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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Mask Slips

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

The lesson for Americans suffused with anxiety and dread over the crackup of the financial markets is that the way you vote matters, that there are real-world consequences when you go into a voting booth and cast that ballot.

For the nitwits who vote for the man or woman they'd most like to have over for dinner, or hang out at a barbecue with, I suggest you take a look at how well your 401(k) is doing, or how easy it will be to meet the mortgage this month, or whether the college fund you've been trying to build for your kids is as robust as you'd like it to be.

Voters in the George W. Bush era gave the Republican Party nearly complete control of the federal government. Now the financial markets are in turmoil, top government and corporate leaders are on the verge of panic and scholars are dusting off treatises that analyzed the causes of the Great Depression.

Mr. Bush was never viewed as a policy or intellectual heavyweight. But he seemed like a nicer guy to a lot of voters than Al Gore.

It's not just the economy. While the United States has been fighting a useless and irresponsible war in Iraq, Afghanistan — the home base of the terrorists who struck us on 9/11 — has been allowed to fall into a state of chaos. Osama bin Laden is still at large. New Orleans is still on its knees. And so on.

Voting has consequences.

I don't for a moment think that the Democratic Party has been free of egregious problems. But there are two things I find remarkable about the G.O.P., and especially its more conservative wing, which is now about all there is.

The first is how wrong conservative Republicans have been on so many profoundly important matters for so many years. The second is how the G.O.P. has nevertheless been able to persuade so many voters of modest means that its wrongheaded, favor-the-rich, country-be-damned approach was not only good for working Americans, but was the patriotic way to go.

Remember voodoo economics? That was the derisive term George H.W. Bush used for Ronald Reagan's fantasy that he could simultaneously increase defense spending, cut taxes and balance the budget. After Reagan became president (with Mr. Bush as his vice president) the budget deficit — surprise, surprise — soared.

In a moment of unusual candor, Reagan's own chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, Martin Feldstein, gave three reasons for the growth of the deficit: the president's tax cuts, the increased defense spending and the interest on the expanding national debt.

These were the self-proclaimed fiscal conservatives who were behaving so profligately. The budget was balanced and a surplus realized under Bill Clinton, but soon the "fiscal conservatives" were back in the driver's seat. "Deficits don't matter," said Dick Cheney, and the wildest, most reckless of economic rides was on.

Americans, including the Joe Sixpacks, soccer moms and hockey moms, were repeatedly told that the benefits lavished on the highfliers would trickle down to them. Someday.

Just as they were wrong about trickle down, conservative Republican politicians and their closest buddies in the commentariat have been wrong on one important national issue after another, from Social Security (conservatives opposed it from the start and have been trying to undermine it ever since) to Medicare (Ronald Reagan saw it as the first wave of socialism) to the environment, energy policy and global warming.

When the Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded to the discoverers of the link between chlorofluorocarbons and ozone depletion, Tom DeLay, a Republican who would go on to wield enormous power as majority leader in the House, mocked the award as the "Nobel Appeasement Prize."

Mr. Reagan, the ultimate political hero of so many Republicans, opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In response to the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* school-desegregation ruling, William F. Buckley, the ultimate intellectual hero of so many Republicans, asserted that whites, being superior, were well within their rights to discriminate against blacks.

"The White community is so entitled," he wrote, "because, for the time being, it is the advanced race..." He would later repudiate that sentiment, but only after it was clear that his racist view was harmful to himself.

The G.O.P. has done a great job masking the terrible consequences of much that it has stood for over the decades. Now the mask has slipped. As we survey the wreckage of the American economy and the real-life suffering associated with the financial crackup of 2008, it would be well for voters to draw upon the lessons of history and think more seriously about the consequences of the ballots they may cast in the future.

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