

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

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THEY SAID IT

[T]he conservative coalition has its share of contradictions, but that's to be expected of any growing ideological movement or political party. Franklin Roosevelt's coalition included racist southerners, progressive blacks and Jews, liberal reformers, grafters, and machine bosses. These people fought a lot. They fought over policy, and they debated who really had Roosevelt's support. From the 1920s to the 1950s, a debate raged around the question, "Whither liberalism?" Was it over? When did it die? What does it mean now?

--Syndicated columnist and National Review Online editor-at-large
Jonah Goldberg, "Cracked," March 30, 2005.

IMMIGRATION: TROUBLE IN GOP-LAND IN 2008.

For the past couple of weeks, there has been considerable discussion on the left, on the libertarian right, and even in the mainstream media about the impending "crack-up" of the conservative coalition, which is described as the inevitable and looming split between religious conservatives and the more libertarian-leaning, small-government Republicans.

The proximate cause for this crack-up, according to those peddling the idea, is, of course, the Terri Schiavo case, in which religious conservatives purportedly offended and alienated their libertarian erstwhile fellow partisans and thus threatened the viability of the coalition by overstepping the bounds of good judgment and sticking their collective nose where it didn't belong.

One problem with all of this theorizing and prophesying about the "conservative crack-up" is that the idea is hardly new. Indeed, the widespread belief that the GOP coalition is falling apart and simply cannot last much longer is one of the most hackneyed clichés in modern American politics. For as long as I can remember, the Republican coalition assembled by Nixon, strengthened by Reagan, expanded by Gingrich, and consolidated by George W. Bush has been on the verge of collapse. Last week, the inimitable Mark Steyn assessed the Republicans' perpetual crack-up thusly:

Blog maestro Andrew Sullivan decided that America was witnessing a "conservative crack-up" over Terri Schiavo and the embrace of her cause by extreme right wing fundamentalist theocrat zealots like, er, Jesse Jackson and Ralph Nader. Sullivan was last predicting a "conservative crack-up" during the impeachment era, on the grounds (if I recall correctly) that Republican moralizing

would dramatically cut into Strom Thurmond's share of the gay vote. In the '90s, the *Weekly Standard* ran innumerable special editions devoted to the subject: Conservative Crack-Up; Conservative Crack-Up 2; Conservative Crack-Up - The Musical; Abbott And Costello Meet The Conservative Crack-Up; Conservative Crack-Up On Elm Street; Four Weddings And A Conservative Crack-Up; Rod Stewart Sings Timeless Favorites From The Great Conservative Crack-Up, etc.

The mistake that most of the crack-up theorists make is that they come to believe that the issues that matter deeply to them and to other Inside-the-Beltway elites matter just as deeply to rank-and-file Republican voters. And this is rarely the case. Additionally, they misinterpret honest, productive, intra-partisan debate – something that occurs only on the political right these days – as a sign of weakness, rather than the sign of overall intellectual fitness and energy that it actually is. This combination of self-absorption and anxiety or hope (depending on one's political preference) accounts for the vast majority of the speculation that serious fissures exist where none do and likely never will.

This is not, of course, to say that the Republican coalition does not have its weak spots and its potential flash-point issues. One of the most notable of these is immigration. With volunteers from around the country currently patrolling the Mexican border in the world's largest Neighborhood Watch program (known as the "Minuteman Project"), and with President Bush having called those volunteers "vigilantes," the immigration issue is currently the source of much consternation in conservative circles and is a contributing factor in a small percentage of the aforementioned discussions about the looming conservative crack-up. As even Steyn concedes, "Republicans could well run into trouble in 2006 and 2008, but for being insufficiently conservative on things like immigration rather than for anything the media claim they're cracking up over."

Unlike issues of life, Social Security, taxes, or any of the other controversies that the mainstream media insist are going to tear Republicans apart, immigration actually does hold some very serious potential danger for the GOP. I doubt whether that danger will manifest itself as the long-awaited GOP split. But I do believe that immigration can, if it is not handled delicately over the next three years, cause the party to squander its recent gains with minorities, specifically Hispanics, and, ultimately, to miss its opportunity to semi-permanently realign the nation's partisan predilections.

