Barack Obama's America

White, John

Published by University of Michigan Press

White, John.

_for additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64088

_for content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2278867
IN 1959, RONALD REAGAN received an unsolicited fan letter. While it was not unusual for the famous actor to get mail from his many admirers, the author of this particular missive was the vice president of the United States, Richard M. Nixon. Preparing to seek the presidency the following year, Nixon admired Reagan’s ventures into politics, telling the actor, “You have the ability of putting complicated technical ideas into words everyone can understand. Those of us who have spent many years in Washington too often lack the ability to express ourselves in this way.”¹ Nixon urged Reagan to “continue your very effective speeches,” hoping that the Hollywood celebrity would abandon his Democratic roots and back the vice president in his forthcoming race against John F. Kennedy.² Replying from his Southern California home, Reagan prophesied the coming conservative revolution, darkly warning, “It is our responsibility to see that our freedom is not sacrificed from within—lost by default.” He added, “[W]e are told that it is we who have asked for and received each of our services from the government. But how many of the current government programs have resulted from the demands of the people? Isn’t it true that government itself has dangled many programs before us with no mention of the ultimate cost or the loss in personal freedoms? In many cases the people in government were well-meaning, but aren’t we justified in sus-
jecting that there are those who have fostered the growth of government by deliberate intent and design?"

Nixon’s letter to Reagan was prophetic. Nixon recognized Reagan’s raw political talent, his grace and stage presence—both of which Nixon lacked. Thirty years later, Reagan left the White House a beloved president known as the Great Communicator, while Nixon retained the aura of shame that had accompanied his resignation from the nation’s highest office. On the eve of becoming president, Reagan revealed his knack for politics when a reporter asked what voters could possibly see in the actor turned politician: “Would you laugh if I told you that I think, maybe, they see themselves and that I’m one of them? I’ve never been able to detach myself or think that I, somehow, am apart from them.”

As president, Reagan never forgot his audience. Shortly before leaving the presidency, he acknowledged that his acting skills lay behind many of his successes: “There have been times in this office when I’ve wondered how you can do this job if you hadn’t been an actor.” Reagan’s command of the stage was such that he often expressed amazement at his ability to woo a crowd. In a diary entry written early in his presidency, for example, Reagan described a particularly enthusiastic response from a New York City audience:

The streets were lined with people as if for a parade all the way to the Waldorf [Hotel]. They cheered & clapped and I wore my arms out waving back to them.

I keep thinking this can’t continue and yet their warmth & affection seems so genuine I get a lump in my throat. I pray constantly that I won’t let them down.

Reagan won the hearts of his countrymen not because he articulated conservative ideas but because he grasped and conveyed a vision of a country during happier and simpler times. Reagan biographer Richard Reeves captures the essence of Reagan’s political acumen, noting that he was a dreamer who wanted to take the nation “back into remembrances of his own boyhood and a Reader’s Digest version of the 1950s.” Indeed, whenever Reagan recollected his childhood, he painted idyllic portraits: “There were woods and mysteries, life and death among the small creatures, hunting and fishing. . . . Waiting and hoping for the winter freeze without snow so that we could go skating on the Rock River . . . swimming and picnics in
the summer, the long thoughts of spring, the pain with the coloring of the
falling leaves of autumn.” Creating these pictures meant overlooking ma-
jor blemishes, including his father’s alcoholism and the family’s frequent
relocations during the Great Depression as a consequence of his dad’s in-
ability to hold a job.

Reagan’s presidency was, as Reeves eloquently states, a triumph of our
collective imaginations. Addressing cultural leaders in Moscow, he re-
vealed one of the most important secrets of success both as an actor and as
president: “You must see and feel what you are thinking. . . . You must hold
and fix it in your memory and senses. To grasp and hold a vision, to fix it in
your senses—that is the very essence, I believe, of successful leadership.”

For Reagan, that meant clinging to his imagined vision of an America dur-
ding the 1950s. In his 1989 Farewell Address, Reagan made one final plea
for the resuscitation of the traditional family values that his fellow citizens
had once so uniformly accepted:

Those of us who are over thirty-five or so years of age grew up in a dif-
ferent America. We were taught, very directly, what it means to be an
American, and we absorbed almost in the air a love of country and an
appreciation of its institutions. If you didn’t get these things from your
family, you got them from the neighborhood, from the father down the
street who fought in Korea, or the family who lost someone at Anzio.
Or you could get a sense of patriotism from school. And if all else
failed, you could get a sense of patriotism from the popular culture.
The movies celebrated democratic values and implicitly reinforced the
idea that America was special. TV was like that, too, through the mid-
sixties.

Reagan’s vision carried weight because the voters’ collective memories
encompassed the idyllic pictures he painted. And Reagan frequently re-
ferred to those festive times, not only in the vivid word portraits contained
in his speeches but in the imagery created in his campaign commercials.
The most memorable of those commercials was “Morning in America”
(1984), which used a series of iconic images to depict an idealized version
of American life much as Reagan himself envisioned it: a briefcase-toting
dad climbing into a station wagon and heading for work while a kid on a
bike tosses the morning paper onto his front porch; a pair of young newly-
weds leaving church and kissing as a set of grandparents looks on approv-
ingly; a mom, dad, and kids bringing the latest acquisition (a carpet) into their home (complete with white picket fence); a family outside a log cabin hoisting an American flag; a police officer doing the same. The advertisement concluded with an announcer making the pitch that Reagan had restored pride and patriotism to their rightful places in the civic culture:

It’s morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country’s history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It’s morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?12

Reviewing the commercial today, one is struck that all of the characters depicted are white (though one child at the end may be biracial). The emotive images of newly married couples moving into new homes—along with proud, patriotic communities celebrating traditional family values—certainly resonated with white voters, who gave Reagan 56 percent of their votes in 1980 and 64 percent in 1984.13

