits and debts rise post-2008 because of stimulus spending or declines in government revenues?

Did taxes go up or down in the Obama years?

Did government employment increase or decrease?

25. <http://www.nationaljournal.com/columns/political-connections/separate-but-equal-coalitions-take-differing-attitudes-to-demographic-change-20110603>

Does half the country go untaxed?

Which groups in America receive the most government benefits?

How much do we spend on welfare?

Liberals and Democrats have created their own knowledge systems too, of course. During the 2012 election cycle, their broadcasters and websites transmogrified Romney from a competent guy tragically victimized by a clownish primary electorate to a greedy corporate super-villain. They silenced their own previously expressed opinions on issues like Guantanamo Bay, the Afghanistan war, and presidential kill lists. As the election neared, they provided their audience with good news on job creation, while giving short shrift to the bad news on income stagnation. They whipped up rage against designated villains like the Koch brothers and dismissed as trivial the Benghazi fiasco.

Yet it also has to be said that the Republican and conservative knowledge system does seem more coordinated than the liberal system—and even further removed from reality.

A pair of surveys by Farleigh Dickinson University in 2011 and 2012 found that those people who most consistently watched Fox News were the least informed on basic questions of fact, such as: who was then leading in the race for the Republican nomination?²⁶ (Fox viewers were 10 points less likely to answer that question correctly than MSNBC viewers.)

When party activists are misinformed, party leaders must adjust to that misinformation. Who will tell the faithful that tax cuts do not in fact increase government revenues? Or that public broadcasting represents only .01 percent of the federal budget? Or that domestic oil and gas production are rising, not declining? Or that we do not actually spend a trillion dollars a year on “welfare”?

In one supremely important way, the information system built by liberals serves them better than the system built by conservatives. The liberal system presents liberalism as the creed of a beset and beleaguered minority. The liberal system may be smug, but at least it also teaches its participants the need for political caution. Nobody watches MSNBC and comes away congratulating themselves with “I’ve heard the great and good American people in their multitudes, and they agree with me!”

The conservative system, however, does propound that dangerously reassuring message: real America stands with us. A memo written by Newt Gingrich in 2004 pungently expressed the bedrock assumption of the conservative information system: “There is an amazing majority among most Americans but it is a distinct minority

26. <http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2011/knowless/>

among the news media, the academic elites and the Hollywood crowd ... This left bias against America is a very important and deeply under-noticed weakness of the left. The majorities who disagree with this anti-American, politically correct and multicultural approach are massive.”²⁷

Gingrich proceeded to argue that the country had a built-in conservative majority of between four-to-one and eight-to-one, if only conservative leaders mobilized that majority with audacity and aggression. That mentality has, again and again, led the GOP to overreach. That mentality has progressively led the party further and further away from the majority status it assumes itself to have.

The alternative information system built by conservative elites imprisons them as much as it does the movement’s rank-and-file. Exactly at the moment when realism and restraint are most needed, those qualities are spurned by a political movement that has furnished its collective mind with pseudo-facts and pretend information.

27. http://2004.georgewbush.org/deadletteroffice/attachments/NEWT-WHAT_IS_AT_STAKE_IN_2004_ELECTION.pdf

3. DELIVERANCE

Half a decade ago, many leading Republicans urged a rethink of their party's direction. Tim Pawlenty, the governor of Minnesota, speculated about a more middle-class style of politics: "Sam's Club Republicanism." Mitt Romney of course famously devoted himself to extending health coverage. John McCain interested himself in the environment and climate change. Even Newt Gingrich—who invoked Ronald Reagan more than any other candidate in 2012—said in a January 2008 TV appearance: "The era of Ronald Reagan is over." It wasn't a throwaway remark either. Gingrich was then promoting a new book that urged a "green conservatism" and endorsed a mandate requiring all Americans to buy health insurance, with subsidies for those who could not afford it.²⁸

After the 2008 election, such calls for rethinking were shelved in favor of the back-to-basics message of the Tea Party. This was hardly the first time a defeated party had recoiled upon its base. After the narrow defeat of Richard Nixon in 1960, Republicans turned to Barry Goldwater; after the narrow defeat of Hubert Humphrey in 1968, Democrats turned to George McGovern. The pattern manifests itself in other democracies too: after the first loss to Margaret Thatcher in 1979, Britain's Labour Party steered hard left; after their own defeat of 1997, Britain's Conservatives turned to the right. Maybe it's an inevitable part of the rebuilding process.