It is no secret that immigration has long been a source of serious and significant disagreement among various factions in the Republican Party. While the vast majority of Republicans have traditionally had no overpoweringly strong feelings about immigrants, two groups in particular, the Buchananite Paleocons on the one hand and the *Wall-Street-Journal*-esque free-marketeters on the other, have, over the past couple of decades, made enough noise on the subject to make it an important facet in the internal GOP dialogue and an even more important part of the public face presented by the party.

The Buchananite faction flamed out pretty spectacularly after the debacles in 1992 and '96, in which Pitchfork Pat and his band of immigration hardliners put such an ugly and angry face on the party that they contributed in no small way to the defeat of George H.W. Bush and of Bob Dole, both at the hands of Bill Clinton.

And while the Robert Bartley-inspired pro-immigrationists dominated the party and the debate throughout the decade of the '90s, they suffered their own setback after September 11, when sentiment understandably turned dramatically against immigration and the percentage of Americans favoring a *decrease* in legal immigration jumped by nearly 40%.

In the intervening two-and-a-half years, the issue has largely been quiescent. President Bush's "amnesty-lite" proposal has occasionally surfaced and drawn the

requisite howls from within the Party. Border security has been an important component of the debate over the creation of the Homeland Security Department and, more recently, the new intelligence uber-agency. And a handful of Democrats have used immigration in general and illegal immigration specifically to score cheap political points, calling attention to the fact that American borders remain porous and easily exploitable by terrorists, but offering no tangible policy solutions of their own. But by and large the issue has been quiet; the purview of Republican fringe elements and few others. Until now.

For a handful of reasons – including the Minuteman Project, the President’s proposed budget, and Congressional hearings highlighting the potential terrorist threat posed by the porous Mexican border – immigration has, over the last several weeks, reemerged as a significant issue. And, as is the case with most issues these days, the bulk of the debate is taking place on the political right. Of course, Democrats continue to use immigration to take tactical potshots at the Bush administration, but the real, earnest discussion of the issue has been an all-Republican affair, which is a big part of the reason why some presume that this topic is but one of the many factors that will presage the eventual “crack-up.”

Without question, the best known and most popular advocate of immigration “reform” is Republican Congressman Tom Tancredo, who represents the Denver suburbs. He has carefully cultivated the image of a party maverick who is concerned about the safety of the nation’s borders and who is willing to cross anyone in the party – even the all-powerful Karl Rove, with whom he had a notorious blow out – to ensure that those borders are adequately protected. Unfortunately for the GOP, in the process, Tancredo had also turned himself into what *The New Republic’s* Michael Crowley described as “the avatar of a resurgent anti-immigration wing of the Republican Party.”

At first blush, Tancredo seems tolerable enough. The onetime schoolteacher is generally well liked by his GOP colleagues. He is the chairman of the 71-member (and growing) House Immigration Reform

Caucus. And he is someone who believes passionately that American culture should be preserved and enriched, and that one of the ways to ensure that that is possible is to enforce immigration laws and crackdown on those who flout such laws. All of this appears reasonable enough. And while I consider myself a fairly committed supporter of greater legal immigration, even I’ll concede that Tancredo’s stance in favor of reducing immigration does not appear on the surface to be wholly ridiculous or entirely indefensible and certainly does not, in and of itself, appear to disqualify him from rational discourse on the subject.

But then the man starts talking. *The New Republic’s* Crowley writes that “outrageousness seems to come naturally” to Tancredo, who, in addition to being a rabid anti-immigrationist, is a “rabid” self-promoter. Crowley continues:

When the *Denver Post* profiled an illegal immigrant high school student with a 3.9 grad point average, Tancredo tried to have the boy deported. During his re-election race last fall, he aired campaign ads that included images of the devastation from the Beslan school massacre in Russia and in which he declared, “Am I supposed to ignore the possibility of something like this happening here? Not on your life!” In one recent speech to activists in Washington, D.C., Tancredo averred that the Chinese government is “trying to export people” as a “way of extending their hegemony.”

