

by Terry Michael, November 6, 2006

When the results are in Tuesday....

GOP Evangelicals to Render Unto Caesar. Democrats' Cold War Ghost Exorcized.

The results of the 2006 mid-term election, if they're anything close to predictions, will suggest two near-seismic changes in the national political landscape.

Evangelical Christians, after three decades of dabbling in politics, are ready--perhaps even eager--to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things which are not the Republican Party's.

And the Democrats' Cold War "soft-on-defense" ghost will be exorcized, a scarecrow image that has been propped up in the fields of American politics for years, not only by Republicans but by the foreign policy neo-conservative Democratic minority, which colluded in the Iraq War.

Three things should be stipulated about those generalizations.

First, they apply specifically to the strategic thinking that should inform presidential candidates in their appeals to the broad center of the electorate in 2008.

They obviously don't match every congressional race in the country. If you're a Democrat running in a marginal, particularly a Southern, district, you run to the right on social cultural and national security issues, and if you're a Republican running in a Democratic-leaning, particularly Northeastern, district, you tilt left.

Finally, these assertions are reached not just by the likely outcomes of Democratic control of the House and a possible majority in the Senate. They come from trends that have been developing in a two-or-three decade shift from the Nixon/Reagan Democrat center, to the Baby Boom and soon-to-be Gen X domination of the middle of American politics in the next several national elections.

Evangelicals to eschew politics.

If you need anecdotal proof of the souring of fundamentalist Christians on political involvement, look no further than David Kuo's recent book, "Tempting Faith." The former White House faith-based initiative aide reveals the national Republican Party is really laughing behind the backs of "people of faith," at the same time they mine their churches for votes.

That is also apparent from GOP triangulation tactics, in which Republicans attempt to distance themselves from the religious right agenda. It wasn't for nothing that Vice President Cheney publicly discovered his lesbian daughter a few months before the 2004 election. And George Bush found he had no problem with civil unions just days before he was re-elected.

The national Republican leadership understands the religious right scares the bejesus out of the center. Witness the recent mother-in-law moment at the swearing-in ceremony for a new global AIDS coordinator, where Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in the presence of Laura Bush, used that reference in acknowledging the mother of openly-gay Ambassador Mark Dybul's domestic partner--curious talk in a party that has championed marriage as a one-man, one-woman kind of thing.

The decline of the religious right in national politics has been largely missed by a media and a political class that have virtually swooned over Karl Rove and his vastly overrated strategy to wield politicized evangelicals as a GOP sword. Conservative Christian involvement in politics began in the late 1970's and began to show clout in the 1980's, when the Depression Era/World War II generation, with conservative social and cultural values, dominated the center of American politics and produced Reagan Democratic voters.

The religious right reached its apogee when it was energized by Newt Gingrich and the Christian Coalition in the 1994 elections that yielded GOP control of the House for the first time in decades.

But the new center of the electorate is populated by the sex, drugs and rock 'n roll Sixties generation, soon to be replaced by the also more social/cultural liberal Gen X'ers and their offspring.

Ironically, the consultant class of the Democratic Party, failing to understand this shift in the center, is ill-advising their clients to engage in a kind of “religion lite” political communication, when the middle increasingly is being turned off by mixing religion and politics.

Center also has shifted on national security.

As the center eschews Christian conservative values, it also has turned against the foreign interventionism of the GOP neo-Cons. And that will empower the non-interventionist Democratic Party majority, fed up with their neo-conservative-lite foreign policy “experts” like Sen. Joe Biden, who colluded in Bush’s elective war and who continue to support it.

Any reasonable reading of independent voters in the 2006 election will have to conclude that the middle is mad as hell about the sacrifice of young American lives, in what they have come to believe is the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the right time.

Cowering as the White House hurls the “cut-and-run” epitaph in their direction, congressional supporters of the war, like Biden, continue to defend their votes for going into Iraq, and argue that the center, while disenchanted with the war, doesn’t want to just, well....cut and run. If you’ve seen that movie before, you’re old enough to have lived through Vietnam, in which the then-best-and-brightest also refused to declare victory and withdraw—sending tens of thousands more young men to their deaths in the jungles of Southeast Asia after the American public concluded that war was a mistake around 1968.

The truth is, Biden and others like him don’t want to set a date for withdrawal, because they would have to admit they helped send thousands of young men and women to their deaths in the desert. But in reality, the opinions of the center are waiting to be formed by the leadership of the Democratic Party in the direction of an Iraq exit strategy. The results of the mid-term elections will surely empower war opponents, to a point that may even cause the new Democratic majority in the House and maybe the Senate to promote an end to the waste of lives and treasury.

Like the shift of the center on social cultural issues, the center has also moved on foreign policy, since the self-styled Democratic Leadership Council was formed in 1984 after the World War II generation helped re-elect Reagan in a landslide.

The DLC made an important contribution by moving the party to a more free market position on economic policy, resulting in Bill Clinton’s election in 1992. But the organization became obsessed with trying to prove that Democrats weren’t wimps on defense, and apparently can’t get over the fact that the Cold War ended under Bush 41.

The DLC has successfully peddled its tough-on-defense line to the congressional Democratic defense and foreign policy establishment, as well as to a national press corps filled with baby boom era reporters whose perception of where the center is on national security hasn’t caught up with reality.

Thus, the media that interprets politics and those in positions of power in the Democratic Party saw to it that there was no real engaged public debate in the run-up to the Iraq War, leading to the disaster that ensued.

Anyone who can’t read the results of the 2006 mid-term elections as a repudiation of the war is, well....probably a writer for the editorial page of The Washington Post.

So long religious right. And good riddance neo-Con warriors. Presidential candidates for 2008: ignore those lessons of 2006 at your peril.

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