

E. J. Dionne

The New Ideas Republicans

Republicans aren't given to singing FDR's anthem, "Happy Days Are Here Again," but the song certainly reflects their mood. For the Republicans, everything's coming up Clinton. They think that's even better than roses given how fast and how far the president's popularity has dropped.

But there is a group of Republican skeptics who deserve attention because they are the same people who warned early last year—and, in some cases, even before—that George Bush was in bad trouble. They insisted that absent coherent proposals for the future, Republicans would be ridden out of town.

Their warnings today are familiar. William Kristol, who was Dan Quayle's chief of staff and is now thinking about the future for the conservative Bradley Foundation, says the Republican message right now is: "We're not the Democrats, we're not going to raise your taxes, we're not going to spend your money."

"There's no positive vision," Kristol says. "If you're against Clinton's changes, and you don't propose changes of your own, you're for the status quo. And that's a losing proposition."

William Bennett, the former drug czar and education secretary, is also unhappy with the narrow focus of some in his party. "They see it as a one issue game, and it's taxes," Bennett said. "And that's shortsighted."

Vin Weber, an official with Bennett, Jack Kemp and Jeane Kirkpatrick of Empower America, a group dedicated to new thinking about old Republican principles, is disappointed that while Republicans have opposed taxes in general, they've been unwilling to make a principled case against Clinton's higher taxes on the wealthy.

Weber argues that for Republicans, supply-side economics remains the "only thing they have to offer as far as getting the economy growing is concerned." Yet Republicans are so afraid of seeming to favor the rich that they've barely protested

as Clinton throws "the last shovel of dirt" on the grave of Reaganomics.

Weber's comments are revealing, because they help explain why the Republicans have not been able to rise much in the polls as Clinton has fallen. Opposing tax increases will always win applause and some special elections. But it's not a program for boosting growth or middle-class living standards.

Reaganomics, for better or worse, is a coherent theory. It says that if you keep cutting taxes on the investing class (in Democratic terms, "the rich,") you'll get more investment, more growth, more jobs.

There's only one problem: Reaganomics isn't popular any more. Both Clinton and Ross Perot campaigned against Reaganomics and together got 62 percent. It turns out that voters may accept tax cuts for the rich if the economy booms (as it did in 1984 and 1988) but don't particularly like them and would prefer to see them reversed. They want tax cuts for themselves, not for people earning more than \$200,000.

As Weber notes, if Clinton's experiment fails, supply-siders may get another go at power. But if the economy survives or even prospers, what do Republicans have to say about the other problems the country faces?

Here, at least, the "new ideas Republicans"—Kristol, Bennett, Kemp, Weber, former Bush adviser Jim Pinkerton, among others—have a theory

aimed at dealing with one of the party's central difficulties: the split between economic and social conservatives.

The economic conservatives, essentially libertarians, don't much like taxes, big government, regulation or bureaucracy. But they can be rather liberal on social issues, especially abortion. The social conservatives care most about opposition to abortion, pornography, gay rights and "permissiveness" generally. But if their views get too much prominence in campaigns, upper-middle-class voters can peel off.

The new ideas Republicans would solve this problem by leading an attack on government policies and institutions seen as promoting liberal, even "permissive," values. This attack on "big, bureaucratic government" can unite both wings of the coalition. "It appeals to market conservatives for competition reasons and social conservatives for value reasons," says Kristol.

Central to this strategy is a critique of the public schools and a call for education vouchers to let parents pick their own schools, including private ones. Kemp's support for selling off public housing units to tenants is aimed at breaking up the big housing authorities and (conservatives hope) turning the new tenants/owners into Republicans.

For the broader middle class, there would be a new round of tax cuts for parents with children. Again, "big spending, big taxing" government is

cast as the enemy of traditional institutions—in this case, the family.

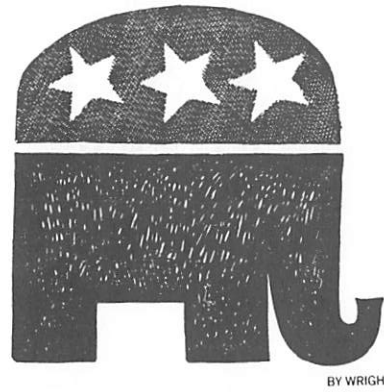
This broad strategy is finding support in interesting places. It's largely endorsed in the forthcoming issue of the Heritage Foundation's magazine, *Policy Review*, by Ralph Reed, executive director of Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition.

Reed admits that "the pro-family movement's political rhetoric has often been policy-thin and value-laden, leaving many voters out." His side, he says, "has limited its effectiveness by concentrating disproportionately on issues such as abortion and homosexuality." Central to a new approach, he says, are school vouchers and pro-children tax cuts.

There are some big problems with this agenda. Where will they get the money for the tax cuts or the rest of their program? The new ideas Republicans' latest hero, Jersey City Mayor Bret Schundler, conceded in a recent talk sponsored by the Manhattan Institute that his own school voucher plan depends on a state aid program pushed through by Democratic Gov. Jim Florio. That program required income tax increases and shifts of money from affluent suburbs to the cities. Schundler is for this, but most conservatives aren't.

Moreover, many of the new ideas depend on actions by local governments and are aimed at fixing up inner cities, places Republicans seem unlikely to run in the near future. In the suburbs that Republicans do run, alienation with local government is lower and the very radicalism of the proposals may limit their appeal.

Still, the new ideas Republicans carry two useful warnings. Democrats can't assume that Republicans will remain intellectually moribund. Republicans can't assume they can bludgeon their way back to power with stale shouts of "no new taxes." Republicans, said Kristol, need to remember what happens in boxing when "the bad guy gets knocked down and the good guy makes the mistake of waving to the crowd." Especially when your adversary is called "the Comeback Kid."



An attack on big government can unite both wings of the coalition.