In his 1980 campaign, Reagan presented himself as having just the right tonic for what ailed the country, promising to usher in “an era of national renewal [that would] revitalize the values of family, work, and neighborhood.”14 For years, Reagan had worried about the effects of the women’s rights and sexual revolutions on his idealized 1950s-era vision of the family. As he wrote while serving as governor of California, “I am deeply concerned with the wave of hedonism—the humanist philosophy so prevalent today—and believe this nation must have a spiritual rebirth, a rededication to the moral precepts which guided us for so much of our past, and we must have such a rebirth very soon.”15 In 1979, Reagan pollster Richard Wirthlin discovered that Americans were not joining the Reagan cause because of the issues per se; rather, people had a prevailing unease that a rapid erosion of the country’s values was creating an era of personal anomie. Revealingly, Wirthlin learned,
two-thirds of Americans agreed with the statement that “everything changes so quickly these days that I often have trouble deciding which are the right rules to follow”;

a majority said that the country was “better off in the old days when everyone knew just how they were expected to act”;

71 percent believed that “many things our parents stood for are going to ruin right before our eyes”;

nearly 8 in 10 believed that “what is lacking in the world today is the old kind of friendship that lasted for a lifetime”;

one in two described themselves as “left out of things going on around me.”

Into this breach stepped the veteran actor. In his personal appearance, Reagan was a prototypical 1950s organization man, complete with neatly folded handkerchief in his breast pocket, white shirt, knotted tie, dark blue suit, and polished black shoes. Reagan the salesman not only pitched himself as a reincarnation of Robert Young in *Father Knows Best* but also sold the electorate on a Republican Party that would, in his words, “build a new consensus with all those across the land who share a community of values embodied in these words: family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom.” The party’s 1980 platform elaborated on its standard-bearer’s themes:

We will reemphasize those vital communities like the family, the neighborhood, the workplace, and others which are found at the center of our society between government and the individual.

Reagan’s rhetoric never deviated from that plank. Thus, he extolled “parents who sacrifice long and hard so their children will know a better life than they’ve known; church and civic leaders who help to feed, clothe, nurse, and teach the needy; millions who’ve made our nation and our nation’s destiny so very special—unsung heroes who may not have realized their own dream themselves but then who reinvest those dreams in their children.” Reagan later commemorated Mother’s Day by calling the nation’s moms “quiet, everyday heroes [from whom] we first learn about values and caring and the difference between right and wrong.” Listeners
could have easily imagined that Reagan was describing the real Harriet Nelson, as portrayed in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, or the mythical June Cleaver and Betty Anderson of *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*.

Reagan also resorted to telling stories, as, for example, in 1987, when the besieged president left the nation’s capital to escape the fury of the Iran-Contra affair. Just after Air Force One landed in the relatively friendly environs of West Lafayette, Indiana, the president told a large crowd about a letter he received concerning a boy named Billy. Reagan vividly described the scene: Billy nagged his father to oblige him in his sole pastime of playing baseball, while Billy’s dad wanted to relax and read the Sunday newspaper. To stall the boy, the father cut a newspaper map of the world into tiny pieces and asked Billy to tape it back together. The two agreed that when Billy had completed the task, they would play ball. In just seven minutes, Billy put the map together. When asked how he had accomplished this seemingly impossible task so quickly, the boy proudly responded, “On the other side of the map there was a picture of the family, and I found that if you put the family together the world took care of itself.”

At that, the crowd burst into applause. Nancy Reagan, who understood her husband’s knack for reading audiences, said, “There’s a certain cynicism in politics. You look back [on] a statement for what a man really means. But it takes people a while to realize that with Ronnie you don’t have to look in back of anything.”

This simplicity in the president’s thinking helped him make a powerful connection with voters who shared both his sense of order and his reverence for tradition. Indeed, the longing for order was particularly apparent in the place that gave birth to Reaganism, Southern California. Recalling his childhood there, political scientist James Q. Wilson observed that an obsessiveness with normalcy was constantly on display: “Each family had a house: there it was for all to see and inspect. With a practiced glance, one could tell how much it cost, how well it was cared for, how good a lawn had been coaxed into uncertain life, and how tastefully plants and shrubs had been set out.” On their Sunday afternoon drives, families would call on friends, visit distant relatives, and see the sights—and examine other people’s homes and evaluate the neatness of their neighborhoods.

An old adage holds that success in politics requires the person and the moment to meet. Such was the case for Reagan in 1980. The longing for order following defeat in Vietnam, the Watergate scandals and Nixon’s res-
ignation, and the societal revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s were crucial to Reagan’s enormous electoral victories. In his campaign biography, *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama captured the spell that Ronald Reagan cast on the electorate:

> [A]s disturbed as I might have been by Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980, as unconvinced as I might have been by his John Wayne, *Father Knows Best* pose, his policy by anecdote, and his gratuitous assaults on the poor, I understood his appeal. It was the same appeal that the military bases back in Hawaii always held for me as a young boy, with their tidy streets and well-oiled machinery, the crisp uniforms and crisper salutes. It was related to the pleasure I still get from watching a well-played baseball game, or my wife gets from watching reruns of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Reagan spoke to America’s longing for order, our need to believe that we are not simply subject to blind, impersonal forces but that we can shape our individual and collective destinies, so long as we rediscover the traditional virtues of hard work, patriotism, personal responsibility, optimism, and faith.

From first to last, Reagan never deviated from emphasizing the nostrums of family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom. By creating such vivid mental images, Reagan, in the words of former ABC News anchor Peter Jennings, “held us spellbound.”

“We Will Act as If He Were Here”

Shortly after the unsuccessful attempt on Ronald Reagan’s life in 1981, Vice President George H. W. Bush flew to the nation’s capital from Houston, where he had been attending a dedication ceremony. Arriving at a panic-stricken White House, Bush told Reagan’s shaken Cabinet, “We will act as if he were here.”

