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POLITICS

Dying Breed

Who Killed the Responsible Republican? Bill Kristol, of course.

By Jacob Weisberg

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Do you remember the Responsible Republicans? In the 1980s, small herds of them still roamed freely around Washington. In 1982, they voted for [the largest tax increase in history](#) to mitigate the fiscal harm of Ronald Reagan's 1981 tax cut.* In 1983, they converged on Capitol Hill to pass a package of tax increases and benefit cuts recommended by the Greenspan Commission to keep Social Security solvent. In 1986, they followed Wyoming Sen. Alan Simpson to [pass bipartisan immigration](#) reform legislation by a large majority. In 1990, several were spotted with President George H.W. Bush (the Responsible one) at Andrews Air Force Base, conspiring to reduce the deficit.

After the Andrews summit, however, glimpses of them outside captivity became increasingly rare. With their habitats in the Northeast, Midwest, and Pacific Northwest under threat and their natural predators on the rise, the status of the species moved from "threatened" to "endangered." Though occasionally spotted on the rocky shoals of Maine's Penobscot Bay and in beach houses up and down the California coast, they now rarely emerge from the wilderness. During the health care battle, President Obama was unable to find a single Responsible Republican to serve as a mascot. There continue to be rumors of the Double R's return around issues such as immigration, financial reform, and climate change. Yet we have now gone several years without a confirmed sighting.

If Responsible Republicans are in fact nearing extinction, I think we can identify the crucial event that signaled their demise. It was a [December 1993 memo](#) by conservative strategist and commentator William Kristol. Kristol's advice about how Republicans should respond to Bill Clinton's 1993 health care effort—and a series of follow-up memos he wrote in 1994—pushed the GOP away from cooperation with Democrats on any social and economic legislation. His message marks the pivotal moment when Republicans shifted from fundamentally responsible partners in governing the country to uncompromising, hyperpartisan antagonists on all issues.

In his five-page memo, Kristol took aim at Bob Dole and other congressional Republicans who were then working with Democrats to find a compromise around shared goals of universal coverage and cost containment. Kristol called for the GOP to "adopt an aggressive and uncompromising counterstrategy designed to delegitimize the proposal," arguing that a bipartisan deal on health care would be a political victory for Democrats and a defeat for the GOP. "Unqualified political defeat of the Clinton health care proposal," Kristol wrote, "... would be a monumental setback for the president, and an incontestable piece of evidence that Democratic welfare-state liberalism remains firmly in retreat."

Slowly at first, then all at once, Republicans adopted this zero-sum view of politics. Newt Gingrich, the truculent House minority leader, had risen to power attacking the 1990 budget summit and the more conciliatory Republican leadership that preceded him. Dole soon adopted the rejectionist approach as well, responding to Clinton's 1994 State of the Union address by echoing Kristol's line that there was "[no health care crisis](#)." Remaining Double Rs such as Sen. John Chafee of Rhode Island were left out in the cold by their party, and hopes for a deal died.

Kristol's Carthaginian strategy worked politically, or seemed to. Newt Gingrich and Contract With America Republicans swept into power in the 1994 midterm election on the basis of monolithic opposition to Clinton's economic plan and social agenda. But the Gingrich "revolution" soon failed. Its ideas were not enacted, Bill Clinton won re-election in 1996, and its leaders fell to a variety of scandals. Congressional Republicans kept their opposition to government at the level of rhetoric only, becoming bigger spenders than ever. But this outcome did not dim the GOP's essential faith in the Kristol approach. Under Obama, the Republican Party has simply tried to replay its script from the Clinton years, opposing everything the president proposes, [looking for heretics to burn](#), and calling the other side extreme—though this time without blocking the president's major initiative. They've been at it again this week, claiming, absurdly, that financial regulations supported by Democrats would amount to a [perpetual bank bailout](#).

The politics of Republican implacability are based on what might seem an obvious insight that competition is a zero-sum game. If Democrats pass their plans, they succeed politically and Republicans lose. But while elections are zero-sum, politics as a whole is not. Without some level of bipartisan cooperation, [voters become increasingly cynical](#), the system becomes too paralyzed to

address the major issues, and the whole country suffers in consequence. Longer term, it is hard to see [the politics of "no"](#) as a winning Republican strategy.

The rise of hyperpartisanship is not one of those problems for which the left and right are equally to blame. Democrats, who like legislating better than Republican do, and who have seldom had the GOP's ability to march in lockstep, still instinctively prefer to work on a bipartisan basis. They continue to hope, against the odds, that Double Rs will escape extinction and one day provide partners for them again. Perhaps Ted Turner will find a way to [breed them](#) on his ranch.

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Correction, April 19, 2010: This article originally indicated that Congress overrode Ronald Reagan's veto of a major tax increase in 1982. In fact, Reagan signed the 1982 tax increase. Reagan vetoed a separate supplemental appropriations bill that Congress passed shortly after the tax bill. It was that veto that Congress overrode with Republican support. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

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