

## Conservatives Misunderstand What Went Wrong Under Bush

You'd swear from today's rhetoric that the problem was too much compromise. Nope.



The Tea Party is composed largely of Republicans who supported George W. Bush when he was the GOP standard-bearer, voting for him twice and criticizing him far less frequently than they defended him, only to rebel against his record at the end of his second term. At that point, partisan loyalty and shared hatred of liberals finally gave way to the realization that the GOP's time in power was a disaster for conservatives.

Humans seldom look inward when assigning blame for bygone disasters, and the story conservatives have settled on seems to be that establishment Republicans have long been selling them out by failing to fight hard enough. As a Fox News commentator put it, echoing talking points used by many hardliners, "■ sure we will hear establishment apologists calling the events of recent days a compromise. But seeing how the president refused to compromise, it's more likely the Grand Old Party was the only one bending. Establishment Republicans always talk about doing the right thing for the nation, no matter the price. But when push comes to shove, they always throw in the towel."

What ought to be evident, when Tea Partiers reflect on what they disliked about the Bush years, is that neither insufficient fight nor excessive compromise was the problem. The Iraq War, the most disastrous, budget-busting initiative of the aughts, occurred when the GOP establishment fought for war and didn't give up. The K Street Project involved neither capitulation nor compromising with Democrats. And conservatives were pleased when the establishment "threw in the towel" on immigration reform and the Harriet Miers nomination.

Many in the Tea Party seem to have conflated compromising one's principles, a bad thing, with negotiating to reach agreements that make both sides better off. The latter kind of compromise is the only way American government can function when power is divided. There is no logical reason that it should be regarded by conservatives as a dirty word—the Bush years weren't bad for conservatives because of negotiated deals that gave both sides some of what they wanted.

Pretending that compromise is what went wrong during the Bush years helps conservatives evade responsibility for supporting an agenda many parts of which they find indefensible in hindsight. It permits them to blame Democrats and establishment Republicans for events they themselves only rebelled against after the fact, and to delude themselves into thinking that everything will get better if only they vehemently insist on getting their way, sans compromise, all of the time.

Who wouldn't want to believe that's all success takes? It's a pretty lie that talk-radio hosts find it easy to tell over and over again, despite contrary evidence, because conservatives want to believe that it's true. Reality is much harder to face. In order to mount a comeback and wield influence in American politics, conservatives need to face their own flaws, negotiate savvy compromises with President Obama and Democrats, build credibility and momentum with small gains in the short term, persuade people of their ideas and governing vision in the medium term, and implement their agenda by winning elections rather than brinkmanship. But hard truths don't attract a large enough audience to sustain a radio show.

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