Sadly for Republicans who actually enjoy being members of the nation’s majority party, Tancredo is just getting started. According to Crowley, Tancredo fancies himself a devotee of Samuel Huntington and of Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” theory. And indeed, Tancredo has spoken often, including several times on the floor of the House, about his fondness for the “clash of civilizations” paradigm and his belief that the immigration question is part and parcel of this clash.

While there is certainly value in Huntington's theory, about which Mark and I have written favorably in the past, Tancredo's embrace of it, particularly in the context of his support for immigration reform, presents a serious problem for the GOP. For starters, Tancredo is vague about what constitutes "Western Civilization," and certainly employs the phrase much differently than does his purported intellectual hero, Huntington.

If I understand his position correctly, Tancredo appears to believe that immigrants from North America, who are descended from Western Europeans, who speak one of the five Romance languages derived from Latin, and who are predominantly members of the world's largest and oldest Christian denomination, are somehow a grave and deadly threat to Western Civilization. This is, to say the very least, a rather creative and troubling interpretation of the term.

Certainly Tancredo makes a valid point that immigrants to this country, particularly those who come illegally, are not effectively assimilated into American culture. But that is a social and educational problem, not an immigration problem. And when he speaks ominously of the threat that these immigrants pose to "Western Civilization" he not only undermines his own credibility, but undermines the credibility of his party as well. I don't know Tom Tancredo, but I doubt seriously whether he is a racist. Nevertheless, his inflammatory rhetoric and his use of a factually inaccurate connotation of the term "Western Civilization" certainly play into the hands of those who would paint the GOP as the party of white elitism.

And this is, to say the least, no small problem. The *Wall Street Journal's* John Fund noted in his column last week that President Bush's gains among Hispanic voters were critical to his successful re-election bid and therefore represent an opportunity for Republicans to consolidate power and affirm their majority status. He wrote:

Michael Barone, a co-author of the definitive *Almanac of American Politics*,

reports that Polidata's findings tend to confirm the exit polls that showed George W. Bush gaining nine percentage points among Hispanic voters, ending up with some 44%. Several liberal-oriented groups disputed those numbers, but a look at the breakdown of the two dozen districts with Hispanic House members shows that Mr. Bush indeed made strong gains in their districts.

Take Texas, where six of the state's 32 House districts have Hispanic representatives (five Democrats and one Republican) and another 69%-Hispanic district is represented by Anglo Democrat Lloyd Doggett. In the areas that now make up those seven districts, Mr. Bush dramatically increased his vote totals over 2000, winning four of the seven districts and breaking even in their total popular vote. In two of the Democratic Hispanic districts, Mr. Bush won 55% of the vote, setting up the possibility that a Republican could win those seats when they become vacant.

In Florida, Mr. Bush's Hispanic percentages were artificially inflated in 2000 by Cuban-American anger over the Clinton administration's deportation of Elian Gonzalez. But Mr. Bush still did well in the three Miami-area districts represented by Cuban-American Republicans, winning them by an average of 12 percentage points.

But it is in California where Mr. Bush made the most surprising gains among Hispanic voters. Ten of the Golden State's 53 districts are held by Hispanic Democrats, and two others, in the Central Valley, by Portuguese-American Republicans. In the 10 Democratic districts, Al Gore won 65% of the vote in 2000. But in last year's election, Mr. Bush made gains in every district and ended up with about 40% of the overall vote in those 10 districts.

In 2000 Mr. Bush lost what is now the Orange County district held by Democrat Loretta Sanchez by 15% of the vote. In 2004, Mr. Bush outpolled Mr. Kerry in Ms. Sanchez's district. Similarly, Mr. Bush captured the Modesto-based district of Democrat Dennis Cardoza, an area that Al Gore had easily carried. "I fully appreciate the fact that George W. Bush won 49% of my district," says Jim Costa, a Fresno-area freshman Democrat who won only 54% last November against an Anglo Republican.

