

The Republican future

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Republicans are in danger of losing something more vital to their future than the presidency in 2008. The late Lee Atwater dubbed it the Big Tent. Others called it the Reagan coalition. It delivered five of the last seven presidential elections for the GOP. Now that coalition is frayed and battered, a victim of events, changing times and Republican dysfunction in a sour era for a party frittering away the Gipper's legacy.

Whatever chance there is of reviving a winning Republican coalition must start with a frank assessment of what has gone wrong.

The decline began in a Republican Congress. The 1994 Gingrich revolution produced simultaneous Republican majorities in the House and Senate for the first time in 40 years, a triumph that eluded even Ronald Reagan. Alas, Republicans succumbed eventually to the corrupting lure of spend and elect and K Street lobbyists and lost their congressional majorities in 2006.

Nearly every congressional survey forecasts further losses for Republicans in the House and Senate this year.

In the race for president, 2008 has long promised to be an uphill fight for Republicans. A politically weak and unpopular George W. Bush gives Republicans no leg up in the contest to succeed him. Most of the issues, notably including a suddenly slumping economy, cut against Republicans and for Democrats.

In this adverse environment, the party of Ronald Reagan needs every asset it can muster. There isn't and won't be another Reagan, even as there never was another FDR, Lincoln, Jefferson or Washington. History doesn't replicate unique leaders who rose to greatness in unique times. But principles do endure. So, too, can electoral coalitions; not forever, of course, but for as long as they are relevant, share common ground and are steadfastly nurtured.

Successful political parties in democracies are always eclectic coalitions - grand alliances that look beyond their internal differences to the larger goals and ideals they share in common.

The Reagan era's Big Tent GOP coalition joined four conservative impulses - on national security, lower taxes and free-market economics, smaller government, and traditional social/cultural values - into an electoral majority. Along the way, the coalition enlisted Reagan Democrats, disaffected liberals, 40 percent of Hispanic Americans, a like share of labor union members, plus a vibrant corps of conservative intellectuals who served as a wellspring of ideas.

Working together, that coalition won the White House, Congress, two-thirds of the nation's governorships, a majority of state legislatures and mayoral races in such formerly Democratic bastions as New York and Los Angeles.

Each of the main pillars of the Reagan coalition is represented among the Republican presidential contenders: John McCain and Rudy Giuliani on national security, Mitt Romney on economics, Mike Huckabee on traditional social values, Fred Thompson on smaller, less intrusive government. None of these candidates is a perfect conservative. All are vulnerable in one degree or another to conservative critiques of their records.

But before these candidates and their supporters put each other through an ideological demolition derby, they should consider how Reagan himself would have fared in such a fratricidal exercise. Reagan, the conservative icon, nonetheless raised taxes as California's governor and signed a liberal abortion law. His presidency was dedicated to conservative ideals; lowering taxes to revive the economy, defeating the Soviet Union, and restoring America's confidence and inspirational example as that "shining city on a hill." Yet, when necessary, Reagan could be as pragmatic as he was conservative.

Those busily nitpicking Republican presidential contenders for deviations from conservative orthodoxy should recall the pragmatism often forced by circumstances on Reagan.

Reagan was also author of his celebrated 11th commandment - "Thou shall not speak ill of a fellow Republican." So far, the GOP's presidential contenders - if not always their supporters, conservative talk radio and the blogosphere - deserve mostly good marks for debating their differences respectfully. Keeping that debate respectful and constructive will be necessary if Republicans are to unite around their eventual nominee.

The larger problem is how to rebuild the fracturing Reagan coalition. Today, there are fewer Reagan Democrats. The Hispanic vote, now the largest minority bloc, is trending Democratic. Union members are returning to the Democratic Party fold. The conservative Republican base, mobilized by Karl Rove to win two presidential terms for George W. Bush, is plainly dispirited.

In part, sagging Republican morale and a fraying GOP coalition are functions of changing times and events. A controversial war cannot be erased, although it's now being won. Fixing a cyclically faltering economy will take time. The Republican Party's lost luster of fiscal responsibility won't be restored overnight. Turning pro-growth economic policies into a true "tide that lifts all boats" will prove a similarly protracted task.

Yet, a Republican Party and presidential candidate credibly committed to accomplishing these tasks can still win.

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, for all their ceaseless talk about "change," have few new ideas that don't involve bigger, more expensive government. They are unpersuasive on national security and stubbornly defeatist on Iraq. Their claims to fiscal responsibility are implausible. Remember, too, that the new Democratic Congress has a public disapproval rating of 70 percent.

Meanwhile, Republicans can still grasp the standard of enduring principles that built and sustained the Reagan coalition. Most Americans still favor smaller, smarter government, oppose higher taxes, embrace traditional values and, above all, want safety and security for themselves and their country.

On these sturdy foundations, the Reagan coalition can yet be restored.

Robert J. Caldwell is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's Sunday Insight section and can be reached at robert.caldwell@uniontrib.com.

The Republican future by Robert_J_Caldwell