Certainly many of the Republican Party's most promising politicians seemed to think so. Smart, competent, and realistic politicians like Governors Chris Christie, Mitch Daniels, and Jeb Bush absented themselves from the 2012 contest, abandoning the field to the Michele Bachmanns, Donald Trumps, and Herman Cains. They read the party's mood and decided that 2012 was not the year for their style of politics.

Mitt Romney could have run in 2012 as a compassionate conservative who brought universal health coverage to the state he governed. He could have run as a pragmatic problem-solver who would responsibly pay down America's debt, mostly relying on spending cuts, but also adding some new revenues from taxes on consumption and pollution. He could have tested every policy proposal against the criteria: will it create jobs? Will it raise wages? Will it improve the life chances of the poor?

28. Newt Gingrich, *Real Change: From the World That Fails to the World That Works* (Regnery 2007). The discussion of green conservatism fills Chapter 16; the endorsement of a health insurance mandate appears on page 276.

He could have run as the leader of a party that was both conservative and inclusive, like the conservative parties in Canada, Britain, and Australia. He could have run as a candidate who championed entrepreneurs but knew how to say “no” to bankers. (Entrepreneurs dislike bankers, too!) He could have taken a firm stand against the race-baiting, slut-naming, and gay-mocking of the conservative entertainment complex. He could have closed his door against advisers who disdained the bottom 30 percent or 47 percent or 99 percent, and instead committed himself by word and deed always to represent as best he could the whole sprawling mess of the great American 100 percent.

Had he done those things, Mitt Romney would likely be president-elect of the United States today.

But now, post-2012, it’s time to return to the path of reform and rethink that Republicans and conservatives explored in the later Bush years. The danger of continuing on the present back-to-basics approach is best summed up by a story told by Karen Hughes, George W. Bush’s former communications director, in her memoirs.

Walking along a beach on a vacation day, Hughes noticed in the sky a small plane pulling an advertising banner: “Jill, come back. I am miserable without you. Love, Jack.” She thought: bad message, Jack. Too much about you; not enough about her.

Through the Obama years, Republicans made Jack’s mistake over and over and over again: we talked to and about ourselves, not enough to and about the country.

In so doing, we badly let down not only the country, but ourselves.

Many smart individual Republicans did have ideas about how to sustain employment in the recession, without Obama-style boondoggle stimulus. They considered a much more active monetary policy, one that would generate enough money to prevent nominal GDP from declining in bad times. Mitt Romney himself urged an ambitious counter-cyclical program of tax relief and infrastructure spending in 2008. Some discussed conditional aid to states: offering states federal loans to avert layoffs of teachers and other public employees if those employees would agree to longer-term changes to reduce the future burden of their retirement benefits. Many advocated a large payroll tax holiday, suspending half or even all of it, in order to encourage employers to hire and employees to spend. A few talked about ambitious ideas to eliminate the housing glut, including plans for government to buy and bulldoze uneconomic housing units.²⁹

The emergency phase of the Great Recession has ended. We are moving into a phase of economic growth, but a growth that will not restore Americans to their prior

29. One of those few was Federal Reserve chair Ben Bernanke, in this under-appreciated 2008 speech: <http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/bernanke20080314a.htm>

prosperity for a very long time—let alone bring new progress. What will conservatives say in the months and years of reconstruction ahead? What ideas and what hope can we offer a battered and pessimistic country?

“Your answers are so old I’ve forgotten the questions.” That was the retort from a famous ex-communist to a much younger man who presumed to lecture him about Marxism.

If conservatives are to succeed in the century ahead, they need to rethink what conservatism means in a time as far removed from Ronald Reagan’s as Reagan’s was from World War II.

In 1980, the U.S. and its core allies produced half the planet’s output. As things are going, that group of democracies will do well to produce even one-third in the 2020s. Back then, the U.S. was threatened by a great military adversary. In the 21st century, the U.S. faces an economic and technological rival for the first time since 1917.

