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Robert Dole and the false dawn of 'moderation.'

THE REPUBLICAN UNDEAD

By Sidney Blumenthal

ASPECTER is haunting Reagan—the specter of Republicanism.

All the wizards of the new conservatism have entered into an alliance to exorcise this specter: Meese and Kirkpatrick, Gilder and Gingrich, Heritage Foundation and political action committees. In 1984 Ronald Reagan disdained to conceal his aims. The ancient A.D.A. or never evoked the glorious past of the Grand Old Party. He ran for reelection as the true heir of Roosevelt. Reagan—not Walter Mondale—was the ultimate “real” Democrat. “It’s morning in America again,” proclaimed his television ads, echoing the Rooseveltian optimism. Reagan, declining to detail his future policies, declared: “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” But after his victory he offered no conservative version of F.D.R.’s second New Deal.

“Yet” arrived before Christmas, and, as promised, the American people were vouchsafed a vision of nothin’. The Tuesday Team gave way to the Doomsday Team, David Stockman’s budget-cutters, and calls for austerity replaced denunciations of Mondale’s “gloom and doom.” Reagan’s landslide triumph had made the Democrats disappear, but not the deficit. The Administration’s thematic vital signs started to go flat. It’s nightfall in America again.

The regular Republicans, supposedly consigned to the dustbin of history by the conservative “revolution,” struggled to their feet. Unsteadily at first, then with a loud, firm tread, they began marching toward the cameras. One after another they came—Dole of Kansas, Lugar of Indiana, Packwood of Oregon, Chafee of Rhode Island. . . . They had stayed the course. In the Senate the regulars elected Dole majority leader, suppressing a conservative insurgency, and took control of every open post within the Republican caucus.

This is their moment, partly because for fifty years the federal deficit has been their issue, despite the fact that whenever they strenuously campaigned on the question, they lost. It’s an issue whose time has come and gone and come again, brought back from the shadows by a Republican President who has fostered the biggest debt ever. By dispensing with traditional G.O.P. nostrums, Reagan promised, among other things, to produce a budget surplus. Having failed at this feat, he is stuck with a “second New Deal” that is taking on the coloration of the “real” Republicanism. It would be an exaggeration to say that the regular Republicans have come back to life, because their reemergence in the Senate has been caused by the pecu-

liarities of that body, not by any change in the political balance of the country. But if they are not exactly alive, neither are they as dead as they had seemed to be as recently as the 1984 Republican Convention. They are something in between: the politically undead.

Conservatives, meanwhile, are experiencing rage. They believe they won the election and the traditionalists have usurped power. “What happened to ‘morning?’” wonders Vin Weber, a young activist in the House. To the conservatives, who insist that economic growth will shrink the deficit, it seems that Mondale is the victor, with his name changed to Dole. “I never thought growth would deal with the deficit,” says Dole. “Mondale’s view of it was all right. He was the wrong salesman.”

The fissure between conservatives and regulars has several fault lines. It is a split between the ascendant Senate majority and a House caucus, the Conservative Opportunity Society, a minority within a minority. In the Senate the party controls the strategic levers, whereas in the House the movement group is stymied by a Democratic majority. The split is also a difference between political generations, between older men who have felt the fear of political extinction and younger men whose careers have paralleled the Reagan rise. Finally, the split is doctrinal. Eliminating the deficit is at the center of the traditionalists’ world view. They seek a fiscal stringency that attempts at least the appearance of equal sacrifice. The conservatives, however, want only to cut social programs. For them, the deficit is both an opportunity and a danger. Ironically, Reagan’s policies have created an impasse that makes possible his goal of negative government. The deficit has become an instrument of conservative social policy, just as it was once a mechanism for liberal social policy. But its enormous size calls into doubt the credibility of supply-side economics, the conservative claim to the mantle of growth and optimism. If tax cuts don’t increase revenues or investment, as advertised, but do increase deficits, supply-side economics may turn out to be mainly a stimulus for the traditionalist position. Unlike the conservatives, the regulars are not opposed to government in principle. “There are people in the New Right who feel the government should defend the shores and deliver the mail and that’s it. That’s it. You won’t find anyone like that in the Republican Senate leadership,” says Senator John Heinz, newly elected chairman of the Republican Senate Campaign Committee. The traditionalists want to make

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government run more efficiently, like a well-organized business. Their conservatism is the impulse to reform and conserve yesterday’s liberalism. Their stance is based less on an explicit creed than on an implicit disposition. A movement located beyond the bounds of the party is foreign to them.

