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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Same Old Party

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

There have been a number of articles recently that portray President Bush as someone who strayed from the path of true conservatism. Republicans, these articles say, need to return to their roots.

Well, I don't know what true conservatism is, but while doing research for my forthcoming book I spent a lot of time studying the history of the American political movement that calls itself conservatism — and Mr. Bush hasn't strayed from the path at all. On the contrary, he's the very model of a modern movement conservative.

For example, people claim to be shocked that Mr. Bush cut taxes while waging an expensive war. But Ronald Reagan also cut taxes while embarking on a huge military buildup.

People claim to be shocked by Mr. Bush's general fiscal irresponsibility. But conservative intellectuals, by their own account, abandoned fiscal responsibility 30 years ago. Here's how Irving Kristol, then the editor of *The Public Interest*, explained his embrace of supply-side economics in the 1970s: He had a "rather cavalier attitude toward the budget deficit and other monetary or fiscal problems" because "the task, as I saw it, was to create a new majority, which evidently would mean a conservative majority, which came to mean, in turn, a Republican majority — so political effectiveness was the priority, not the accounting deficiencies of government."

People claim to be shocked by the way the Bush administration outsourced key government functions to private contractors yet refused to exert effective oversight over these contractors, a process exemplified by the failed reconstruction of Iraq and the Blackwater affair.

But back in 1993, Jonathan Cohn, writing in *The American Prospect*, explained that "under Reagan and Bush, the ranks of public officials necessary to supervise contractors have been so thinned that the putative gains of contracting out have evaporated. Agencies have been left with the worst of both worlds — demoralized and disorganized public officials and unaccountable private contractors."

People claim to be shocked by the Bush administration's general incompetence. But disinterest in good government has long been a principle of modern conservatism. In "The Conscience of a Conservative," published in 1960, Barry Goldwater wrote that "I have little interest in streamlining government or making it more efficient, for I mean to reduce its size."

People claim to be shocked that the Bush Justice Department, making a mockery of the Constitution, issued a secret opinion authorizing torture despite instructions by Congress and the courts that the practice should stop. But remember Iran-Contra? The Reagan administration secretly sold weapons to Iran, violating a legal embargo, and used the proceeds to support the Nicaraguan contras, defying an explicit Congressional ban on such support.

Oh, and if you think Iran-Contra was a rogue operation, rather than something done with the full knowledge and approval of people at the top — who were then protected by a careful cover-up, including convenient presidential pardons — I've got a letter from Niger you might want to buy.

People claim to be shocked at the Bush administration's efforts to disenfranchise minority groups, under the pretense of combating voting fraud. But Reagan opposed the Voting Rights Act, and as late as 1980 he described it as "humiliating to the South."

People claim to be shocked at the Bush administration's attempts — which, for a time, were all too successful — to intimidate the press. But this administration's media tactics, and to a large extent the people implementing those tactics, come straight out of the Nixon administration. Dick Cheney wanted to search Seymour Hersh's apartment, not last week, but in 1975. Roger Ailes, the president of Fox News, was Nixon's media adviser.

People claim to be shocked at the Bush administration's attempts to equate dissent with treason. But Goldwater — who, like Reagan, has been reinvented as an icon of conservative purity but was a much less attractive figure in real life — staunchly supported Joseph McCarthy, and was one of only 22 senators who voted against a motion censuring the demagogue.

Above all, people claim to be shocked by the Bush administration's authoritarianism, its disdain for the rule of law. But a full half-century has passed since The National Review proclaimed that "the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail," and dismissed as irrelevant objections that might be raised after "consulting a catalogue of the rights of American citizens, born Equal" — presumably a reference to the document known as the Constitution of the United States.

Now, as they survey the wreckage of their cause, conservatives may ask themselves: "Well, how did we get here?" They may tell themselves: "This is not my beautiful Right." They may ask themselves: "My God, what have we done?"

But their movement is the same as it ever was. And Mr. Bush is movement conservatism's true, loyal heir.

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