In 1980, the gap between rich and poor had only just begun to widen from its narrowest point of the whole 20th century. Today, the typical worker earns less than his counterpart of 1980, middle-class incomes are stagnating, and wealth and power have concentrated to a degree that would startle even the Astors and the Vanderbilts.

In 1980, presidential elections were publicly financed, and post-Watergate reforms tightly governed congressional elections. Today, the post-Watergate reforms have collapsed, and presidential elections are increasingly financed by small numbers of extremely wealthy individuals who can bend the political system to their will.

In 1980, middle-class Americans regarded economic progress as the norm, and tough times as the exception. Today, a plurality of non-college educated whites say they expect their children to be no better off than they are themselves.

In 1980, this was still an overwhelmingly white country. Today, a majority of the population under age 18 traces its origins to Latin America, Africa, or Asia. Back then, America remained a relatively young country, with a median age of exactly 30 years.³⁰ Today, over-80 is the fastest growing age cohort, and the median age has surpassed 37.³¹

In 1980, young women had only just recently entered the workforce in large numbers. Today, our leading labor market worry is the number of young men who are exiting.

In 1980, marriage remained the norm among heterosexuals and unimaginable for homosexuals. Today, a majority of American women are unmarried, and same-sex marriage is on its way to becoming the law of the land.

30. <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2011/tables/11s0007.pdf>

31. <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-03.pdf>

In 1980, our top environmental concerns involved risks to the health of individual human beings. Today, after 30 years of progress toward cleaner air and water, we must now worry about the health of the whole planetary climate system.

In 1980, 79 percent of Americans under age 65 were covered by employer-provided health insurance plans, a level that had held constant since the mid-1960s.³² Back then, healthcare costs accounted for only about one-tenth of the federal budget. Since 1980, private health coverage has shriveled, leaving some 45 million people uninsured. Healthcare now consumes one-quarter of all federal dollars, rapidly rising toward one-third—and that's without considering the costs of Obamacare.³³

These realities do not dictate any particular political choice. But they do shape the menu of choices that will be available to political actors, as well as the range of outcomes that are achievable.

For example: it's certainly possible for Republicans to choose to be a white person's party. If we do so choose, however, we are also choosing to be an old person's party. Since the elderly receive by far the largest portion of government's benefits, an old person's party will be drawn by almost inescapable necessity to become a big government party. Indeed that is just what happened in the George W. Bush years: Medicare Part D and all that.

In the Obama years, the GOP rebelled against Bush-era big government. But because it remained an old person's party—more so than ever—the only way to reconcile the voting base and the party's ideology was to adopt Paul Ryan's budget plan, which loaded virtually all the burden of fiscal adjustment onto the young and the poor. And that of course intensified the party's dependence on the old, white voters who set the cycle in motion in the first place.

Another example: the GOP's social conservatism has increasingly repelled college-educated voters. In 1988, college-educated whites voted for George H.W. Bush over Michael Dukakis by a margin of more than 20 points. In 2008, John McCain bested Barack Obama among college-educated whites only by two points. As the GOP relies more heavily on less-educated voters, it finds itself relying on a class of people who have lost ground economically. Those voters understandably tend to mistrust business. It's an odd predicament for the party of free enterprise to base itself on the most business-skeptical voters—a predicament that cost Romney dearly in the industrial Midwest.

Capitalism is a highly dynamic system. Yet the voters most likely to vote GOP work in some of the least dynamic sectors of the economy: construction, mining, forestry. Workers in high-tech, telecom, and scientific research are significantly more likely to

32. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr017.pdf>

33. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2011/assets/hist.pdf>

vote Democratic.³⁴

Perhaps the GOP would wish to remain a pro-life party first and foremost? Then it needs to take careful note of who is having abortions and why. The incidence of abortion varies with the state of the economy. Abortion rates dropped sharply in the prosperous years of the 1990s, dropped slowly in the less benign economy of the 2000s, and began to increase again after the economy crashed in 2008.³⁵ Forty-two percent of women who have abortions have incomes below the poverty line. Three-quarters of women who have abortions cite their inability to afford a child as their reason for abortion.

Europe's most pro-life parties also support generous welfare states, and those Republican politicians who take their pro-life advocacy most seriously—like Governor Mike Huckabee and Senator Rick Santorum—have often found themselves urging less economic austerity than the party's more libertarian factions.

