

REPUBLICANS IN CRISIS

The Republican Party in the United States is at its lowest point of popularity in a generation and is suffering from a crisis in identity and leadership. In recent weeks almost every one of the Republican prospects for President in 2012 have suffered devastating personal setbacks leaving the Party without national leadership or a national voice.

Since 1980, Republicans have enjoyed the benefit of having a clearly defined philosophy which was formulated under former President Ronald Reagan. Reagan's injunction that "government is not the solution, government is the problem" encapsulated a governing philosophy that centered on low taxes, less regulation, anti-Communism and support for traditional family values. However, after dominating the political landscape for a generation, Reagan's governing philosophy began to appear less relevant as a response to the systemic crisis facing the United States at the end of the George W. Bush Presidency. President Barack Obama has ushered in an era of activist government not seen since the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson, and to date the public approves with Obama enjoying a 60% to 33% job approval rating.

This job approval rating strongly indicates that if an election were held today, Barack Obama would easily be re-elected as President of the United States. Then again, if an election were held today, it is very unclear if a credible Republican challenger would emerge. In the past month, more than half a dozen leading Republican challengers have either disqualified themselves or gravely damaged their chances of gaining the Republican nomination for President of the United States in 2012.

The Presidential election of 2008 demonstrated the changing demography of the United States in that one out of four voters was non-white. This was the highest percentage in history and made clear that for any political party to be successful in the future, it needed some leaders to reflect the changing face of America. The Republican Party has two such leaders in Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana and Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska.

Jindal is a first generation American, the son of parents from India. He is considered an intellectual and has been an effective leader and executive in his home state leading many commentators to tout him as a potential Presidential candidate. Sarah Palin, while not being accused of belonging to the intellectual class, is a different kind of leader for Republicans in that she is a female leader with demonstrated appeal to working class men. In a Party in which all past credible Presidential contenders have been white men, Jindal and Palin offered a new look for the Grand Old Party.

Both Jindal and Palin have stumbled as of late and perhaps in an irretrievable manner. Governor Jindal was offered the opportunity to respond to President Obama's State of the Union Address. Jindal's performance was a substantive disappointment and a stylistic disaster, offering no new ideas in a time of crisis, and delivered in a stilted and lecturing tone which left pundits writing Jindal's political obituary. Governor Palin has had a very tough legislative session in her state capitol of Juneau and an even rougher reception in Washington, DC where her infrequent visits have been marked by small distractions and petty feuds. Palin seems bent on picking the wrong fights, taking on comedian David Letterman after the late night talk show host made a joke at the expense of Palin's daughter. While the dwindling conservative base supported their heroine in her battle of wits with a comedian, most of the nation saw behavior unbecoming a President of the United States, and Palin's star has begun to fall.

Two other rising stars in the Republican firmament enjoyed the support of the social conservative wing of the Party and were both aiming for the highest office in the land in 2012. U.S. Senator John Ensign of Nevada and Governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina are by most accounts socially conservative, attractive and ambitious men who were exploring Presidential bids. Within the span of ten days, both family men had to admit to marital infidelity, an indiscretion which disqualifies them with the social conservative base of the Republican Party and exposes them to charges of hypocrisy from secular voters.

From the establishment wing of the Republican Party are two economic conservatives who have been striving to become President for many years. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich have been speaking across the country in a shadow campaign ever since the end of the last Presidential election. Romney has held himself out as an alternative voice on economic issues during the economic crisis. While his brand of laissez faire economics may have appeal inside the Republican base of support, Romney's economic message has little resonance with a middle class shaken by a systemic economic crisis and ready for activist government to provide solutions.

Newt Gingrich is a Republican leader with a penchant for prolific production of policy proposals for almost every major issue facing the United States. In 1994, Gingrich led the Republican Revolution which saw his party gain control of the United States Congress for the first time in a generation. Less than four years later he was undone by the combative style which had led him to the heights of leadership in the first instance. Since then Gingrich has spent time as a commentator and leader of a think tank designed to offer innovative policy solutions. In recent polls his star was beginning to rise again inside the Republican Party and he was being mentioned as a Presidential prospect. That is until he called the popular Supreme Court nominee Judge Sotomayor a "racist". The reaction to his statement caused Gingrich to retract his statement and reminded observers of the old Gingrich whose combative style often detracted from his policy initiatives.

In what was a political masterstroke, President Obama removed the main moderate Republican leader capable of mounting a challenge in 2012 by appointing Governor Jon Huntsman as his Ambassador to the People's Republic of China. Huntsman was a unique kind of candidate for the Republicans, a Governor of conservative Utah who supported gay rights. Seen as a "different kind of Republican" capable of re-branding the Grand Old Party, Huntsman's acceptance of an Ambassadorship rather than a potential run for President speaks volumes about his assessment on the prospects for a moderate gaining a Republican nomination for President of the United States in 2012.

It has been said that one week is like a lifetime in politics. Republicans in the United States must hope that this is true, for they have a long way to go in finding their voice and finding a leader who can begin to contest the ambitious agenda and leadership of Barack Obama.

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