In many ways, the Republican Party has followed Bush’s advice ever since. The vice president essentially won Reagan’s third term in 1988 by promising to pursue the fortieth president’s conservative values; twelve years later, Bush’s son, George W. Bush, promised to outdo Reagan in cutting taxes and reaching out to evangelicals with his faith-based initiatives. The younger Bush demonstrated a remarkable penchant for making Reagan’s values his own. Seeking reelection as Texas governor in 1998, a Bush
television advertisement had the candidate echoing Reagan: “Whether for government or individuals, I believe in accountability and responsibility. For too long, we’ve encouraged a culture that says if it feels good, do it, and blame somebody else if you’ve got a problem. We’ve got to change our culture to one based on responsibility.” Two years later, Bush told a New Hampshire audience that while winning the presidency would be a great honor, it would not be his most important accomplishment: “After power vanishes and pride passes, this is what remains: The promises we kept. The oath we fulfilled. The example we set. The honor we earned. . . . We are united in a common task: to give our children a spirit of moral courage.”

Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. noted that Bush’s rhetoric resonated with those discomfited by alterations both in family life and in the popular culture: “If you hate the 1960s, you love this stuff.”

By explicitly rejecting the sexual freedom espoused during the “Make love, not war” heyday of the 1960s, George W. Bush offered himself as a reincarnated Reaganesque father figure, someone who, unlike the morally challenged Bill Clinton, would set a personal example as president that complemented his publicly stated commitment to traditional family values. Conservative commentator Andrew Sullivan once likened the governing style followed by Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, to a 1950s-era Hallmark card: “The model of their masculinity is definitely retro—stern dads in suits and ties, undemonstrative, matter-of-fact, but with alleged hearts of gold.” First Lady Laura Bush similarly presented herself as someone who lacked any aspirations other than being a helpmeet to her husband. Laura Welch quit her job as a librarian to marry George W. and became a stay-at-home mom after her twins were born. In 2004, President Bush’s values strategy reached its zenith: 22 percent of voters cited “moral values” as their most important concern, and 80 percent of that group backed him.

But unlike his father, George W. wanted to do more than be a pale imitation of Reagan. Both Bush and his political strategist, Karl Rove, believed that a combination of new issues and changing demography would destroy the rough equilibrium in which the two major parties found themselves after the Bush-Gore tie of 2000 and give the Republicans a solid majority. Accordingly, the younger Bush championed tax reductions at a greater and faster pace than Reagan, proudly signing a major tax cut into law just five months into his first term, three months faster than the venerable Reagan had done so.
Bush also sought to take away the Democratic advantage on education by championing the No Child Left Behind law, even overcoming the GOP’s state’s-rights-based resistance. In 2007, Michigan Republican Peter Hoekstra capitalized on his party’s feelings of buyer’s remorse and collected signatures from 65 GOP House members on a measure that would allow states to opt out of the law’s requirements. Says Hoekstra, “I always had misgivings [about No Child Left Behind]. But I did vote for it on the basis that maybe [Bush] was right and this was his big domestic initiative and let’s give him a chance. But all my concerns . . . have proven to be justified.”

Bush similarly suppressed intraparty opposition when he demanded that the Republican-controlled Congress enact a $140 billion Medicare prescription drug benefit, the largest federal entitlement program since Medicare itself was enacted in 1965. Florida congressman Tom Feeney was one of several GOP members who berated the new entitlement as a betrayal of the party’s historic commitment to fiscal conservatism: “It was probably the greatest failure in my adult lifetime.”

But these Bush-engineered legislative victories achieved an important strategic goal: neutralizing the Democratic advantage on education and Medicare. Both Bush and Rove knew that Clinton had won an unexpected victory in 1996 by using the formula M2E2—shorthand for Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the environment—and emphasizing how a Democratic-controlled White House would preserve these programs from a Republican-led onslaught. Now Bush and his fellow Republicans could claim credit for the preservation and expansion of two crucial Clinton-era ideas.

To satisfy evangelical voters who had moved en masse into the Republican tent during the Reagan years but who were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the Republican Party’s inability to satisfy their demands (especially with regard to stopping abortion), Bush proposed government-sponsored faith-based initiatives. The idea had arisen during Bush’s governorship, when he championed programs such as Second Chance, which provided group homes for unwed teenage mothers; some of the homes were run by faith-based groups. As president, Bush promised that his administration would restore religious organizations to “an honored place in our plans and in our laws,” adding a biblical reference: “When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side.”

Finally, as noted in chapter 2, Bush made a major play for Hispanic voters by championing immigration reform. Bush’s rhetoric resonated with
Hispanics, and he held Democrat John F. Kerry to just 58 percent of their votes in 2004. Yet despite these herculean efforts to engender a Republican realignment, former National Committee chair Ken Mehlman conceded on the eve of the 2008 contest that “conditions remain where they were” in 2000. The realignment for which Republicans had hoped had not taken place. In fact, an emerging new demography had changed everything, leaving the GOP in an especially weakened condition.

“We Are Dying at the Box Office”

After the turn of the twenty-first century, Reagan’s appeal to a 1950s-era America with its traditional families and tightly structured moral codes lost its aura. The Pew Research Center found that between 1987 and 2007, public support for “old fashioned values and family and marriage” dropped from 87 percent to 76 percent. A year before John McCain and the Republicans were beaten at the presidential polls, another actor turned politician, California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, sounded an alarm. Noting that his party had shed 370,000 registered voters in his state in just two years, Schwarzenegger analogized the Republicans’ perilous plight to that of a failed motion picture: “In movie terms, we are dying at the box office. We are not filling the seats.” Virginia Republican Tom Davis told his House colleagues that the party’s brand was “in the trash can”: “[I]f we were a dog food, they would take us off the shelf.”

One reason why Republicans are losing support is that they appear to be a party of naysayers. Even though the world has profoundly changed since the Reagan-dominated 1980s, Schwarzenegger, for one, believes his party has not changed with it: “In business if you lose market share, you do something about it. But I wonder if we’ve been so beaten down by our minority status that we’ve developed a bunker mentality? I wonder if we’ve come to believe that our only remaining power is to say no?”

