

The Republican vacuum

by Susan_Estrich

Imagine how different things might be right now if there were a Republican Party. I mean a party like the one led by Ronald Reagan, George Bush or Newt Gingrich; a party with a program, a single set of talking points, and the technological and communications advantages to get their message across. That kind of Republican Party. The kind that doesn't exist right now.

Conservative talk radio is on the wane. The Internet, with the exception of the ever-popular Drudge Report, is dominated by the left and the more left. The Democrats, for the first time in this adult's memory, now hold the advantage in terms of technology, organization and communications. Imagine.

If there actually were a Republican Party, they'd be having a field day right now. Not a Glenn Beck field day, but the Washington-politics kind, where you hold hearings and press conferences and announce alternate legislation; where you run ads in key districts making clear what's wrong with their approach; where you do radical things like unify to oppose earmarks, renounce all of your own and become a party that stands for something. Imagine that. Beck's popularity derives not only from his talent, but also from the vacuum of any other way "like involvement in politics" to voice passionately felt concerns. God knows, you wouldn't write to your congressman.

The Republicans in Congress are irrelevant "either because, in the smallest number, they go along with the Democrats, or because they just say no and lose. Either way, they're part of the problem and not a place to find an answer. Lately, most of the Republican talking heads I see are so busy trying to figure out whether Rush Limbaugh is or is not their leader that they lose any claim to being leaders themselves.

Consider this AIG bonus mess. Could the Democrats have done more to assume the position of sitting ducks than they have on this one? Could you get a better symbol to bang over their heads than knowingly allowing hundreds of millions of dollars in bonuses to be paid while people are losing their jobs and struggling to hold on to their homes? Sure, I know, the economists will tell you that hundreds of millions don't matter much when we're talking about a bailout in the hundreds of billions. But this is politics, not economics. This turkey is trimmed and stuffed.

But do you see the Republicans turning it into an opportunity? To do what? It's not just that the Democrats blew it on this one. It's that moments like this are an opportunity if there's anybody else out there with something to say worth listening to. And I don't mean Glenn or Rush â€” they're doing just fine. I mean the people who do, or should, call themselves the leaders of the Republican Party, or who should make way for others who could fill those shoes.

Sarah Palin is still the big draw for Republicans, with Bobby Jindal now a distant second. But neither of them, as recent history has painfully proved, have the experience, gravity, understanding or credibility to go toe to toe with Tim Geithner, Larry Summers and the rest as to what the economy needs, and doesn't. Until the Republicans find some folks who can, this will remain a one-sided game, even on weeks like this, where that one side finds itself in the sort of situation that a real opposition party could exploit.

Should be good ratings this week for Rush and Glenn. Lucky for the White House that the president does better running against them than anyone else. Not so lucky for the Republican Party, such as it is.

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