

TIP YOUR HAT

Jack Balkin gets at something I was trying to address the other day: the collapse of Reagan's three-legged stool and its benefits for the Democratic party.

Bush's failed presidency has left the Republicans scrambling to reconstitute the Reagan coalition. The wide range of different candidates— from Giuliani to Romney to McCain to Huckabee to Paul— offer different solutions. We don't yet know how the coalition will be reassembled, and under whose leadership. However, as of the day of the New Hampshire primary, it looks like putting it back together will be a tall order. And although the eventual nominee will try to assume the mantle of Ronald Reagan— and, equally important, not the mantle of George W. Bush— the Republican party will have been changed forever by the events of the last eight years.

[snip]

And that is why, if, like many Americans, you think that change is coming, and you think that this is a good thing, you should tip your hat to George W. Bush and his eventful presidency. For if Ronald Reagan was the Great Communicator, George W. Bush is the Great Destroyer of Coalitions.

We don't know for sure how this is going to turn out—but the sheer unpredictability of the Republican side of this primary is testament that something new is afoot. (Though why do people keep pretending that neither Michigan nor Nevada have primaries coming up on the same day or before the South Carolina primary?) If I had to bet, I'd bet either that Romney gets the nod but that the Republican bigots stay home, or that Huck gets the nomination which results in a

lot of what I called the "competence corporatists" heavily supporting Dems. In either case, resulting in low Republican turnout and, barring Cheney pulling OBL out of a hole or something similar, a comfortable Dem win.

What makes Balkin's post worth reading, though, is the way he ties this into Bush the failure.

If 2008 turns out to be a pivotal election, defining a new political era, it is important to give credit where credit is due. Two key reasons for the change will be the crackup of the coalition of the dominant party of the era, the Republicans, and the almost complete political failure of George W. Bush and his chief political adviser, Karl Rove. Let me begin with the second reason, and then move to the first.

The Bush/Rove strategy of accentuating divisions along partisan lines was a bold gamble that ultimately failed, because it depended on the Bush presidency being successful. Think of it this way: If Bush does well at his task, then people at the margins gravitate toward the winning side and the Republican coalition slowly expands over time, rejuvenating the party and producing a post-Reagan vision (organized, for example, around the War on Terror and the opportunity society) that extends well into the future. But if Bush does badly, or as it turned out, very badly, the same strategy that encourages increased partisanship and divisiveness will tend to make Americans believe that these features of political life are also the cause of political failure. They will seek both change and a sense of unity. This is precisely what Obama has tapped into, which is why he has been successful so far. Obama, if you will, is what Bush's strategy has produced.

That is, Bush and Rove's strategy to implement the permanent Republican majority would only work if it could get results. And because it was such a resounding failure (and more importantly, will lead to the US' most ignominious defeat), it will discredit the Republican party for some time.

But I'd go one step further. This was bound to happen. That's not only because the Republican coalition had irresolvable conflicts that were bound to come into conflict when, for example, all the jobs went overseas or when, for example, the Reagan Democrats' children started dying in large numbers in a pointless war. But that's also because the Republican ideology requires the government to be a failure (well, and because contracting out government will inevitably lead to the same kind of corruption that does in all single-party states). Bush had to fail at the Katrina recovery, both because his crony capitalist friends had no interest in rebuilding African-American homes in NOLA, and also because if Katrina recovery had succeeded, it would have undermined the Republican ideological truism that government is never the best entity to get something done, not even (it appears the Republicans now believe) in waging war.

Maybe I'm overly optimistic about the larger tea leaves for this election. But it sure seems like the opposition to Bush has resulted in more than just an anti-war movement that will help Dems win larger majorities in Congress. It may well bring about a serious realignment by finally knocking Reagan's stool out from under those who have been balancing precariously on top of it for the last twenty years.