Indeed, saying no is not enough to build a winning campaign. In 2006, Pennsylvania Republican Rick Santorum structured his reelection effort around the notion that his no-nonsense prescriptions about the importance of adhering to traditional values merited his return to the U.S. Senate. Denouncing the demise of the 1950s-era family, Santorum claimed that individual selfishness had tempted women to surrender their stay-at-home mom roles: “Many women have told me, and surveys have shown, that they find it easier, more ‘professionally’ gratifying, and certainly more socially affirming, to work outside the home than to give up their careers to take
care of their children. Think about that for a moment. What happened in America so that mothers and fathers who leave their children in the care of someone else—or worse yet, home alone after school between three and six in the afternoon—find themselves more affirmed by society?"

Santorum’s assault on the social and cultural liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s generated outright skepticism, even from members of his own party. Donna Wright, a Republican township supervisor, said of Santorum’s bromides, “Women are entitled to their choice, whether they become professionals or stay home. I don’t appreciate anyone, public figure or not, telling anyone what they can and cannot do.” Vicki Lightcap, another Republican, explained that she cast her senatorial vote for Democrat Bob Casey because “Women do have a future in politics, we have a future in our business professions, and it’s up to us to become role models for our daughters—and our sons.” Sixty-one percent of Pennsylvania’s women felt similarly, and Santorum suffered a landslide defeat, losing by a margin of 59 percent to 41 percent.

Santorum’s loss was emblematic of a troubled GOP future. His defeat did not happen simply because George W. Bush and the Iraq War were wildly unpopular. Rather, Santorum’s evocation of Reagan’s “family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom” values mantra appealed to a much smaller slice of the electorate. According to exit polls, Santorum’s best sources of support were the same groups that had formed the heart of the Reagan coalition: Republicans (86 percent), conservatives (80 percent), white evangelical born-again voters (71 percent), more-than-weekly churchgoers (65 percent), and those who believed abortion should be illegal (64 percent). But the electoral coalition that was vibrant enough to elect Santorum in 1994 and 2000 had lost voters and could not replace them with others. Moreover, Pennsylvania has voted Democratic in five straight presidential contests: Clinton in 1992 and 1996, Gore in 2000, Kerry in 2004, and Obama in 2008. In 2009, Santorum’s former Republican seatmate in the Senate, Arlen Specter, saw the writing on the wall and bolted to the Democrats.

Despite the overwhelming Republican victory in the 1980 presidential election, one ambitious Democratic politician saw vulnerability in the Reagan coalition. Speaking before the Mecklenburg County Democratic Men’s Club in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1981, Bill Clinton told listeners that while Reagan had accomplished a good deal in a few months, he and the Republican Party were courting eventual trouble: “Reagan is pandering to the people who want to tell the rest of us how to live. The Re-
publican party is trying to tell the rest of us whether we are moral or not. We will never make heaven on Earth; that is what heaven’s for.”

Today, conservative scholar Bruce Bartlett has reached a similar conclusion: “There are cycles in history where one party or one movement ascends for a while and then it sows the seeds of its own self-destruction. It’s clear we have come to an end of a Republican conservative era.”

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, personal experimentation with the definition of the family, along with demographic changes that have turned the face of America bronze, have brought the Reagan juggernaut to a halt. Put bluntly, the Reagan coalition, like the old actor himself, has died of natural causes.

An Exhausted Philosophy

Seeking reelection to the presidency in 1932, Herbert Hoover declared that on Election Day, voters would choose “between two philosophies of government”: “You cannot extend the mastery of government over the daily life of a people without somewhere making it master of people’s souls and thought.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt disagreed, noting that under Hoover, the nation was afflicted with “hear-nothing, see-nothing, do-nothing government” operating under a “doctrine that the government is best which is most indifferent.” Although Hoover lost decisively, the philosophy he articulated survived and was resurrected by former New Dealer Ronald Reagan. Hoover’s laissez-faire, minimalist approach to governance has always appealed to a free, prosperous, and middle-class nation—the latter two qualities sorely lacking in 1932. The perennial challenges to would-be conservative presidents include (1) how to say no to new government initiatives without being perceived as naysayers and (2) how to set forth an action agenda to address urgent problems that require a federal response.

These problems did not hamper the conservative movement when Reagan took the helm in 1980. After five decades of big government, many Americans had come to agree with Reagan when he said, “In the present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” By making the bloated bureaucracy a target, Reagan’s proposed surgery became part of a new, action-oriented conservative agenda. Before Reagan, activist presidents had been liberals—for example, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F.
Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Beginning with Reagan, activist presidents were conservatives—Reagan and George W. Bush.

But Reagan’s denunciations of big government did not represent a rejection of the past; rather, Americans deemed the New Deal and Great Society unqualified successes. In 1937, Roosevelt bleakly outlined the problems besetting a nation still crippled by the Great Depression:

I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day.

I see millions whose daily lives in city and on farm continue under conditions labeled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago.

I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children.

I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions.

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.\textsuperscript{54}

By 1980, FDR’s “ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished” nation had become decidedly middle class, despite the inflationary pressures so often associated with prosperity. The result was not a populace that wanted more government but a nation of taxpayers that viewed government through the green eyeshades of penny-pinching accountants. Yet instead of shrinking government, Reagan made it cheaper. Daniel Patrick Moynihan noted that during the Reagan years, “For seventy-five cents worth of taxes, you got a dollar’s worth of return.”\textsuperscript{55} Reducing the rate of government growth—and the taxation that accompanied it—were central goals of the Reagan administration. And they were accomplished. Former Reagan campaign manager Ed Rollins believes that Reagan’s successes have rendered his once-potent coalition inert: “[W]hat was the Reagan coalition—social conservatives, defense conservatives, anti-tax conservatives—it doesn’t mean a whole lot to people anymore.”\textsuperscript{56} Conservative columnist Brendan Miniter agrees. Writing in the \textit{Wall Street Journal}, Miniter claims that the political windfall once associated with the Reagan (and later Bush) tax cuts has passed its zenith: “On both the national and state level, some Republicans are starting to bet that they know where the point of diminishing political returns is, and that for tax cuts, we’ve already reached it.”\textsuperscript{57}
In foreign affairs, Reagan took on the mantra of “peace through strength,” and he and his fellow Republicans claimed a significant victory in this arena. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, fulfilling Reagan’s 1983 prophesy: “I believe that communism is another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written.” But the fall of communism created new problems for the GOP. By 1992, Reagan’s successor, George H. W. Bush, was a Cold War president without the Cold War. Bush tried to turn voter attention to his foreign policy successes, plaintively telling CNN’s Frank Sesno, “I hope every mother and dad out there says, ‘Hey, we ought to give this president a little credit out there for the fact that our little kids don’t worry so much about nuclear war.’ Isn’t that important?” It was important, but the Reagan coalition was already entering its death throes—again, as a consequence of its architect’s singular successes.