Now, Fund continued by suggesting that worries about a crack down on illegal immigration endangering "GOP support among Hispanics" are "often exaggerated" and that "Hispanics rank immigration low on their list of priority issues." And I have no reason to dispute either assertion, both of which certainly sound reasonable enough (particularly coming from Fund). But I would note that the messenger in any immigration reform battle is at least as important as the message. And not only is Tom Tancredo's message far more antagonistic than mere "illegal immigration reform," but given his penchant for the outrageous, the Congressman is likely to be an easily demonized and therefore dangerous messenger.

There are those who have suggested, and not unreasonably, that Tancredo's outrageousness has already had a negative impact on his party's image. Last November, Tancredo's home state of Colorado bucked the national trend, supporting President Bush, but electing both a Democratic Senator to an erstwhile Republican seat and a new Democratic majority to both houses of the state legislature. One of the explanations offered for this unique split-ticket vote is the impact that Tancredo's anti-immigrant message had on down-ticket Republicans. President Bush, of course, was spared this deleterious "guilt-by-association" effect in large part because Tancredo made certain that there was no confusion about the fact that he and the President are on opposite sides of this issue.

In any case, Republicans should be leery of the fact that Tancredo is already making plans to take his anti-immigration cause nationwide. He has been making trips to early primary states like New Hampshire and South Carolina and has been not so subtly assembling a potential campaign team that includes a handful of veterans of Pat Buchanan's quixotic presidential runs. Pitchfork Pat's sister and former campaign manager, Angela "Bay" Buchanan, accompanied Tancredo on a trip to New Hampshire in February, and according to John Fund, "Paul Nagy, the co-chair of Mr. Buchanan's 1992 New Hampshire campaign, is also contemplating supporting Mr. Tancredo." Fund also notes that Tancredo is bound and determined "to make opposition to immigration a 'litmus test' for candidates in the 2008 New Hampshire primary."

Though it is extremely unlikely that Tancredo would be able to make much headway in any run for the Republican nomination, the mere fact that he is even threatening to run should serve as a warning to the GOP and, more specifically, to the White House. Tancredo may be the most vocal, the most visible, and the most outlandish anti-immigrationist around, but he is hardly alone. And while I continue to doubt whether Tancredo and his supporters could split the party, there is no question that they could make enough noise to embarrass it and to threaten its increasing rapport with Hispanic and other swing voters.

In other words, if President Bush, Karl Rove, and Ken Mehlman wish to do as they have said and semi-permanently realign the parties, then they have their work cut out for them. They will, sometime before January 2008, have to deal with Tom Tancredo and the anti-immigration faction he represents. And this, of course, will be easier said than done. If it were a simple proposition, you can rest assured that they certainly would have taken care of it long before now.

Fortunately for all of them and for the GOP, this particular president has a better chance of navigating these treacherous waters successfully than any other Republican in memory. President Bush has a connection with Hispanic voters that is pretty

uncommon for a Republican. He speaks Spanish; he is the former governor of a border state with a large Hispanic population; he has a brother married to a Mexican immigrant; he has made a point of appointing Hispanics to prominent positions within his administration, including the first ever Hispanic Attorney General; he is an old and dear friend of the President of Mexico, whose help in any effort to address immigration will be absolutely crucial; and, perhaps most importantly, he generally treats Hispanics with respect rather than the condescension that is all too typical of those in his line of work.

In addition, he has made it clear that he intends to win the global war on terror and has the backing of the American public to do so. And there can be little doubt that common sense efforts to improve border security are a necessary step in winning the war and protecting the American people.

Of course, regardless of what he does, someone will be unhappy. It's a pretty safe bet that no matter what steps he takes, the anti-immigration right will complain that it wasn't enough and the anti-Bush left will shriek that he is restricting freedom and unfairly targeting racial minorities.

