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The Usurper: Trump, Islamophobia, and the decline of Reagan Conservatism

By Mike Baugh; Opinion

Small government, fewer taxes, and a strong national defense have faded as the most prevailing messages of the Republican Party. There has been an ideological shift from so-called “common sense” conservatism to extreme, fascist-like sentiment emerging from GOP candidates in the 2016 election cycle. Front-runner Donald Trump, at a rally in South Carolina on December 7, 2015, called for a ban on Muslim entry into the United States. Trump and his unhinged followers defend these statements by calling those of us who take issue with them “too politically correct”. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida made efforts in the later end of his campaign to attack Trump for adding fuel to a fire that started on a calm September morning. Trump is not alone though in the negative sentiment toward Muslims, although he is by far the most outspoken. This is not the first time the GOP has capitalized on bigotry and intolerance.



Harry Reid is correct that this is nothing particularly new. The election of 1968 is a strong example of Republican appeal to White voters with racial prejudices. Richard Nixon and his campaign staff hoped to capitalize on southern White dissatisfaction with the Kennedy/Johnson administrations’ support of the Civil Rights Movement. The election of ’68 moved the base of the Party from the Northeast to a new home in the Southern States.

Ronald Reagan came into power in the 1980s and appealed to middle class white voters through his promises of small government, fewer taxes, and strong defense against the leading threat at the time, the Soviet Union. He is often regarded, as the epitome of what a conservative should be. Ironically, most political thinkers would argue that Reagan would struggle to win the GOP nomination in the modern political environment, with some even saying he might have more luck getting nominated by Democrats than Republicans.

Who is to blame? The Tea Party. Well, actually us. But I’ll get back to that after first expressing my discontent with the Tea Party.

The Tea Party has pushed the GOP away from just-right-of-center towards the fascist end of the political spectrum. After a strong showing in the 2010 midterms, the Tea Party cost Mitt Romney a winnable election against an unpopular incumbent. Romney – relatively a moderate Republican – was forced to move his campaign message far to the right in order to secure the nomination, but wasn't able to make up that ground when it came to the general election. The Tea Party declined in popularity in the years after the 2010 midterms, but it opened the can of worms that spawned Donald Trump.

This shift in the ideology of the Republican Party was exemplified by the evisceration of early front-runner, Jeb Bush. Jeb was a popular governor from the State of Florida from a powerful political family with an excellent donor network. In any other year, a candidate like Jeb Bush would be a near-lock for a nomination. Perhaps a strong conservative with an appeal to minority voters might give him a run for his money (e.g. Marco Rubio), but Jeb Bush certainly does not get embarrassed the way he did in 2016 if he is running for the nomination of a Pre-Tea Party GOP.

While the eradication of basic conservative principles extends to a handful of issues, I've chosen to focus mainly on the anti-Muslim rhetoric as the most frightening example. I blame the Tea Party for hijacking the Republican Party and shifting the focus away from Reagan Conservatism to more extreme stances. The fact of the matter is we are to blame entirely for the extremism. Our leaders are a reflection of us. Politicians will say and do almost anything to get elected to office. Donald Trump would not be able to propose a Muslim ban in the United States if he weren't getting a standing ovation after that statement. He would not be able to get away with inciting fear and rage with Muslims at his rallies and in debates without the overwhelming support he is getting in primary contest after primary contest. We are to blame for Donald Trump and the extremist wave that has demolished Reagan conservatism. To borrow a quote from Star Wars, "This is how liberty dies; with thunderous applause."

Don't let liberty die. Vote Democrat. Vote for an Independent. Vote the Easter Bunny. Just not Trump.

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