Reagan’s domestic and foreign policy triumphs, like those of FDR and LBJ, created a unique set of challenges for the Republican Party. After having turned Reagan’s conservative platitudes into law, what remained for the Republicans to do except continuously to seek and hold power? The problem became especially acute by 1988, when reporters repeatedly asked George H. W. Bush what he would do as president. Bush derided the queries, dubbing them “the vision thing.” Not only did Bush avoid answering, but his campaign staff encouraged him to do so. Policy adviser Deborah Steelman noted that if Reagan’s heir were to declare himself on a few big issues, “we’d have less of a chance to win than we do.”

During the Clinton years, Republicans continued to avoid setting forth a futuristic agenda. Instead, they emphasized the largely procedural items contained in their 1994 Contract with America and continued to stress their cultural differences with Clinton. Rather than thinking philosophically, Republicans concentrated on the mechanics associated with building a formidable political machine. As journalist Thomas B. Edsall explains in his insightful *Building Red America*,

Over the past forty years, the Republican Party and the conservative movement have together created a juggernaut—a loosely connected but highly coordinated network of individuals and organizations—with a shared stake in a strong, centralized political machine. This machine includes the national party itself, a collection of campaign contributors large and small, a majority of the country’s business and trade associa-
tions, the bulk of the corporate lobbying community, and an interlocking alliance of muscular conservative “values” organizations and churches (The Family Research Council, the Coalition for Traditional Values, Focus on the Family, the Southern Baptist Convention, thriving Pentecostal, evangelical, and right-leaning Catholic communities, and so forth). It includes a powerful array of conservative foundations with focused social and economic agendas (Scaife, Bradley, Loin, Koch, Smith Richardson, Carthage, Earhart, etc.), as well as prosperous right-of-center think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, the Free Congress Foundation, the Heritage Foundation, and the Manhattan Institute. This interlocking alliance—a “new conservative labyrinth”—has proven deft at redefining key American concepts of social justice, at marketing conservative ideologies in both domestic and international affairs, and at successfully integrating these redefined ideals—in the eyes of many voters—with goals of economic efficiency.61

Newt Gingrich led Republicans on the final phase of their 40-year odyssey to reclaim control of the House of Representatives. But after taking power in 1994, Republicans came to see it as an end in itself. As former Federal Reserve chair Alan Greenspan ruefully observed, the GOP has “fundamentally been focusing on how to maintain political power, and my question is, for what purpose?” Greenspan noted that under George W. Bush, a party that had stood for fiscal accountability became a big spender, leading the economist to conclude, “The Republican Party, which ruled the House, the Senate, and the presidency, I no longer recognize.”62 Greekspan has a point: in 1940, the GOP had a 17-point advantage over the Democrats as the party more likely to balance the federal budget; six years later, the GOP beat the Democrats by 31 points as the party best able to “cut down government expense.”63 More than a half century ago, when the Gallup Organization asked respondents why they identified with the Republican Party, the most common answers were

- policies: more conservative, 100 percent American—28 percent;
- more economical with money, cut taxes—16 percent;
- favor business, encourage free enterprise—13 percent;
- tradition: family Republican, always been Republican—13 percent;
- oppose welfare state, socialism, government regulation—5 percent.64
But in the George W. Bush years, many of these GOP strengths disappeared. A 2004 American Enterprise Institute study found that during Bush’s first term, federal discretionary spending rose by an astounding 30.2 percent. Only Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society (“We’re in favor of a lot of things and we’re against mighty few”) had outspent Bush.65 The party of fiscal responsibility suddenly lost credibility on this core issue, even among its own faithful. Bartlett claimed that Bush was a “pretend conservative.”66 New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg maintained that the level of federal indebtedness that future taxpayers will have to absorb constituted “lunacy.”67 Bloomberg was so upset at the Republican Party’s lack of fiscal discipline that he abandoned the party in 2007 to become an independent.

If liberal Republicans such as Bloomberg were upset with Bush’s record spending, conservatives were apoplectic. Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation rebuked Bush for his free-spending fiscal policies: Bush “says, ‘Well, I had a Republican Congress and I didn’t want to go against a Republican Congress.’ Well, why not? He could’ve vetoed all those bills. People would’ve been happy about it.” Richard Cooper, a Reaganite Republican and former chair of Weight Watchers, argues that “Democrats are the new conservatives” thanks to their alarms about deficit spending and calls to end the Bush tax cuts.68 Even David Frum, author of a sympathetic 2003 pro-Bush book, has recanted.69 In a provocative 2008 work, Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again, Frum wrote that Bush’s presidency was a conservative catastrophe: “On the debit side: So many mistakes! And such stubborn refusal to correct them when there was still time! So many lives needlessly sacrificed, so much money wasted, so many friends alienated, so many enemies strengthened.”70

Libertarian-minded Republicans were equally unhappy, deeply disturbed by Bush’s eavesdropping on millions of private telephone conversations and ordering phone companies to provide the federal government with records of calls made, all without court approval. House minority leader John Boehner voiced skepticism about Bush’s actions: “I am not sure why it would be necessary to keep and have that kind of information.”71 Former Republican congressman and MSNBC commentator Joe Scarborough issued a scathing indictment: “Memo to the President and congressional leaders who signed up on this lousy program: We don’t trust you anymore. We don’t trust you with our phone bills. We don’t trust you with our bank records. We don’t trust you with our medical histories. From now
on, if you want to look at Americans’ private records, get a damn search warrant!”72

