

## COMMENTARY

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## What is a Republican?

The "conversion" of Colorado Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell from Democrat to Republican is not good news for the GOP.

While it widens the numerical majority in the Republican Senate to 54 votes, Mr. Campbell's presence in the Republican Party further obscures what Republicans stand for.

As many of his former party colleagues have said, Mr. Campbell votes with Democrats on most issues of substance. As a Democrat, Mr. Campbell supported President Clinton's 1994 budget, which included the biggest tax increase in recent history. He is "pro-choice" on abortion and voted to lift the longstanding ban on federal funding to pay for most abortions for poor women. He supported the president on gays in the military by voting not to enshrine the gay ban into law.

Add to this his strong support of organized labor and his vote to ban "assault weapons" and you have a Democrat that has merely changed his label, not his mind. That there is room for him in the rapidly expanding GOP "big tent" says something about the dilution of Republican ideology and the apparent unimportance of ideas to those in the party who are embracing this defector.

The same day that Mr. Campbell announced his switch, Indiana Republican Sen. Richard Lugar said he is going to run for president and broke with his party's orthodox line favoring tax cuts. Following the defeat of the balanced budget amendment to the Constitution, Mr. Lugar said "to cut taxes in the face of that situation is simply to increase the pain down the road."

Mr. Campbell's Colorado colleague, Republican Sen. Hank Brown, said Mr. Campbell's switch will change the GOP image. "The Republican Party has become the working party," he said. What does that mean? The Republican "image" was good enough last November to win the House and Senate for the first time in four decades. What's to change? This sounds like the class warfare game Democrats play when they claim their party represents "working people," implying that Republicans don't work, or that people who make more than a certain amount of money haven't legitimately earned it.

The Republican Party, so close to winning it all in next year's election, could blow it all unless it sticks to a clear identity. What does it stand for? Who is a Republican? Should the party have certain principles, the violation of which means one is not a Republican? Or, has the tent grown

so large that anyone can seek admission without demonstrating commitment to anything but a label?

This is not the party that was founded in 1854 by people who took a principled position against the extension of slavery. No big tent there. No compromise. Compromise was what the Whigs did. The Whigs thought they could build a "big tent" in their day. By fudging on a matter of principle, the Whigs sealed their doom. The new Republican Party lost its first presidential election in 1856, but because it stood on principle, Republicans emerged from the Civil War with enormous political strength, allow-

ing the party to control the national government for 72 years, with the exception of 16 years during which Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson were in the White House.

A great social force was behind the creation of the Republican Party, and it was greater than party loyalty. That social force reshaped American politics. Republicans rode that force to victory after victory because they stood for what was right, not what was expedient.

Now the party of Lincoln is faced with a similar challenge. It must not allow anyone to wear the Republican label. It must articulate certain

fundamental principles in which it believes.

It is not enough to be against President Clinton. Republicans must be for something. If they fail to set forth certain fundamental principles, they run the risk of going the way of the Whigs. But that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. A new party could emerge that would be built, not in a big tent, but on a solid rock.

Cal Thomas is a nationally syndicated columnist.



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Ben Nighthorse Campbell