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A Way Out of the Wilderness

By Jeff Flake

Wednesday, November 5, 2008; A26

Well, we Republicans have just made history. Not the type of history we wanted to make, mind you, but history nonetheless. Not only did we lose the [White House](#) but, after losing our House and Senate majorities in 2006, we followed it up last night with even steeper losses in Congress.

In January, Democrats will enjoy lopsided congressional ratios not seen since the 1970s. Let's face it: We Republicans are now, by any reasonable measurement, deep in the political wilderness.

The temptation for Republican members of Congress today will be to assume the role of the post-Watergate Republicans of 1974 and accept minority status as a permanent condition. Indeed, the terrain is more difficult for us now than it was in 1992. Then, Republicanism was still largely defined by the Reagan years. Today the party is defined in the public mind by the Bush presidency. We've got a steep hill to climb.

Much of the backroom maneuvering and media speculation in the coming weeks will focus on identifying new standard-bearers for the party. This is important, and after a second straight drubbing, the [House Republican](#) leadership should be replaced. But the far more critical task is determining what standard these new leaders will bear.

I suggest that we return to first principles. At the top of that list has to be a recommitment to limited government. After eight years of profligate spending and soaring deficits, voters can be forgiven for not knowing that limited government has long been the first article of faith for Republicans.

Of course, it's not the level of spending that gets the most attention; it's the manner in which the spending is allocated. The proliferation of earmarks is largely a product of the Gingrich-DeLay years, and it's no surprise that some of the most ardent practitioners were earmarked by the voters for retirement yesterday. Few Americans will take seriously Republican speeches on limited government if we Republicans can't wean ourselves from this insidious practice. But if we can go clean, it will offer a stark contrast to the Democrats, who, after two years in training, already have their own earmark favor factory running at full tilt.

Second, we need to recommit to our belief in economic freedom. [Adam Smith's](#) "The Wealth of Nations" may be on the discount rack this year, but the free market is still the most efficient means to allocate capital and human resources in an economy, and Americans know it. Now that we've inserted government deeply into the private sector by bailing out banks and businesses, the temptation will be for government to overstay its welcome and force the distribution of resources to serve political ends. Substituting political for economic incentives is not the recipe for economic recovery.

Most House Republicans opposed the recent bailout and will be in a strong position to promote

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economic freedom over central planning as the [Obama](#) administration stumbles from industry to industry trying to determine which is small enough to be allowed to fail and which is not. Since timetables will be in vogue, perhaps Republicans could even insist on a timetable for getting the government out of the private sector.

There are, of course, other pillars of the Republican standard -- strong national defense, support for traditional values and the Second Amendment -- but these are not areas where voters question Republican bona fides. In any event, as we have seen over the past several months, economic woes tend to subsume other concerns. We shouldn't complain. We can now play our strongest hand.

In some respects, raising a new standard was made easier by yesterday's rout. The Republican Party is not bound by election-year promises made by its presidential nominee. More important, the party is finally untethered from the ill-fitting and unworkable big-government conservatism that defined the Bush administration.

This is not to say that it will be an easy transition. Congressional Republicans picked up some unattractive habits over the years in an effort to hold on to power. Whether it was relying on the redistricting process to help us choose our constituents, using the appropriations process as an ATM or passing legislation -- such as a generous prescription drug benefit and a bloated farm bill -- to pacify individual constituencies, these habits and voting patterns will be hard to break.

But there is reason for Republicans to feel optimism. Politically, America remains a center-right country, and America loves a chastened and repentant sinner. As surely as the sun rises in the east, the Democrats will overreach.

As long as we Republicans are willing to admit our folly, get back to first principles and work like there's no tomorrow, we've got 'em just where we want 'em.

The writer, a Republican, represents Arizona's 6th District in the U.S. House.

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