Just as southerners deserted the Democratic Party in droves during Reagan’s heyday, record numbers of liberal Republicans are abandoning the party of their forebears. In 2007, former Rhode Island senator Lincoln Chafee, the son of John H. Chafee, Rhode Island’s governor from 1963 to 1969 and a U.S. senator from 1976 until his death in 1999, left his father’s party to become an independent. Lincoln Chafee opposed Bush on such key issues as the Iraq War, the environment, and the administration’s creation of “permanent deficits,” believing that Bush had taken the Republican Party far from its origins. Declaring that the GOP was “not my party anymore,” Chafee denounced Bush as a “rogue president” who had started an “unnecessary war.”73 Leaving the GOP, he said, “felt good.”74 In 2008, Chafee took the final step away from the Republicans by endorsing the presidential bid of Democrat Barack Obama, a staunch opponent of the Iraq War, which Chafee described as “a colossal error in judgment. For Americans who feel like I do, we deserve a choice on this issue.”75

Chafee is not the only New England Republican to defect. In 2001, Vermont Republican Jim Jeffords became an independent, thereby handing control of the U.S. Senate to the Democrats. Like Chafee, Jeffords disagreed with Bush on a host of issues—“choice, the direction of the judiciary, tax and spending decisions, missile defense, energy and the environment.” Jeffords concluded that Bush’s Republican Party no longer stood for “moderation; tolerance; fiscal responsibility.”76 A decade earlier, former U.S. senator and Connecticut governor Lowell Weicker claimed that the GOP had lost its way when it came to standing “for the rights of the individual, for equal opportunity for the individual, for private initiative, private enterprise.”77 Christine Todd Whitman, a former New Jersey governor and Environmental Protection Agency director under George W. Bush, remains a Republican but believes that her party faces “a clear and present danger” that it “will move so far to the right that it ends up alienating centrist voters and marginalizing itself.”78

Demography Is Destiny

In May 2004, George W. Bush convened a meeting of his top reelection advisors. After thanking everyone for their hard work, Bush told them,
“Our numbers are right at where Reagan’s were at this point in 1984. So that means we’re headed for a big victory.” At this, a bewildered look came over pollster Matthew Dowd’s face, and he conveyed the bad news: “Our numbers are nowhere near Reagan’s. We’re like twelve to fourteen points off his. I mean, we’re ahead slightly. But we’re in the margin of error. And if we win, it won’t be a big victory. It’ll be like two or three points.” Dowd was right: Bush defeated Kerry by a margin of 51 percent to 48 percent. But even if Bush had equaled Reagan’s popularity among the groups that had supported the fortieth president, there would have been no guarantee of victory. In the 20 years since Reagan had swamped Mondale, the Reagan coalition itself had been swamped by vast transformations in the nation’s demography.

When political revolutions happen, old rules of politics are upended. Thus, when Nixon won the presidency in 1968, a rule of thumb held that Democrats needed to carry urban areas by substantial margins to offset Republican majorities everywhere else. But journalist Samuel Lubell noted at the time that Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey had overwhelmingly won urban areas yet had lost the presidency because the nation’s demography had changed. For example, Humphrey decisively carried Richmond, Virginia, where the political maxim dictated that he should have won the entire state. Yet he did not. Changing demography—in this case, growing suburbs dominated by whites who fled the inner cities, leaving them with black majorities—made Nixon the victor. Henceforth, Republicans could win the White House by dominating among angry suburban whites upset by school integration, inner-city crime, and race riots. In effect, the GOP became the white party, a pattern that continued under Reagan.

Today the political demography that gave Nixon, Reagan, and both Bushes the presidency—that is, near-lockstep southern support and backing among suburban whites who were married, divided their religious loyalties between some variant of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and had kids living at home—has changed dramatically. With each passing year, the Republican share of the presidential vote has declined to the point where old rules are again about to be broken. Nowhere is the evidence more powerful than among whites. At the onset of the twenty-first century, 69 percent of Americans were white, 12 percent were Hispanic, another 12 percent were black, 4 percent were classified as Asian and Pacific Islander, and 3 percent were listed in “some other category.” This is quite unlike 1970, when Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg described the
“real majority” as being “unyoung,” “unpoor,” and “unblack.” At the time, 87.5 percent of the population was white, and only 11.1 percent was black. Whites still dominate the voting population, as evidenced by the fact that 77 percent of 2004 voters were white. But only 65 percent of voters aged 18 to 24 were white. And in 2008, white voters fell to just 74 percent of the total, the smallest ever recorded.

Here Come the Hispanics

As noted in chapter 2, Hispanics have become a new and potent political force. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the state that launched Reagan’s political star, California. The twentieth-century version of the state that elected Reagan its governor in 1966 and 1970 and gave him its presidential electors in 1980 and 1984 no longer exists, except perhaps on the commemorative state license plates honoring the late president. By 2000, Democrats had assumed a dominant position: that year, Al Gore spent zero campaign dollars for television advertisements there, while George W. Bush laid out a hefty $20 million. Nonetheless, Gore handily beat Bush (53 percent to 42 percent), largely accounting for Gore’s 500,000 edge in the national popular vote. Key to Gore’s Golden State landslide was the fact that Hispanics constituted 14 percent of the electorate and gave him 68 percent of those votes.

Four years later (and despite the September 11 attacks), Bush’s California tallies did not significantly improve, as he received 45 percent of the vote to Kerry’s 54 percent. Once again, the Democrat’s Golden State victory can be attributed to the 63 percent backing he received among Hispanics. Hispanics constituted a record 21 percent of the California electorate in 2004, while whites fell to just 44 percent of those aged 18 to 24. Four years later, Barack Obama won an impressive 61 percent of California’s votes and took 74 percent of California’s Hispanic votes, a victory made even more powerful because the Hispanic percentage of all votes cast stood at 18 percent. At the same time, the percentage of whites continued its decline, reaching 63 percent of the state’s total vote.

