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Bigger Than Bush

By [PAUL KRUGMAN](#)

As the new Democratic majority prepares to take power, Republicans have become, as Phil Gramm might put it, a party of whiners.

Some of the whining almost defies belief. Did Alberto Gonzales, the former attorney general, really say, “I consider myself a casualty, one of the many casualties of the war on terror”? Did Rush Limbaugh really suggest that the financial crisis was the result of a conspiracy, masterminded by that evil genius Chuck Schumer?

But most of the whining takes the form of claims that the Bush administration’s failure was simply a matter of bad luck — either the bad luck of President Bush himself, who just happened to have disasters happen on his watch, or the bad luck of the G.O.P., which just happened to send the wrong man to the White House.

The fault, however, lies not in Republicans’ stars but in themselves. Forty years ago the G.O.P. decided, in effect, to make itself the party of racial backlash. And everything that has happened in recent years, from the choice of Mr. Bush as the party’s champion, to the Bush administration’s pervasive incompetence, to the party’s shrinking base, is a consequence of that decision.

If the Bush administration became a byword for policy bumbles, for government by the unqualified, well, it was just following the advice of leading conservative think tanks: after the 2000 election the Heritage Foundation specifically urged the new team to “make appointments based on loyalty first and expertise second.”

Contempt for expertise, in turn, rested on contempt for government in general. “Government is not the solution to our problem,” declared Ronald Reagan. “Government is the problem.” So why worry about governing well?

Where did this hostility to government come from? In 1981 Lee Atwater, the famed Republican political consultant, explained the evolution of the G.O.P.’s “Southern strategy,” which originally focused on opposition to the Voting Rights Act but eventually took a more coded form: “You’re getting so abstract now you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is blacks get hurt worse than whites.” In other words, government is the problem because it takes your money and gives it to Those People.

Oh, and the racial element isn’t all that abstract, even now: Chip Saltsman, currently a candidate for the

chairmanship of the Republican National Committee, sent committee members a CD including a song titled “Barack the Magic Negro” — and according to some reports, the controversy over his action has actually helped his chances.

So the reign of George W. Bush, the first true Southern Republican president since Reconstruction, was the culmination of a long process. And despite the claims of some on the right that Mr. Bush betrayed conservatism, the truth is that he faithfully carried out both his party’s divisive tactics — long before Sarah Palin, Mr. Bush declared that he visited his ranch to “stay in touch with real Americans” — and its governing philosophy.

That’s why the soon-to-be-gone administration’s failure is bigger than Mr. Bush himself: it represents the end of the line for a political strategy that dominated the scene for more than a generation.

The reality of this strategy’s collapse has not, I believe, fully sunk in with some observers. Thus, some commentators warning President-elect Barack Obama against bold action have held up Bill Clinton’s political failures in his first two years as a cautionary tale.

But America in 1993 was a very different country — not just a country that had yet to see what happens when conservatives control all three branches of government, but also a country in which Democratic control of Congress depended on the votes of Southern conservatives. Today, Republicans have taken away almost all those Southern votes — and lost the rest of the country. It was a grand ride for a while, but in the end the Southern strategy led the G.O.P. into a cul-de-sac.

Mr. Obama therefore has room to be bold. If Republicans try a 1993-style strategy of attacking him for promoting big government, they’ll learn two things: not only has the financial crisis discredited their economic theories, the racial subtext of anti-government rhetoric doesn’t play the way it used to.

Will the Republicans eventually stage a comeback? Yes, of course. But barring some huge missteps by Mr. Obama, that will not happen until they stop whining and look at what really went wrong. And when they do, they will discover that they need to get in touch with the real “real America,” a country that is more diverse, more tolerant, and more demanding of effective government than is dreamt of in their political philosophy.

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