

# The Big Tent Collapses

Editorial

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At the end of the 1980s pro-choice Republicans were spending a lot of time complaining about the pro-life plank in the party's platform. But they were told that if the plank was good enough to win three presidential elections (1980, '84, and '88), then it was good enough for future elections. At the time, conservatives in the GOP offered moderates one concession—although the party was, and would always be, pro-life, it would be a Big Tent Republican pro-life party.

The Big Tent that Ronald Reagan invented in 1980, when he convinced moderate Republicans and conservative Democrats to join, collapsed in the '92 presidential election. Two events best symbolized the collapse of the GOP Big Tent—Ross Perot's independent challenge to President Bush, and the Houston Convention where Pat Buchanan declared a "culture war in America" and declared George Bush a conscientious objector.

Not caring much for Buchanan's tone, Barbara Bush let the convention not so quietly know she considered herself a pro-choice Republican. Meanwhile Massachusetts governor Bill Weld tried doggedly to get a pro-choice amendment included in the party's platform. All for naught. Partly because of the abortion debate and partly because of Bush Sr.'s seemingly aristocratic indifference to the nation's recession, the Republican Party imploded. The Big Tent collapsed.

Goodbye to the longest ruling generation in America, the WWII generation (nine presidents in a row). It was the weakest showing by an incumbent President since 1912 when Teddy Roosevelt forced President Taft to hide in the Rose Garden rather than campaign against Woodrow Wilson. Enter Bill Clinton, the Democrat Party and the high-tech 90s, when baby boomers reigned supreme, and liberals had gold cards.

Bill Clinton and the Democrats built the Big Tent in the '90s, while Republicans continued to divide over abortion. The number of pro-choice Republican U.S. senators dropped from approximately 20 in the mid-1980s to a handful by the end of the century. In '96, the economy was strong, the party was divided, and Bob Dole (a WWII veteran) got creamed.

But politics is not static. By 2003 the world had turned, due to the NASDAQ bubble burst in March '00, 9-11, the war on terrorism, and the healing influence of George Bush's compassionate conservatism. Today, virtually all GOP members are conservative, and the party, with its small business and evangelical base, is quite happy with its direction, despite some big government spending by the present administration, which most believe is temporary—a result of the war on terror. Or so they hope. The GOP has been busy rebuilding a new Big Tent.

The same cannot be said for the Democrats.

Just as Bush Sr. couldn't hold together the Big Tent coalition built by Reagan, Al Gore couldn't hold together the Big Tent coalition that Bill Clinton built for the Democrats. An assist in that coalition break-up goes to Clinton himself for his unprecedented unethical behavior in office.

The '90s mixture of money and social tolerance made Democrats the country's ruling party. With a hot economy, Clinton used common sense positions on welfare reform, a balanced budget, and free trade to paper over real differences in a broad Democrat coalition. The coalition extended from environmentalists to blue collar workers to professional unions to minorities to high-tech entrepreneurs. Radicals in the Democrat party often were silenced, bought off through large gifts from liberal establishment foundations, much in the same way that ruling Saudi families buy off religious terrorists. This political bribery existed with special zeal in the liberal Northwest, where environmental activists who sometimes had shadowy ties to eco-terrorist movements openly associated with establishment non-profits like the Sierra Club or The Audobon Society.

But the '90s boom is now over and many voters no longer put social tolerance at the top of their voting priorities. Take the money away and the coalition collapses.

No better example of the collapse of the Democrat Big Tent can be found than here in Portland, Ore., where a civil war broke out sometime ago between the city's anti-capitalist mayor, Vera Katz, and influential Democrat families and businesses that helped put her in power. On a national level, Ralph Nader helped to deny Al Gore the presidency—dramatically demonstrating the schism.

In several areas of current public policy—taxes, the war in Iraq, the environment, affirmative action, welfare reform—it is Democrats, not Republicans, who are divided. Democrat presidential candidate Joe Lieberman is far closer to George Bush on the issues than he is to Howard Dean. This division in the party means that Democrats will not win in '04. As that knowledge seeps in, it may explain why the Democrats' political rhetoric has turned so vicious toward Pres. Bush and the ruling Republicans.

Closer to home, the Big Tent collapse also might explain why the *Oregonian* has written a series of shrill, intolerant editorials trying to raise the tired, old specter of the Republican Party as home base for intolerance. A recent opinion sounded as if having Portland's police department led by an evangelical was akin to the force being led by an alien. The "behind the times" paper doesn't seem to understand that roughly three-fourths of America's traditional Protestant churches now call themselves evangelical. That is about 40 percent of the nation.

The local Newhouse franchise is also unhappy with Americans who refer to themselves as religious, which is about three-quarters of the nation's population. And more than half of religious Americans consider themselves pro-life. Not intolerant, just pro-life. Again, this adds up to roughly 40 percent of all Americans.

Faced with these numbers, certain members of the media elite lash out desperately, near hysterically, trying to stir up old ghosts that once so bitterly divided the GOP. But that dog won't hunt. The world has turned. In 2003 it's the Democrats who are the party of

dysfunction, the party of the collapsing Big Tent—currently being played out, complete with fireworks, on a cable news network and in newspapers near you.