Two former Republican National Committee chairs believe that their party has too many whites. According to Mehlman, “America is every day, less of a white country. We rely too hard on white guys for votes.” Ed Gillespie concurs: “Our majority already rests too heavily on white voters, given that current demographic voting percentages will not allow us to
hold our majority in the future.” According to Mehlman and Gillespie, the Republican Party’s base does not reflect the café au lait face of the twenty-first-century American. If that does not change, the GOP could lose valuable votes, even in places it once took for granted.

One of the best places to see the crash of the GOP sailing ship is Orange County, California. Site of John Wayne Airport, Disneyland, and the Crystal Cathedral (home to Dutch Reform televangelist Robert Schuller), Orange County was once a bastion of right-wing Republican conservatism. For years, the profoundly anticomunist and conspiracy-minded John Birch Society called it home. A 1961 report on the group’s activities compiled by California attorney general Stanley Mosk noted that the Birchers were “wealthy businessmen, retired military leaders, and little old ladies in tennis shoes.” Mosk’s description also applied to the typical Orange County resident.

That bygone era of white faces and sunny beaches, memorialized in the 1964 hit “The Little Old Lady from Pasadena,” has been replaced by an Orange County that is both multiracial and multicultural. During the 1990s, the number of Hispanics residing there rose to 31 percent, while the number of whites declined by 6 percent. The Hispanic influx was augmented by an increase in those of Asian background, who presently constitute 14 percent of the county’s population. A 2004 Census study found that whites had become a minority there (49 percent).

The addition of Orange County to a growing list of “majority-minority” suburbs runs counter to the long-standing stereotype of the area’s pristine beaches populated by sun-drenched conservative white Republicans. Such imagery still appears in popular culture, most notably on MTV’s Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County. The only problem with this “reality” program’s all-white cast of high school students is that it fails to mirror the present-day demographic realities.

Orange County’s racial revolution has been accompanied by a political upheaval that has seen its white, conservative Republican officeholders replaced with Hispanic Democrats. In 1996, Loretta Sanchez beat Bob Dornan for the area’s congressional seat. Dornan, a conservative Republican nicknamed “B-1 Bob” for his support of the B-1 bomber and other military hardware, began his tenth campaign supremely confident of victory: Sanchez “can’t beat me,” he announced. “Bob Dornan is a father of five, grandfather of ten, military man, been married forty-one years. She has no kids, no military, no track record. [Therefore,] I win.” But voters dis-
agreed, and Sanchez edged Dornan by 984 votes. Today, Sanchez is an entrenched incumbent, drubbing her Republican opponents every two years. In 2008, for example, Sanchez dispatched a Hispanic Republican rival by a gargantuan 44 percentage points.

When the 110th Congress convened in the nation’s capital in January 2007, 30 Hispanic representatives took seats in the U.S. House, among them Loretta Sanchez and her sister, Linda, who represents the nearby town of Whittier, where Nixon grew up and began his long political odyssey. The Sanchez sisters are but 2 of 24 Hispanic Democrats in the 110th Congress, a group that also includes two committee chairs and thirteen subcommittee chairs. A similar pattern emerged in the U.S. Senate, where Florida Republican Mel Martinez, Colorado Democrat Ken Salazar, and New Jersey Democrat Robert Menendez became the first Hispanic trio to serve. Nationally, there are more than 6,000 elected Hispanic officials, including officeholders in such seemingly unlikely places as Wichita, Kansas (mayor), Idaho (state senator), Minnesota (state senator), New Hampshire (state representative), and Carrboro, North Carolina (city council member). Arturo Vargas, executive director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, says, “If you want to run a winning campaign, you must have a strategy to reach and engage Latino voters.”

But Republicans are both unable and unwilling to do so. In 2008, McCain received a mere 31 percent of the Hispanic vote, a 13-point drop from Bush’s support in 2004. Throughout the 2008 campaign, Republicans alienated nonwhites in order to satisfy the party’s base. For example, a Republican debate sponsored by the Spanish network Univision was canceled because McCain was the only one of the ten GOP presidential candidates who would commit to participating. One, Representative Tom Tancredo, objected on principle: “We should not be doing things that encourage people to stay separate in a separate language.” The GOP’s problem with nonwhites became even more pronounced when only a handful of its candidates—a group that did not include front-runners McCain, Fred Thompson, Mitt Romney, or Rudy Giuliani, appeared at a public television debate to discuss issues affecting black Americans. Former GOP congressman J. C. Watts, who is black, harshly criticized the no-shows: “I think the best that comes out of stupid decisions like this is that African-Americans might say, ‘Was it because of my skin color?’ Now, maybe it wasn’t, but African-Americans do say, ‘It crossed my mind.’”
The situation was further aggravated at the 2008 Republican National Convention, where only 36 of the 2,380 delegates were black, the lowest number in 40 years.\textsuperscript{102} The absence of persons of color in the GOP led former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson to conclude that his party may be on the verge of committing political suicide:

In politics, some acts are so emblematic and potent that they cannot be undone for decades—as when Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Goldwater was no racist; his constitutional objections were sincere. Members of the Republican party actually voted for the Civil Rights Act in higher percentages than Democrats. But all of this was overwhelmed by the symbolism of the moment. In his autobiography, former secretary of state Colin Powell says that after the Goldwater vote, he went to his car and affixed a Lyndon Johnson bumper sticker, as did many other African-Americans.

