

REPUBLICANS SQUANDER THE BRAND AND GET THE BOOT

DEB JORDAHL

Some say the November 2006 election is proof that conservatism is dead. In fact just the opposite is true, and incumbent Republicans learned that if you leave your conservative principles behind, conservatives will leave you.

1994 was the last time control of Congress flipped. Back then, Republicans championed the principles of fiscal and personal responsibility, balanced budgets, lower taxes, and legal reform. Sadly it wasn't long before Republicans morphed from the party of ideals to the party of incumbency.

Former Congressman Pat Toomey who now chairs the conservative Club for Growth says Republicans "squandered the brand" as the party of lower taxes, less government, and more personal freedom. They abandoned the very principles that shaped the political debate that led to their rise to power.

Sure Republicans cut taxes, but they also created new spending programs like Medicare Part D, a universal drug entitlement program likely to generate trillions of dollars in future debt. Why? To win over senior citizens and placate the pharmaceutical companies who

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were losing business to Canada.

Second the idealistic public servants, who once vowed to balance the federal budget, became practical politicians who dismissed public anxiety over a looming budget deficit, and took the practice of earmarking bills with pork barrel projects to a fine art. Pork barrel spending helped incumbent members raise campaign

funds and curry favor with their constituents.

Finally, Republicans proved just as willing as Democrats to bend the rules, break the law, and to tolerate the transgressions of their members in order to retain their power. To wit: the same Republican leaders who refused to confront Florida Congressman Mark Foley's abuse of congressional pages, protested the FBI search of Louisiana Congressman William Jefferson's office, even though agents discovered \$90,000 dollars of illegal cash in the distinguished gentleman's freezer.

The GOP team sacrificed its ideals and paid the ultimate political price. But if the party returns to the principles of lower taxes,

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less government, and more personal freedom, there is hope to regain the conservative brand.

A survey of likely voters conducted by the Club for Growth on the eve of the election, found that an overwhelming majority of Americans still have a taste for conservative policies and principles such as extending the Bush tax cuts and cutting government spending, yet they identified the GOP as the “Party of Big Government” by 39 to 27.9 percent. When asked which party was more likely to cut government spending, they gave Democrats the edge by 39.1 to 24.6 percent.

Conservatism may be (temporarily) homeless, but it is very much alive. Now it’s up to the GOP’s self-described conservatives to pay more than lip service to the basic conservative principles.

Legislative conservatives in Wisconsin have a real opportunity to change the debate from how much money to dole out for a particular program to whether the program is a necessary and appropriate function of state government. This is especially true in light of Wisconsin’s \$1.6 billion budget deficit and Governor Doyle’s latest proposal to raise taxes and fees by \$1.75 billion.

But if incumbent Republicans merely tinker with the Governor’s out of control budget, they will not only have squandered the conservative brand, but also a genuine opportunity to change the debate about the proper role of state government. That could result in even fewer of them being sworn in come January 2009.