To govern is to choose, and we cannot choose everything. How will Republicans adapt to preserve what they value most? It's an urgent question, for adapt we must. Cultural reaction, ethnic chauvinism, a defense of narrow status-quo economic interests, and a fact-indifferent approach to policy—these have together led us to an angry and embittered dead-end.

I've been a critic of the Tea Party. Yet I'll concede the Tea Party this: every defeated party must undergo some kind of rendezvous with the question "What do we stand for?" For Republicans, the Tea Party was the beginning of that rendezvous. It must not, however, be the finale. It cannot be the finale. The outpouring of anguish and anxiety that characterized the Tea Party should command attention. Yet nostalgia for a misremembered past is no basis for governing a diverse and advancing nation.

We have to begin instead by recollecting that the conservatives of the 1970s and 1980s actually won more battles than they lost. To lament that "our freedoms are in peril" is to reverse the truth. In most ways, Americans of the 2010s are much freer than the Americans of 50 years ago. Leave aside the obvious points about race and sex and sexual orientation. Even white male heterosexual Americans are freer than they were then. No Americans are subject to the draft, for one thing. Everyone may now legally buy birth control in every state of the union. All Americans may read or view virtually anything they want to, without a censor's scrutiny or permission. Nor may the government any longer deny Americans the right to travel based on their political opinions, as it did to suspected communists in the 1950s.

In the purely economic realm, Americans can legally own gold bullion, a serious offense 50 years ago. They can legally own a telephone. (It seems beyond belief now,

34. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/10/how-your-job-and-your-wage-predicts-your-vote/263942/>

35. http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html

but that was not allowed in 1962. Phones had to be rented from the phone company—of which there was exactly one.) If they manage an airline, a trucking company, a retail brokerage house, a natural gas well, a railroad, an oil well, or a bank, they may set their own prices for their products and services without the prior approval of a government regulator. Nor do they have to worry that if they undercut a competitor's price, they may face an antitrust prosecution. No longer are rules passed restricting how much farmers may grow. Americans' tax rates have dropped far lower than they were a half-century ago. They top out at 35 percent, soon perhaps at 40 percent, but nowhere near the 91 percent maximum of 1962. Americans may import or export products subject to lower tariffs and fewer restrictions than at almost any other time in the nation's history.

Americans are also freer than ever before from extra-legal social pressures. How they dress; how they wear their hair; how they worship (or not)—never before in American history have the neighbors had less to say about such choices than today. Americans also enjoy more choices of food and drink, of therapies and medicines, of information and entertainment than ever before.

For better or worse, Americans also retain their right to own firearms of almost every description, up to and including semi-automatic rifles.

Lose our freedoms? We're almost overwhelmed by freedoms. Our cable bills alone contain more choices than most of us can cope with. And while it's true that some things once permissible have ceased to be, it's hard for most of us to feel too oppressed because others among us may no longer smoke on airplanes, or drink before driving, or emit sulphur dioxide directly into the atmosphere, or spray dangerous insecticides on orchards, or sell flammable pajamas to children, or misrepresent the service records of used cars.

One of the most important and most difficult jobs of a politician is to listen carefully to voters, to hear the question that is often lodged inside another question. The classic example comes from the 1992 town hall presidential debate. A woman—older, seemingly not well-educated, visibly nervous—asked the candidates how each had personally been affected by the deficit. President George H.W. Bush and Ross Perot each mishandled the question. Bill Clinton at his turn stepped forward and asked the woman how she had been affected by the deficit. As she answered, it became apparent that she was confused. She didn't mean "the deficit." She meant "the recession." She had mixed up the two words.

Likewise, when voters talk about "freedom," they may mean "the ability to do what I want." If your wages stagnate, if college education recedes beyond your reach, if gasoline prices vacuum the dollars from your wallet, if the doctor you want declines to accept any more Medicare patients, none of that implicates "freedom" as political theorists use the word. But you will still feel a terrible sense of frustration. And you may feel an even more terrible sense of wrongness if, in the interval, other people

with other backgrounds seem to be gaining advantages that you have lost. The words “I want my country back” will acquire poignant, personal meaning.