This burst of Republicanism may be the rise before the fall. In 1986 twenty-two G.O.P. Senators face reelection. A net loss of only four seats turns the Senate over to the Democrats. In this century there have been six mid second-term elections. In no instance did the party holding the White House lose fewer than four Senate seats. Moreover, after 1986, the approaching Republican Convention will assume greater force. If the regulars can’t translate their strength from the Senate caucus to the convention they will be reentered once again. Their reign may be a short-lived phenomenon—the wave of the past. For the moment, though, they hold sway.

THE REPUBLICAN ASSERTION in the Senate is quite traditional. Dole’s rise and the capture of the committee chairmanship by the regulars was hardly a break with the past. Dole is the latest of a line that stretches back to Robert Taft, the conservative midwestern Senate baron, who could never transfer his strength from the Congressional caucus to the G.O.P. Convention. He was beaten time and again by Thomas Dewey’s political network, which ran from governor’s mansions to clubhouses. While the Taftites ruled the Senate, the Deweyites won the Presidential nominations. Even the 1964 Draft Goldwater movement was rooted among former Young Republicans trained in the Dewey operation. When Reagan became President, there were few true Reaganites in the Senate. The two Senators who ran against him in the 1980 primaries, Howard Baker and Dole, had gone nowhere; like Taft, they prospered in the institutional setting, not among the broad electorate. The Senate regulars are a fusion of latter-day Taftites and Deweyites, whose differences have been muted in the face of the newer brand of conservatism, regionally based in the Sun Belt, where Republicans have a shallow history. In the states of greatest conservative strength, the G.O.P. is a novel party for volatile voters.

The “moderate” wing of the Republican Party depends upon the logic of the old two-party system for its sustenance. The “moderates” represent states with big cities, smokstack industries, and diverse ethnic groups; the parties are fixed elements. “The Democratic Party in Pennsylvania is the party of political bosses,” says Senator Heinz. “That creates great opportunity for any Republican.” With a machine Democrat as an opponent, the Republican can pose efficiency against patronage. “Good government” Republicans like Heinz must temper their partisan appeals in order to attract Democrats; their “moderation,” moreover, is mostly a matter of positioning, making a virtue out of lack of intense ideological conviction.

The “moderate” has thus rendered himself almost completely unsuitable for Republican Presidential politics. He

has crafted his appeal too generously; he can’t survive among the decidedly conservative G.O.P. primary electorate, where a vibrant constituency can be animated by ideology. In the Senate this species of “moderate” becomes the natural ally of the neo-Taftite. They share a common Republican patrimony that separates them from the Sun Belt conservatives. In the cockpit of the Senate, the party dominates the movement. And Bob Dole presides.

According to the conventional wisdom there are two distinct Doles—the “good” Dole and the “bad” Dole. The “bad” one was a Republican hatchet man who assailed “Democrat wars” and snarled at Nixon’s detractors. The “good” Dole sponsored the food stamp program and voted for civil rights bills. While Dole’s savage sense of humor may be slightly toned down in recent years—the savagery doesn’t usually overwhelm the humor now—he is fundamentally unchanged. He hasn’t moved much; the planets have. “I don’t know that I’ve changed that much,” he says. “I consider myself a traditional conservative.” He is what conservatives were like before Goldwater. And he is a particular variety. His support for food stamps and civil rights isn’t a drift away from his roots. They are Republican and progressive positions. (Alf Landon of Kansas, after all, was a Progressive Republican.) Dole is unyielding in substance, but as times change he is viewed from a new angle.

He offers the masterful practice of political brokerage, lightened by black humor. His economics are an unspoken moral code, puritanism on the plains. “I’ve grown up in the Republican Party,” he says. “I’ve heard time after time, heard it from business people and farmers, about deficits. And we’ve run it up bigger than all the Administrations in history. Deficits are bad. It ought to be a top priority. You can’t live on a credit card forever.”

Traditional Republican thinking on the federal deficit has its source in the yeoman economy, where farmers and artisans lived in constant terror of debt, which portended foreclosure and ruin. Moreover, debt undermined moral character. What kind of weird doctrine would teach that a penny saved is not a penny earned, but the cause of Depression? How could one get something (prosperity) for nothing (debt), as the Keynesians suggested?

Dole repeatedly says that things aren’t “easy.” During World War II he suffered wounds that hospitalized him for a year and left him without full use of his right arm. He believes in success achieved by hard work, in reward as compensation for effort. It’s not surprising he’s offended by Reagan’s economics.

WITH REAGAN, we’re not in Kansas anymore. The shift from small-town society to mass consumer culture has been accompanied by a shift in political types. In the conservative cosmology, the shift has been from the undramatic Taft to the prickly Goldwater to the smooth Reagan. Reagan knows that good luck can last a lifetime. His wife has even named their new dog Lucky. He stresses pleasure; Dole emphasizes pain. Reagan offers self-indulgence, Dole self-discipline. His new dog is named Leader.

