

The Conservative Collapse

By [ALAN WOLFE](#)

To E.J. Dionne Jr.'s trenchant [analysis](#) of conservative overreach and liberal hopes I have one point to add: The present political situation is due primarily to the fact that conservatives have begun to act the way liberals once did and liberals have learned more than a few things from conservatives.

Liberal politicians have a reputation -- in many ways justified -- of being more concerned with their personal authenticity than with a willingness to sublimate their ambitions to the discipline required to be successful in politics. Ralph Nader, if you think of him as a liberal, is the best example, but one can see the same phenomenon in the tendency of liberals to support candidates for president based more on their ideological purity than on their chance of electoral success. Lacking cohesion, liberals rarely have manifested the party unity that has enabled Republicans to line up behind a candidate -- as they did in 2000 with George W. Bush -- and to practice party loyalty in Congressional voting.

Yet these days, it is conservative Republicans who are more likely to put personal needs before party, rather than liberal Democrats. The best example, oddly enough, is Bush himself. Bush's key political adviser, Karl Rove, as Dionne points out, said that he wanted to create a long-lasting Republican majority. Instead he produced a Democratic Congress in 2006 and a party unable to rally around a nominee for 2008. The question is why.

The Republican Party's dismal prospects were decided when Dick Cheney nominated himself to be vice president. Had Bush chosen a rising young star in the party, that person would now be in the position to claim the Republican nomination. Yet it seems that Bush was more interested in either protecting a place for his brother or in recruiting a strong insider to work with him; fashioning a new Republican majority was not as great a priority. And when Cheney led the country into war with Iraq, he sealed his party's doom. For it turned out that the man with whom he shared power -- I leave it to future historians to decide who really ran things in the Bush White House -- was vain enough to be more concerned with protecting himself against the consequences of the Iraqi disaster than he was with helping his party retain office.

What else can explain Bush's bizarre conduct in 2006? He had already decided to fire the highly unpopular Donald Rumsfeld before the election but, unwilling to acknowledge the mistake of appointing him in the first place, he draped Rumsfeld around the necks of his party's candidates, thereby handing Congress over to the Democrats. And now, by sticking with his failed policy in Iraq, he threatens even further damage to his party in 2008.

While all that was taking place, liberals were acting with unusual political discipline. Nancy Pelosi's ability to keep the Democrats together in Congress rivals the efforts once associated with Tom DeLay -- without the corruption. It is true that Democrats, as they are wont to do, have

many candidates running for president in 2008, but the feeling among the party's base is that most of them are attractive, in contrast to the Republican preference for "none of the above." Whatever you think of the front-runner's politics, Hillary Rodham Clinton is disciplined, sometimes to a fault. If there is anything conservative about her, it is not her initial vote for the war in Iraq but her willingness to use Rove-like tactics in her defense.

One of the most powerful tropes used by conservatives to defeat liberals is that the latter are the spoiled children of the 1960s, while the former are serious adults. Yet after watching a petulant, self-indulgent man occupy the White House, voters may be ready for a politics of responsibility and caution. Dionne is correct to emphasize that liberals must rediscover the attractions of their own tradition. (That's why I am writing a book on why liberalism matters.)

The big challenge for liberals, as Dionne correctly notes, concerns foreign policy. Liberals to this point have different views on Iraq, which is only to be expected when, out of power, they are not responsible for the decisions made in Washington. But should they return to power in 2008, chances are they will be more unified than we have come to expect of them. Consider that another Bush gift to liberalism. Because Bush ignored global opinion, liberals will have to be sensitive to it. Because Bush used up nearly all of America's hard power, a reliance on soft power will be their best option. Given the fact that Bush shifted to the extreme right and failed, there is no reason for liberals to shift to the extreme left. Bush has left them the middle, and they will surely take it. After Bush, liberals can say they are all globalists now.

If liberals take advantage of their opportunities, they have every reason to face the long-term future with confidence. But they are poised to do well in the short term as well, and while much of that is because they have gotten far more serious, it is also because their opponents have become so frivolous.

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