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The Republican Party is dead. Haven't you heard? Despite winning seven of the past 11 presidential elections and controlling at least one house of Congress for 13 of the past 15 years, our salad days are over. The ascendancy of Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, and Barack Obama has shipwrecked the GOP in perpetuity. Those of us who fought the good fight will now have to go back to country clubbing, Bible thumping, and war mongering in the private sector. To add insult to injury, we're the only major institution that has failed in the last year without receiving a generous taxpayer bailout.

Such is the psychology of the party of Lincoln in the early days of 2009. It is a coalition humiliated by defeat, insecure in its principles, and fearful of a new president who may prove to have Ronald Reagan's gifts for charming his way into the support of people with whom he is ideologically incompatible.

This hyperventilation – though characteristically American – is both overstated and premature. The GOP has had its fair share of false death knells over the past half-century – and each time it has quickly come roaring back.

When Barry Goldwater carried only six states in his bid to unseat Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1964 presidential election, the Republican Party was said to be undergoing incremental euthanasia at the hands of an unshakeable liberal coalition. Four years later, Richard Nixon was in the White House. With the passage of another four years, he was carrying the 1972 presidential election with 49 states.

In 1976, the wake of the Watergate scandal was said to be so deep and so traumatic that it would make the GOP irrelevant for a generation. A charismatic but untested presidential candidate offering a message of hope and change – Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter – was going to lead the nation back to the days before we had eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But Carter's Shangri-La on the Potomac would come to a premature end at the hands of Ronald Reagan in 1980. And by 1984, Reagan's reelection would reproduce Nixon's lopsided second term majority – 49 states for Reagan, one for opponent Walter Mondale.

It's important to remember that predictions about enduring political majorities are about as reliable as prognostications about recessions – as the old saw goes, markets have predicted eight of the last three downturns. One need only look back four years to find Karl Rove predicting that permanent Republican leadership was something

just shy of a natural law, while Democrats fretted that their party had ceased to be a serious national presence.

The question for Republicans, then, is not if they can come back, but rather when and how. The structural changes they choose to pursue in the interim will determine whether the current downturn is a temporary exile or a more abiding excommunication from the halls of power.

The first principle for the party to remember is that national political swings are often a function of selection by negation. The LBJ coalition came undone because of the stalemate in Vietnam and the growing radicalism of the 1960s campus culture. Carter was derailed through a combination of economic implosion and dramatic foreign policy humiliations, a trend most poignantly expressed in the Iranian hostage crisis.

In the most recent instance, the blow dealt to congressional Republicans in 2006 was primarily an expression of public fatigue with the war in Iraq. By the time the 2008 elections came around, that feeling had subsided considerably, but even in its diminished state it paired with the financial crisis to create a toxic atmosphere for Republican candidates. Thus, any sensible strategy for a Republican resurgence will recognize a timeless, if frustrating, truth of party politics – sometimes you have to wait for the mountain to come to you.

The second principle for Republicans to keep sight of is that effective political coalitions are built by addition, not subtraction. The notion that social conservatives, libertarian free-market types, or hawkish neoconservatives can be profitably removed from the party is usually an exercise in wishful thinking on behalf of their ideological adversaries.

What's more, putsches of that kind usually work in only two sets of circumstances: (1) if a minority within the coalition has disproportionately negative effects on the party as a whole (such as members of the John Birch Society in the Republican Party of the 1950s) or (2) if one segment of the coalition can be traded out for a new one (such as the switch between northeastern progressives and southern whites that occurred in the wake of the civil rights movement).

The GOP should be wary of any adventurism in constituent shopping. One of the party's great strengths relative to Democrats during the past several decades is that Republicans have remained much more a party of principles than a party of interests. While Democrats have attempted to manage an often unwieldy marriage of unions, environmentalists, ethnic politicians and the like, the GOP has stayed anchored in a broad – if at times tense – philosophical commitment to limited government, traditional values, and a strong national defense.

Rather than trying to unmoor entrenched interests, the party would be better advised to focus on groups that haven't yet found a meaningful home in either party, such as Hispanics, members of the science and technology industry (who have leaned towards Democrats in recent years, but went wild for Ron Paul's libertarian candidacy),

and Catholics torn between a liberal social justice agenda and a conservative insistence on the right to life and personal responsibility.

Republicans also need to learn the lessons that allowed Democrats to trump them at the ballot box during the last two national election cycles. A team of Democratic leaders led by Senator Charles Schumer of New York and then-Congressman (now White House Chief of Staff) Rahm Emanuel of Illinois discovered that it would be easier for Democrats to win local congressional races if they weren't forced into a shotgun marriage with the ideology of the national Democratic Party.

This led to a spate of candidates who sounded more like Republicans on issues ranging from gun control to taxes to abortion – and a watershed of Democratic victories in previously impermeable districts throughout the Midwest and the South. If Republicans hope to win those seats back – and to expand their opportunities in the northeast and the west coast – they'll have to adopt a similarly flexible approach that asks candidates to sign on to a broad national agenda but allows them to defect on issues that can make the difference between won or lost elections.

Finally, the GOP needs to commit itself to the difficult and time-consuming task of intellectually revitalizing the party. While Democratic criticisms of Republicans as "the party of no" are oversimplified, they run the risk of winning popular acceptance if the party can't pair principled rejections of Democratic overreach with an agenda of positive alternatives.

On issues like health care, the environment, and education, the public is convinced that there are legitimate and wide-ranging problems – but that does not mean they're unified on a proper response. If Republican politicians began utilizing the work done by cutting edge organizations like the Center for Health Transformation, the Property and Environment Research Center, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation – and advocate these policies with guidance from the party's top communications experts – they can begin to create a credible alternative to the Democrats' monopoly on domestic issues.

The time for the Republican Party's existential crisis is coming to a close. Now is the hour for a new generation of innovative, optimistic, and principled leaders to see this moment for what it is – an opportunity to renew a proud movement and lead it towards future victories.

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