Reagan remains the inveterate New Dealer in not being taken in by the metaphysics of deficit-fear. Although he decries it, deficit spending sustained the recovery guaranteeing his reelection. Keynesianism and Reaganism are similar in that they undermine the old puritan sense of guilt. The difference is that Reagan denies what the liberals used to acknowledge: that there are times when deficits are actually good.

Reagan’s innovation allowed the Republicans to overcome the stigma of stagnation attached to them since Hoover. The effort to escape this crippling label led Nixon, who attacked Kennedy’s “growthmanship” in 1960, to proclaim himself a Keynesian a decade later. Reagan was led to enact a perverse Keynesian program, which conservatives insist on calling the death of Keynesianism. But Bob Dole is not confused. Supply-siders, he believes, “don’t face reality. They’ve always got another base to cover. Everyone believes we have to reduce spending. I’m not sure they want to make these choices. It’s crazy.”

From the start, Dole was wary of supply-side economics. But as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, he played the good soldier, supporting his President’s tax cut measure. In August 1981, when the bill was signed, the Administration projected a budget surplus for 1984. Recession and deficits followed instead. Dole wanted to raise taxes. In March 1982 he proposed \$105 billion in increases. No dice. Then in August 1982 he helped shepherd a \$98.9 billion increase through the Senate, a bill hailed by liberal tax reformers for its fearless loophole-closing. Dole wanted the pain to be shared by even the undeserving rich. The measure was the largest tax hike in history, a direct repudiation of the Reagan program passed just the year before. Then Dole proposed another increase. But the recovery appeared and pain had limited appeal.

Except for Walter Mondale, who campaigned on a promise to raise taxes, Reagan announced that taxes would be raised “over my dead body.” And he pledged not to cut Medicare and Social Security and defense. The public, massaged by his feel-good campaign, was in no mood for sacrifice.

SHORTLY AFTER the election, the Treasury Department released a remarkably equitable tax reform program, which Reagan did not embrace. The proposal, and Stockman’s draconian budget-cutting plan, had the effect of inspiring virtually all the lobbyists in Washington to mobilize their resources against each specific change. In 1981 Reagan was able to enact his complete economic program only with a unified business coalition, arrayed behind his unwavering leadership. This time the tax and budget bills appeared destined to be handled separately, almost ensuring that the contentious interests can focus their energy on their immediate and narrow concerns. How can the President generate political momentum amidst legislative chaos? “I see the business people chewing up the tax bill and spitting it out,” says Dole. “They’re so busy on that they don’t have time on budget restraint. In 1981, giving it away was easy. Now, we’re taking it

away. It’s much more difficult.” To Dole, the deficits make budget-cutting and tax reform a necessary but Sisyphean task. “I don’t know how we’ll do it. It may be a stalemate.”

The netherworld that Reagan described as Mondale’s Inferno may be the fate of the traditional Republicans as they are engulfed in the political economy of stagnation. The “moderates” have risen just in time to be mouse-trapped by the next economic decline prompted by supply-side theories. While the “moderates” try conscientiously to grapple with the fiscal dilemmas created by the Laffer curve enthusiasm, the supply-siders are already happily hunting the next snark—the gold standard. The “moderates” are about to be impressed into the conservative inopportunism society. Their Republicanism dooms them to respond in the traditional manner: they will continue to seek the ever-elusive balanced budget. Even as the economy mutates into new postindustrial forms, their conception of it remains unchanged.

IN 1986 the Republicans must again confront the consequences of Reagan’s economics, with results that historical precedent suggests may differ from this year’s experience. Paradoxically, the regulars’ continuing control of the Senate depends upon the conservatives’ success. Swept into office on Reagan’s coattails in 1980, many conservatives are extremely vulnerable. But by losing, they would destroy the regulars’ power base. Without the Senate, the traditional Republicans would have to fall back on national political networks if they wish to influence the convention. *Bob Dole for President?* Influence in Washington would not count for much, especially among primary voters who regard “big government” as the fount of the country’s troubles. The traditionalists, however, think almost exclusively in institutional terms. Their strength, after all, comes from their links to permanent structures—constitutional and corporate. This Establishment is in place, but not in motion; the regulars have no movement to carry them against the conservatives in 1988. “Where’s the base outside of Washington?” inquires Robert Teeter, a Republican pollster with close ties to the White House. “When you get to the convention the Washington strength doesn’t hold. Dole doesn’t have a natural base. With these guys there’s nothing at the end of the string.” If the regulars lose the Senate in 1986 and fail to sustain a Presidential candidacy in 1988, they must return to the limbo they occupied for decades.