It’s this sense of loss and betrayal that enflames America’s vituperative politics. The central divide in American politics is the same as the divide in almost every advanced democracy on earth: between one party more committed to private enterprise and another party more supportive of the public sector. These parties may be called Conservative and Labour; Christian Democrat and Social Democrat; Gaullist and Socialist. By comparison to some other democracies—in fact, by comparison to most other democracies—the purely ideological differences between the parties in this country are relatively narrow. Yet the political game is played in this country with a vehemence and recklessness unseen almost any place else in the democratic world.

British Prime Minister David Cameron suggested in a 2010 speech: “[P]olitics shouldn’t be so different from the rest of life, where rational people do somehow find a way of overcoming their disagreements.” Such an aspiration deserves an even closer hearing in this country than in the United Kingdom. In Britain, after all, it’s not possible for the opposition to paralyze the government of the country. In the United States, however, there is no “government” and there is no “opposition.” The president cannot govern without the cooperation of Congress. Polarized politics came within hours of pushing the United States into a default on its obligations in 2011; polarization may yet push the country over the fiscal cliff in 2012.

If the parties are to serve the country for which they profess such patriotism, they must step back from the brink.

On the Republican side, the road to renewal begins with this formula: 21st century conservatism must become economically inclusive, environmentally responsible, culturally modern, and intellectually credible.

What that means in concrete terms is this:

Republicans want to keep markets free and taxes low. The renewal of the tax rates that have prevailed since 2001 seems essential to almost all Republicans. Yet government must be paid for and obligations honored. If new revenues are needed, new revenues are needed. To keep tax rates moderate on work, saving, and investment, we may need to consider new taxes on consumption and pollution. Anti-tax fundamentalism that refuses to think creatively about inescapable problems will only lead to an outcome in which Republicans retain their principles unsullied—but lose the argument and the future.

The party’s free-enterprise principles must not deteriorate into a defense of incumbent economic interests. When budgets must be balanced, all must contribute. Job holders deserve equal consideration with job creators. We must pay due attention to the nurturing of the rising generation as well as to the protection of

the passing generation. Economic depression must be feared at least as much as monetary inflation. The success of a society is judged by the condition of the great preponderance of its people. The fairness of a society is judged by the opportunities it offers to those with the potential to rise. The goodness of a society is judged by the way it treats the least among its people—some of whom find themselves at the bottom through no fault of their own, but others of whom may be very much at fault, and yet are still entitled by virtue of their shared citizenship to a basic minimum decency of food, shelter, and medical care.

Republicans rightly reject the invocation of the environment to justify heavy-handed government intrusion into private decision-making. Government should not direct investment capital to particular technologies, industries, or firms. Yet environmental threats are real and rising. Those threats demand collective action. It's the special responsibility and opportunity of parties of the center-right to meet those threats by market mechanisms and freely chosen responses rather than by central command and government dictation.

The Republican Party is a majority pro-life party. That majority should be respected even by those of us who don't agree, or don't fully agree. But pro-life politics mustn't become an excuse for reactionary denigration of women. If your pro-life logic leads you to oppose abortion in cases of rape and abuse, then you need to rethink your pro-life logic: an oppressive and cruel conclusion is a strong clue that your thinking process is flawed. Yet disappointingly, this was exactly the conclusion that was advocated not only by Tea Party-style Senate candidates in Missouri and Indiana, but by the GOP's vice presidential nominee. Even after joining the national ticket, Paul Ryan described rape as a "method of conception" that should not alter "the definition of life."³⁶

Women as equal participants in the workplace and possessing autonomy of their bodies: this is a social change that has already happened and will not be rolled back. The same is true for nonwhites who have gained their place in the national story and for gays living unashamed and unafraid. Perhaps there are people who still want to argue against these social transformations. Their place is writing in small journals of cultural criticism or niche websites, not running for office as the candidates of a great modern party.

Finally, the matter of intellectual credibility:

The candidate who received the second most votes and second most delegates in the race for the 2012 nomination bitterly remarked after the race had ended: "We will never have the elite, smart people on our side." Those were strange words to emerge from the mouth of a man, Senator Rick Santorum, who had plenty of smarts of his own to boast of. He may not have intended the remark exactly as he pronounced it, but however he meant it, the question that follows is: why not? In the 1970s and 1980s,

36. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csWQURkMxgg&feature=player_embedded

conservatives won the battle of ideas against wage and price controls, against state-run housing, against a dozen other progressive and liberal policies.