All President Bush can do is trust that his message, whatever it eventually may be, is strong enough and that his influence great enough to override these politically motivated objections and to make something positive happen. For if he doesn't, Tom Tancredo will try his hand at making something happen. And the odds on that being positive for the GOP are pretty darn slim.

WHAT'S IN A WORD? TROUBLE IN DEM-LAND IN '06.

The good news for Democrats is that in a scant three-and-a-half years, they will have a decent shot at picking up the White House and regaining control over one of the branches of the federal government. The race will, after all, be wide open, and neither party appears to have anything close to a shoo-in prospect.

The bad news for Democrats is that it looks increasingly likely that this will be the only opportunity they will have to regain some semblance of power in the foreseeable future. While the historical trend famously shows that the party of a second-term incumbent president performs poorly in the midterm election, my suspicion is that 2006 will be an exception. In fact, it is entirely possible that the GOP will increase its margin in the House to a post-'94 high and will win enough Senate seats to be able to break Democratic filibusters (if such things still exist) and reach cloture with just a couple of crossover votes.

There are several reasons to expect this. Most of these are pretty standard fare. For example, Republicans have fewer marginal seats to hold, particularly in the Senate. They were, after all, able to Gerrymander a majority of Congressional districts to their benefit after the 2000 elections, something the Democrats can't even hope to change until after the 2010 midterm. And Democrats are already showing signs of weak candidate recruitment, with several high-profile potential challengers passing on opportunities to take on vulnerable Republicans.

But the biggest reason to suspect that the Democrats will do poorly next year is that they have, in the few months since last year's election, shown pretty definitively that they have no clue whatsoever why they lost and thus have no idea how to rectify the situation. Indeed, if anything, the leaders of the party have shown the political instincts to make things worse in the run-up to '06.

I have neither the time nor the space in one article to list the entire litany of Democratic leadership screw-ups. In fact, it would take weeks of work and reams of text just to address the blunders perpetrated by Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean in his two-and-a-half months on the new job. So, in the interest of brevity, it should suffice to say that thus far Dean has been everything the Republicans hoped he would be.

Sadly for Democrats, Dean has actually been the bright spot among their official leaders. Senate

Minority Leader Harry Reid and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, the other two big shot official bosses, are perhaps the only two people in the world I could imagine who could make the Democrats long for the “good old days” of Tom Daschle and Dick Gephardt, who not only look powerful but downright brilliant in comparison to their current successors.

Again, I don’t have time to catalog all of Reid’s and Pelosi’s missteps. And I will thus have to ignore things like the collective political suicide Reid is trying to engineer by officially opposing the nomination of John Bolton to the post of ambassador to the U.N. Instead, I will focus more narrowly, and address only the principal strategic decision that both Reid and Pelosi have made in developing a plan for winning back the hearts and minds of the American voters. It may not be most spectacular or high profile of the leaders’ flubs, but it may well be the most important.

If you recall, when last we checked in with the Democratic Congressional leaders, they were licking their proverbial wounds and appeared to be coming to the conclusion that their decades-old message had lost some of its appeal to voters and might be in need of revamping. But instead of pursuing this potentially fruitful train of thought, the leaders lapsed back into old habits and old conceits, apparently deciding that it is not their message that is wrong, but the voters.

According to a piece by Joshua Green in the May issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Democratic members of the House returned from their February retreat in Virginia refreshed, reinvigorated, and determined to prove that “that they don’t need new ideas after all” and that “a snazzy new sales pitch will revive their fortunes.” According to Green, Democrats came back convinced that the key to their future success lies in a book that touts the political benefits of language manipulation. To wit:

The Democrats returned from Virginia not with an exit strategy for Iraq or a national-security blueprint or an economic policy but with a book—*Don’t Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, by

George Lakoff, a linguist at the University of California at Berkeley. Lakoff’s seductive thesis is that how you frame an idea largely determines the response to it. George Miller, a California congressman and an enthusiastic disciple, gave a copy to each member of the caucus, and the notion that “messaging” lies at the heart of the Democrats’ woes has had growing currency in the party ever since.