What frustrates the conservatives now, however, may benefit them later. If the Republicans lose control of the Senate, the conservatives will blame the regulars, even if conservative losses are the proximate cause and conservative policies the underlying cause. Party defeat in the Senate would enhance the conservatives’ position in the intra-party competition. Since they have not been invested with governing responsibility within the Congressional caucus, they may reap their reward untainted at the convention. “The arithmetic is against the Senate moderates,” says Vin Weber. “And history is against them. Their response is exactly wrong. Rather than making the themes that

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worked in 1984 those of 1986 they are ensuring they won’t have those positive themes. Look at the Reagan ads. Find the one that says: Vote Republican and make hard nasty decisions. It’s a deadly game they’re playing. It’s heading us toward disaster in 1986. The bad news is that we’ll lose the Senate in 1986. The good news is that it won’t make any difference.”

Six weeks after the President’s reelection his leadership is absent or at least incredibly subtle. Some believe there’s a guiding intelligence in this vacuum, that chaos is a deliberate strategy, a classic Reagan gambit. But a fierce factionalism has been triggered, a preview of the Republican fragmentation that appears inevitable when Reagan departs. The party and the movement are already at war.

End run by GOP senators . . .

Senate Republican leaders made it known last week that they will produce their own version of the next federal budget four days before President Reagan sends his to Congress on Feb. 4. As incoming Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole put it, “We’d like to do a little better.” “Better” to their mind, means reducing federal deficits to less than \$100 billion by 1988 and balancing the budget by 1990. Before Mr. Reagan came into office and nearly doubled the national debt, balanced budgets used to be a basic tenet of orthodox Republican fiscal conservatism. With Budget Director David Stockman now estimating federal deficits at \$240 billion by fiscal 1987, and with White House spending reduction plans falling considerably short of the administration’s goal of halving the deficit, let alone ever balancing the budget, the Senate Republicans have no other choice as responsible public officials. Initial plans call for the senators to achieve their budget reductions with temporary curbs

on Social Security payment increases, meaningful cuts in the defense budget and probably some tax increases. They would also implement many of the domestic-sector cuts the White House wants.

Mr. Reagan vowed in his campaign not to touch Social Security or raise taxes in dealing with the nation’s fiscal catastrophe. And, with Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, he is treating every item on the Pentagon’s wish list as inviolate. Mr. Dole’s Republicans are facing up to an unpleasant truth for the GOP: Mr. Reagan is not a foe of government spending. He is the biggest spender in presidential history. Instead of pursuing fiscal conservatism, he has tried to follow a right-wing radical agenda for grinding down domestic programs while pumping up the defense industry.

The question remains: If his increases in Pentagon spending are as vital to national security as he insists, how does he propose to pay for them? Mr. Dole & Co. may provide an answer.

. . . and a revolt in the House

Despite the all-out support of such supposed political powerhouses as House Speaker Thomas “Tip” O’Neill (D., Mass.), Rep. Melvin Price (D., Ill.) has been toppled as chairman of the important House Armed Services Committee. Meeting in caucus, House Democrats voted 21-118 to replace the 80-year-old Mr. Price with Rep. Les Aspin (D., Wis.), 46, a sometimes iconoclastic maverick who, nonetheless, has won the respect of conservatives and liberals alike for his knowledge of defense issues. By a vote of 128-103, the Democrats also passed over Rep. Charles Bennett (D., Fla.), next in line to Mr. Price on the committee. The action was a blow to crusty old leadership and the seniority system, but mostly it was a blow for congressional common sense. The Pentagon budget is going to be the key to any and all congressional attempts to reduce the deficit. It will be the major battleground in a struggle that will see many Republicans in Congress arrayed against their party’s President. In Mr. Aspin and his respected chief staff

aide, Warren Nelson, the Democrats will have a well-informed and tough-minded force that can deal firmly with a Pentagon that justifies inefficiency, waste, staggering cost overruns, empire building and duplicative and unworkable weapons systems with slogans like “war is not cost effective.”

In Mr. Price, they had a genial but aging and ailing practitioner of the “some for you, some for me” school of pork barrel politics. It is painful to say this, as Illinois has long gotten the short end in terms of a federal payback for tax dollars received. But with deficits rolling toward the \$800 billion-a-year mark and the prospect of tax increases looming, no responsible Illinoisan should argue for the support of a notoriously wasteful system just because it might mean a few more barracks, PXs and manufacturing contracts for this state. Of course, defense contracts should go to the best-qualified bidders, which automatically would give more to Illinois. But military strength, not bloat, must always be the overriding factor.