Those old arguments about markets and prices have largely been won. Today's debates involve new issues: income disparity, environmental protection, the aging of the population, national unity in a time of demographic transition, the rise of non-European economic and military power. Our new conservative challenge is to apply timeless principles of freedom and personal responsibility to a radically changed world.

Ironically, with Mitt Romney, the Republican Party found one of its most intelligent and articulate standard-bearers in decades. Yet we weren't satisfied with him until we had forced him to jettison his own best self and best judgment. This must stop. In the states, Republican governors of brains and toughness and imagination are governing: administering bureaucracies, enacting legislation, negotiating compromises, inspiring nervous publics, mobilizing recalcitrant legislatures. As they emerge into the national spotlight this cycle, these governors will be found to have deviated in many ways from the hyper-ideological, brawlingly confrontational politics praised on talk radio. That's a good thing, not a bad thing. Like Mitt Romney with healthcare and Tim Pawlenty with climate change, they'll have accomplishments that address problems recognized by the whole country, not merely its conservative subculture. That's a good thing, too. When we recognize those good things as such, we'll again be ready to govern on the national level.

For a generation, a certain brand of political commentator has urged conservatives to think of politics as a form of warfare, and to regard their opponents as enemies. This way of thinking does its severest harm to conservatives themselves. It embitters them, isolates them, alienates them, and perverts their judgment of people and things. It causes them to disparage their most effective leaders and instead elevate those who offer confrontation in place of results. The irony is that by insisting so emphatically on ferocious, militant ideology, the GOP rewards most those who believe the least, because only cynics and nihilists will make the transition from the real world of governance to the make-believe world of party purity tests.

When Republicans consider the future, they like to ask the question: "who?" Who is the next Ronald Reagan, the leader who will carry our ideas forward? The more vital question for these times, however, is not "who?" It is "what?"—or maybe "what now?"

I can remember a Republican Party that was not backward-looking. I can remember a Republican Party excited by science and its possibilities. I can remember a Republican Party that regarded those Americans who thought differently not as aliens and enemies, but as fellow-citizens who had not yet been convinced of the merit of our ideas.

When I began to pay serious attention to politics, it was the Democratic Party that

housed all that seemed most obsolete and reactionary in American politics: urban machines that misgoverned troubled cities; industrial unions that looked to trade protectionism to maintain their advantages; foreign-policy experts who saw the next Vietnam in every challenge to U.S. power; members of Congress who dispensed expensive favors as if nothing had changed since 1965; writers and thinkers still dazzled by the Bright Tomorrow promised by revolutionary socialism.

Where the airports were new, where the businesspeople wore casual clothes, where young people were getting married and buying homes—anyplace the future seemed nearest—there, the party of Reagan was strongest. Where the good old days had ended with the Japanese surrender, where the pay phones were broken, and where aldermen were indicted; there, you found the Democratic strongholds.

In those days, it was the Democratic Party that fought internal battles over the need for change: Gary Hart, Les Aspin, and other “Atari Democrats” (as they were called back when Atari was a cool, new brand) vs. Walter Mondale, Tip O’Neill, and other machine pols who sneered back, “Where’s the beef?”

Yet in the end, it was the Atari Democrats who won. A century before, a great British conservative, the Marquess of Salisbury, warned, “The commonest error in politics is sticking to the carcass of dead policies.” The Democrats of the 1980s and 1990s had the courage and honesty to identify which of their policies had died, and then ruthlessly to discard the carcasses. It falls to modern conservatives now to heed Salisbury’s advice: to abandon what is obsolete—and to meet the challenge of the new.

The work of developing a conservative policy agenda adequate to the 21st century will require months or even years. It must involve many people. Political work is collaborative work, and although we all have our 10-point plans, the immediate need is for a plan with just this one goal: we must emancipate ourselves from prior mistakes and adapt to contemporary realities. To be a patriot is to love your country as it is. Those who seem to despise half of America will never be trusted to govern any of it. Those who cherish only the country’s past will not be entrusted with its future.