In essence, messaging . . . is simply the process of selecting words that impart to voters whatever sentiment the author is pushing. One famous example is the Republican effort to recast the “estate tax”—with its implied application to landed aristocrats only—as the much more menacing (and less discriminating!) “death tax.” Lakoff offers no new policy ideas. Instead he suggests that the Democrats reposition the ones they already have, and spruce up some unpopular terminology while they’re at it. He advocates referring to “trial lawyers” as “public-protection attorneys,” replacing “taxes” with “membership fees,” and generally couching the entire Democratic message in palatable—even deceptive—language in order to simplify large ideas and disguise them behind innocent but powerful-sounding phrases.

On the other side of Capitol Hill, Senator Reid decided on a similar strategy for the revival, choosing as well to focus on “messaging” rather than substantive change to the party’s policy positions. Again, Green wrote:

With “messaging efforts” under way throughout the party, more Democrats appear to be coming around to the belief that—election results be damned—what they stand for may not be the problem after all. One of the minor ridiculous figures in Washington these days is an

Internet entrepreneur named Richard Yanowitch, who is pointing down another path to enlightenment. He has put together a jargony memo and a working group dedicated to “branding” the Democrats—the thought apparently being that, as if it were a flagging brand of soda, the party can be revived with snazzier packaging and a new sales pitch. And while Lakoff enjoys the sponsorship of House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Yanowitch has set up shop under the auspices of her Senate counterpart, Harry Reid.

Yanowitch has established what has been described to me as a “secret messaging group.”

I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you this, but all of this is just bonkers. The lessons of the 2004 election appear to have evaporated into thin air, as the Democratic Congressional leaders slip deeper and deeper into a state of denial, delusionally pretending that everything is fine, but that voters simply aren’t smart enough to understand their message. As Marc Cooper, contributing editor of *The Nation* put it, Lakoff’s tome is the “feel-good self-help book for a stratum of despairing liberals who *just can’t believe* how their commonsense message has been misunderstood by the eternally deceived masses.”

Mark and I have written many times over the past couple of years about the Democrats’ fatal conceit, which stems in part from nearly a century as the nation’s majority party and in part from liberals’ intrinsic Gnostic conception of the world. This arrogance is responsible for books like Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter With Kansas?*, in which the author postulates that dimwitted Red State voters simply don’t know what they’re doing and are tricked by devious Republicans into voting against their economic interests and in favor of hollow social interests.

This arrogance is also responsible for having convinced Democrats that John Kerry, a notorious war protestor and an arch-liberal, was “electable.” It is responsible for convincing Democrats that if the *New York Times* agrees with them on an issue, then they must be right, since the *Times* is the nation’s “paper of record.” And now it is responsible for convincing them that if they speak slowly and clearly enough, even borderline-moronic Bush voters will come to realize how brilliant and forward looking the Democratic platform really is.

The Democrats insist that their “messaging” strategy is neither arrogant nor ridiculous and that it is based on the strategy employed by Newt Gingrich and the Republicans to take back Congress in 1994. This too is bonkers. For while it may, in fact, be accurate that the Gingrich Revolutionaries, on the advice of pollster Frank Luntz, spruced up their image and cleaned up their vocabulary, their “messaging” strategy was a minor component of a larger plan that emphasized actual substantive policy ideas that were innovative, practical, and popular. The Democrats’ version is merely new packaging on a tired, old, unpopular package. And it’s not going to sell.

Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi may think they’re on to something with this “messaging” tactic, but they are almost guaranteed to be sorely disappointed come November 2006. The very fact that they have settled on such a strategy is, in itself, proof that they don’t have a clue about why they lost last year or how they might rebound. Or, as Joshua Green put it:

[B]uzzwords are not going to rescue a failing party. That so many Democrats have achieved the Olympian state of denial necessary to believe otherwise suggests that the tempting abstractions of language and messaging have diverted them from a truth that ought to be perfectly clear: rather than being misunderstood, they were understood all too well.

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