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Republicans troubled by nation's direction

Administration rejects conservative values of traditional Republicans

BOB PERKOWITZ
Special to the Observer

Americans' greatest loyalties are to God, country and family, right? You would be remiss if you did not include political party in that list. About half of us get divorced. Many Americans violate their religious canons or change faiths. Yet about 90 percent of us remain loyal to our political party for life -- no matter what.

This blind loyalty enables political leaders to sometimes blatantly misguide their party and the nation. For instance, for decades Republicans believed that communism was bad -- a scourge against freedom, democracy, religion and prosperity. Then President Nixon decided it was time for accommodation -- an open door policy with China and détente with Russia. Virtually overnight, Republicans changed their minds and didn't think communism was so bad anymore.

A decade later it took another Republican president, Ronald Reagan, to return the party and America to our core values. He proclaimed Russia an evil empire and set about morally and financially bankrupting their government. Reagan re-engaged and won the Cold War without a battle, and in the process freed and uplifted the prospects of hundreds of millions of people.

Bush's base shrinking

Most Americans now believe that we are back in another period of misdirection. According to an August Gallup pool, taken before Hurricane Katrina, only 34 percent of Americans are satisfied with the way things are going in this country, while 62 percent are dissatisfied. President George W. Bush's support now resides primarily in a portion of Republicans that have come to be known as his base. Excluding that base, 77 percent of Americans disapprove of the way Bush is handling his job as president. The base itself is steadily shrinking. Almost 20 percent of Republicans now report themselves to be dissatisfied with Bush's performance.

The concerns that Americans have about the direction President Bush is leading our country are not rooted in

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some liberal philosophy. They are based in solidly conservative values that Republicans and most Americans accept as a matter of national heritage and pride. Three examples follow.

Conservative Republicans believe in war as a last resort. Democrats got America into the major conflicts of the past century: World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Republicans Eisenhower and Nixon got America out of Korea and Vietnam. Presidents Reagan and George Bush Sr. effectively handled terrorism and international aggression with powerful restraint, sophisticated diplomacy and surgical military precision.

Candidate George W. Bush promised a "humble" foreign policy and in at least one respect he has delivered on that promise. America has been humbled by his war in Iraq. America spends more on its military than all the other nations in the world combined, yet cannot subdue one small country.

Almost 2,000 Americans have been killed in Iraq and 10,000 injured. Our allies have all but abandoned our current government. Insulting the fallen, Bush presents America with steadily rotating, invalid causes for the war. Worse still, in spite of this supposed war on terror we have not been able to find, capture or kill the world's two leading terrorists, Osama bin Ladin and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

No more fiscal restraint

Conservative Republicans also believe in fiscally responsible government as the foundation for stable economic growth. Democrats had traditionally been the big spenders, using deficits and pork-barrel politics to get re-elected. Republican presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush knowingly risked their own re-elections with responsible anti-inflation and tax programs.

Under President George W. Bush, the federal government deficit has exploded from less than \$6 trillion to more than \$8 trillion in just five years. This debt, coupled with another \$2 trillion in accumulated trade deficit, puts the value of the dollar, our stock market, our home values and even America's financial stability under question and at risk. America is now afraid of even China's financial strength.

Conservative Republicans believe in conservation. From President Ulysses S. Grant to Richard M. Nixon, the vast majority of America's natural heritage and environmental protection laws were passed under Republican presidents. President Reagan himself set aside 12 million acres of American land as wilderness, funded the Superfund pollution cleanup and signed the Montreal Protocol on atmospheric pollution.

President Bush has shifted the cost of pollution from polluters to the American public. Unsuccessful in passing his misnamed Clear Skies and Healthy Forests Acts, or the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Bill, Bush has responded with administrative attacks on environmental protection. The Environmental Protection Agency has been enfeebled.

Hurricane Katrina is just the largest and most obvious consequence to date of this folly.

Fortunately, Americans do have one loyalty greater than their political party -- America itself. As the remaining Republican base watches our great nation undermined by reckless, greedy, short-sighted policies, Republicans will rally around the flag. America's honor will return when Bush departs. And it will likely be true Republicans that push us past that tipping point.

Bob

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