

The Decline and Fall of GOP Principles



The record of the 105th Congress, Republican controlled in both houses, is an abomination. Spending is up. No major program or agency has been significantly cut, much less eliminated. The tax code is more complex than ever, loaded down with new conservative social engineering initiatives. The balanced-budget agreement is an excuse not to cut taxes and, with the “surplus,” an excuse to increase spending. The GOP has seemed intent on federalizing every crime on the books,

indifferent to the Constitution's clear direction that crime is a state and local responsibility. Republican efforts to “privatize” Social Security are so lame as to be laughable. Regrettably, the list could go on. And on.

If you're looking for a reason for the lamentable track record of the Republican Congress, look no further than the party's leadership. January provided clear evidence of an utter lack of philosophical resolve on the part of that leadership. On January 5 House Speaker Newt Gingrich gave what his office billed as a major statement of his political agenda for the next decade in a speech to the Cobb County Chamber of Commerce. To his credit, the Speaker did call for reducing the total tax burden on the American people, now in excess of 40 percent, to 25 percent over the next dozen years. But he failed to offer a single specific spending cut to finance the tax cut. Hardly a profile in political courage.

Indeed, Gingrich has taken to talking of how we can “modernize” government, à la Al Gore's “reinventing government” diversion, as his approach to shrinking the state. Suggesting that there are areas of civil society that should remain outside the scope of the federal government does not appear to be part of the Speaker's strategy.

But by far the most egregious aspect of the Gingrich speech was his plan to save the public schools. Instead of looking for alternatives to the abject failure of the government monopoly school system in America, Gingrich defended the system. “I believe passionately and deeply in the public school system of the country,” he said. His solution to miserable test scores and mounting violence in the nation's public schools was not choice and competition (although he pays lip service to choice when he's not making a “major” speech) but rather a breathtakingly statist, centralized command-and-control proposal. Employing a military analogy (as he is wont to do), he told his Cobb audience, “I think we ought to adopt Winston Churchill's principle of action this day. We ought to identify the schools now that are bad and say to them, ‘What are you going to change in the next 30 days?’ If they don't have a good answer we ought to replace the people in charge of them. We ought to do it everywhere. . . .”

That the Republican Speaker of the House could say something so ignorant, so at odds with both our constitutional form of government and the reality of how markets work, is simply astonishing. Politicians and bureaucrats, not parents, are to determine what a “good answer” is to the problem of bad schools. Some unnamed

central authority (the federal government?) will “replace the people in charge” (with whom?). One can't help but conjure up images of communist authorities in the old Soviet Union demanding more production from steel functionaries at People's Smelter No. 10—“or you will be replaced!”

Close on the heels of the Speaker's “vision” for the future, House Majority Leader Dick Armey followed with an eight-page memo to his Republican colleagues predicated on the curious notion that Americans somehow want politicians, not to get the government out of their lives, but to provide “moral leadership” for the nation. Although we certainly hope that our politicians don't turn out to be crooks and scoundrels, to suggest that Americans believe that element of our society should presume to lead us on issues of morality shows a stunning misunderstanding of how we view politicians.

More fundamentally, Armey's memo reflects the Clinton-driven search for a kind of intimacy between the public and private sectors that is wholly alien to a constitutional structure of strictly limited government. It is disheartening to see one of the few politicians who used to take a principled approach to limited government succumb to the Congress-is-the-center-of-the-universe syndrome.

Finally, on January 27, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott gave the GOP response to the president's state of the union address. An uninspired speech, obviously written by committee, Lott's response not only omitted any reference to specific program or spending cuts, it ignored (incredibly) the fact that the president had put into play 23 percent of the federal budget by calling for fundamental Social Security reform.

The speech called for more federalization of crime, getting rid of “fraud and abuse” (what a good idea), and “rebuilding the kind of government that works with you and for you,” as though most Americans don't believe the government already “works” with us far more than it should.

One sentence in Lott's speech was particularly revealing. He said, “The only way to limit government and expand individual freedom is to eliminate the IRS as we know it today.” Huh? The *only* way to limit government? How about abolishing the Departments of Education, Commerce, Energy, and Labor for starters? But the other interesting thing about that sentence is the habit Republicans have developed of using Clintonesque weasel words like “as we know it today.” We said we'd abolish the IRS as we know it today and you'll be happy to learn that effective tomorrow the entire IRS headquarters will get a fresh coat of paint.

The federal government is a machine designed to increase its control over the lives of average Americans. It is constantly probing here, pushing there, and generally increasing its control. Without a philosophically sound, constitutionally based political party opposing that process, it is going to continue to do so with impunity. The philosophical leadership vacuum at the top of the GOP should be a source of major concern to all freedom-loving Americans.

—Edward H. Crane