

Is the GOP Ascendancy Over?

In America, parties enter periods of hegemony when they are seen as having resolved the crisis of the age.

Lincoln, the first Republican president, reunited in blood a Union that had sundered over his election and a Southern rebellion against the ascendancy of an industrializing North.

With the crushing of the Confederacy by the armies of Sherman and Grant, the assassination of Lincoln on Good Friday 1865, and the abolition of slavery, the Republican Party appeared to have solved the crisis of the age. The GOP owned the patriotism issue, “waving the bloody shirt,” and the morality issue, emancipation, and thus became America’s party.

From 1860 to 1932, the GOP gave America 13 presidents, three of whom were assassinated. Democrats gave us only two, Cleveland and Wilson, both of whom owed their election to divisions within the Republican Party.

By 1930, however, the nation was mired in the Depression. The architects were not Smoot and Hawley but, as Milton Friedman proved, the faceless men of the Federal Reserve. Easy money had overheated the economy and sent stock prices into the stratosphere. In 1929 came the Crash. Margin calls went out. Savings were withdrawn to meet them. Banks collapsed. With no deposit insurance, savings were wiped out and a third of our money supply vanished. The Fed failed to replenish it.

To the rescue in 1932 came “Dr. New Deal.” Though the great medicine man failed to heal the economy—unemployment was 17 percent in 1937—FDR was seen as a leader of energy and ideas doing his best to rescue a nation plunged into Depression by corporate greed. His act had about run its course

when war came, and though he ran in 1940, as Wilson had in 1916, on a pledge to keep us out of war, FDR steered us directly into the world storm. Then, like Lincoln, he died within days of victory as the United States emerged as liberator and savior of Western Europe and first power on earth.

The Democratic ascendancy from 1932 to 1968 gave us four Democratic presidents—FDR, Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson—while the GOP elected only the war hero Eisenhower. Democratic dominance of the Congress was even more pronounced. From 1930 to 1980, for a half century, Democrats held the Senate and House.

What destroyed the New Deal coalition was liberalism’s failure to cope with the crises of the 1960s: crime, Vietnam, and a moral and cultural revolution in which Democrats had a foot in both camps.

Nixon was the architect of Republican resurrection. After his 43 percent victory in 1968, comparable to Lincoln’s vote in 1860, he sheared off of the New Deal coalition, on the issues of patriotism and morality, 10 to 20 million northern ethnic Catholics and Southern Protestant conservatives whose families had voted Democratic for generations.

Though decried as a Southern Strategy, Nixon’s was a national strategy. In 1972, he swept 49 states and 60 percent of the nation, a feat duplicated by Ronald Reagan in 1984.

From 1968 to 1992, Republicans carried the White House in five of six national elections. By the midpoint and latter stages of this second Republican ascendancy, the party had achieved parity and was nearing hegemony at the

congressional level. All this is in peril today, as the Republican Party heads into a perfect storm in November that could sweep it away because it has failed not only to address the crisis of the age but to comprehend it.

What is that crisis? America is today a nation bankrupt in the sense that it cannot meet all the IOUs the party has handed out.

We have an empire we cannot afford. We are committed to fight wars on every continent, but we lack the soldiers to fight as Latin America, the Middle East, Russia, and China become anti-American.

We have Social Security and Medicare commitments to the baby boomers we cannot meet without a ruinous increase in taxes. We are running an unsustainable trade deficit of near \$800 billion, financed by borrowing from abroad that has begun to sink the dollar.

We have a shrinking industrial base and a growing dependence on China, Japan, and Asia for the necessities of our national life.

We have borders we cannot protect as the Third World mounts an invasion of America. And we have a ruling party that is dividing over these issues as the Democrats of 1968 divided over Vietnam, riots, and the cultural revolution—with this difference: America in ’68 had a Republican Party and conservative movement ready to rule. Few today have confidence in the party of Kennedy and Clinton, Kerry and Biden, Pelosi and Reid, Sharpton and Schumer.

In 1932, it took a Depression to bring to power new men and ideas. In 1968, it took a divisive war, urban riots, assassinations, and a cultural revolution to convince America to turn away from the party of their fathers. What is the calamity that is coming this time? ■

[small minds think alike]

Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?

To gain social acceptance, public thinkers needn't be profound, just reliably partisan.

By Chilton Williamson Jr.

BY NATURE, modern America is a commercial-ideological construct, paradox enough for a culture to bear. Yet America is a pragmatic-ideological society as well—an unfortunate combination that nonetheless is less paradoxical than it sounds when one considers that pragmatic idealism, or ideological pragmatism, is simply an alternative description of that hopelessly commonplace attitude toward life and the world called Philistinism. If ever there was a Philistine nation in the history of the world, that nation is the United States since about 1865. Sinclair Lewis thought he was witnessing Philistinism *in excelsis* when he wrote his debunking novels in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s—and Lewis was a thoroughgoing and incorrigible Philistine himself! In fact, he hadn't seen anything yet. When it comes to Philistinism, the America of 2006 surpasses that of the Roaring Twenties as Paris Hilton tops Zelda Fitzgerald or *Carnival Conquest* the *R.M.S. Aquitania*.

As late as the 1920s, the U.S.—like the Western world as a whole—retained a cultural memory through which it continued to uphold (however shakily) standards pertaining to the Western artistic, intellectual, and religious traditions, a trained cultural conscience demanding adherence to those standards, and a kind of cultural etiquette reflecting that conscience (however grudgingly).

During the Twenties, when mass advertising, mass entertainment, mass communications, and mass politics had yet to reach their fullest development, full-blown self-promoting phonies were discoverable mainly among the political and business classes, with here and there a Picasso in the fine arts, a Samuel Beckett in literature, a Schönberg in music. In scholarship, serious plagiarism was rare and instances of egregious intellectual fraud, such as Prof. Michael Bellesiles's *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (published in 2000), virtually unheard of. Hemingway, though a poseur and often a liar, remained a conscientious, if uneven, artist until near the end of his life. Most artists of whatever sort held strong political opinions that they did not hesitate to indulge in their work, frequently to a fault. Yet there remained in those days a broad range of political and social opinion, too various for any single idea—or set of related ideas—either to gain exclusive control of the distribution of artistic rewards or ensure the delivery of inevitable punishments to its rivals and detractors.

The same held even in political commentary before the 1930s, when Franklin Roosevelt and his American Blackshirts succeeded in foisting their New Deal standard upon elite opinion, thereby seriously damaging some major journalistic careers, including those of

H.L. Mencken, John T. Flynn, and Garet Garrett. Even so, though the New Dealers could sideline these men, they never succeeded in silencing them, nor did the elite propaganda machine operating from Washington, D.C. and New York City ever fully succeed in discrediting dissent and supplanting it with the aggressive and vulgar uniformity of thought and expression that, developing from the 1960s, maintains a stranglehold on the Western mind today.

There never was a time in all of history when the reward for propagating one opinion was not greater than that bestowed for disseminating its opposite, when currying favor did not pay off better than ignoring or defying it, when catering to majority taste and sentiment failed to get you further than appealing to minority and private sensibilities, when prostrating yourself before the Great Lie was not, in the worldly sense, a far better bet than standing up for Truth—an act which, in previous times as now, could be positively fatal. That is how the world was, is, and ever shall be.

Yet the conscientious writer, thinker, or artist—the so-called “intellectual”—today finds himself in a compromised position in his relation to society in general, and to his fellow intellectuals in particular, that must be as historically unprecedented as it is precarious. In our age of universal primary and secondary education, compounded by mass educa-