Now Republicans seem to be repeating history with Hispanic-Americans. Some in the party seem pleased. They should be terrified.\textsuperscript{103} Gerson was right. If Hispanics (and other nonwhites) view Republicans as the anti-immigrant party, it is disastrous for their prospects beyond 2008. Recent history makes the point. In 1994, California Republican governor Pete Wilson supported Proposition 187, a measure that banned state aid to illegal immigrants. That year, television sets across the Golden State flickered with pictures of illegal Mexicans swarming across the border as an announcer ominously intoned, “They just keep coming.”\textsuperscript{104} Thanks to these ads, Wilson and Proposition 187 won handily, with the ballot initiative passing by a margin of 59 percent to 41 percent. But while 64 percent of whites backed Proposition 187, 69 percent of Hispanics disapproved.\textsuperscript{105} Alfredo Alvarez, a legal immigrant from Honduras, declared, “I love this country, but I feel unwanted. I feel like unless I am a true American, the government could one day knock on my door and tell me, ‘Alfredo, go back to Honduras!’”\textsuperscript{106} In 1996, the Republican presidential ticket of Bob Dole and Jack Kemp received just 21 percent of Hispanic votes, the worst Republican showing since 1972. Sal Mendoza, an insurance broker and member of one of California’s local school boards, explains the GOP dilemma: “I think Republicans are so obsessed with their traditional conservatism . . . that they’ve lost track of the bigger picture. They’re sitting
on a pot of gold [the Hispanic vote] but they don’t know how to mine it. And if you can’t mine it, you will lose.”

Signs already show that California’s Hispanic voting history is repeating itself on a grander scale. A 2007 Pew Research Center study found that 57 percent of Hispanics nationwide call themselves Democrats, while only 23 percent see themselves as Republicans. Among voters aged 18 to 29, the Democrats hold an overwhelming advantage of 64 percent to 18 percent. Immigration is a primary reason: 79 percent name it as a top voting issue.

George W. Bush is another. He receives particularly poor marks from Hispanics, just 16 percent of whom believed that he had helped them; 41 percent claimed he hurt their cause, while 33 percent said his policies had no particular effect. Forty-one percent of the poll’s participants believed that the Democratic Party did a better job of handling illegal immigration, compared to only 14 percent who chose the Republicans and 26 percent who chose neither party. Finally, when asked which party cared more about people like them, 44 percent of Hispanics chose the Democrats, 8 percent chose the Republicans, and 41 percent said neither party.

A New Generation of Democrats

Today, the age group with the largest number of Republicans is persons between 43 and 54—that is, those who came of age during the Reagan years. These voters, born between 1955 and 1966, had not experienced a successful presidency until Reagan’s: Kennedy was assassinated in 1963; Johnson and Nixon left the White House as discredited public figures; Ford provided a brief but not very consequential interlude; and Carter was a disappointment. Only Reagan conveyed a sense of optimism combined with accomplishment. Thus, in 1984, candidate Reagan frequented college campuses, something neither Johnson or Nixon could do in light of the protests that marked the Vietnam War. Reagan expressed amazement at the reception he received, noting during an appearance at Bowling Green State University, “There is certainly a new generation on hand. The crowd both in & out were wildly enthusiastic and supportive. I thought I was at a Republican convention.” Polls reflected Reagan’s observations, as 61 percent of voters aged 18 to 24 backed him that year. The Reagan generation has subsequently tilted consistently toward the GOP. Among those who came of age between 1978 and 1981, Republicans enjoyed a 6-point edge over the Democrats in party identification, and among those who
voted for the first time between 1982 and 1985, the Republican lead swelled to 14 points.\textsuperscript{111} Today, the Reagan generation still makes its influence felt. According to a study by Mason-Dixon Polling and Research, the Reagan generation was key to Bush’s 2004 victories in Florida, Ohio, Iowa, Nevada, and New Mexico, giving him between 54 and 59 percent of their votes; Kerry prevailed in every other age category.\textsuperscript{112} And the Reagan generation remained inclined toward McCain in 2008 (see chapter 7).

Bush’s unpopularity among today’s young voters, coupled with a corresponding Democratic advantage in party identifiers, has the potential to be historically significant. In 2007, 56 percent of those aged 18–29 identified with the Democratic Party; only 36 percent associated with the Republican Party.\textsuperscript{113} These figures are highly significant: in 2008, 50 million young people voted, a number higher than the post–World War II baby-boom generation. By 2015, estimates show that this new generational cohort will comprise one-third of the electorate.\textsuperscript{114}

How young voters will frame the politics of the future is unclear. But Bush and the Republicans have given Democrats a historic opportunity. Dowd believes that Bush squandered a generational opportunity for the GOP: “If you look at Ronald Reagan and how he performed among youth, he created a generation of Republicans that was able to sustain itself. What Bush has done in his presidency is almost the opposite: He has won elections and lost a generation.”\textsuperscript{115} Numerous surveys bear out Dowd’s observations: young voters opposed the Iraq War, disliked GOP positions on gay marriage and abortion, believed Republicans were incompetent, and favored a bigger government that would provide them with more services. According to a 2007 survey among voters aged 18 to 31, Democrats enjoyed substantial advantages in some key areas: 39 points when it came to “paying attention to issues that affect younger people”; 38 points on the environment; 35 points on health care; 33 points on handling the situation in Iraq; 32 points on becoming energy independent; 25 points on handling the federal budget; 24 points on dealing with the economy and jobs; 21 points on managing the war on terrorism; 15 points on “sharing your values”; and 13 points on taxes.\textsuperscript{116}

The support Democrats generate among the young may result from the importance they accord to tolerance. One 2007 survey found that 87 percent of the nation’s youth said that they were tolerant, and 73 percent thought that description best applied to the Democrats.\textsuperscript{117} In a nation of changing racial and family compositions, tolerance is an especially impor-
tant public value. On that point, it is hardly coincidental that the Democratic Party’s advantages among the young come entirely from nonwhites, the fastest-growing segment of the population. Put another way, Democrats are on the losing end of the party identification scale among young white voters.\textsuperscript{118}

**Destroying a Brand Name**

During the 1930s, Republicans had a hard time selling voters on their brand name. At the opening of the 75th Congress in January 1937, the Republicans held a mere 89 of 435 seats in the House of Representatives and had just 17 of 96 senators.\textsuperscript{119} So engorged were the Democratic ranks that several of the new members had to sit on the Republican side of the aisle in both houses. A few days before the 1936 election, Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke before a throng of supporters at New York City’s Madison Square Garden, artfully practicing the politics of emotion: “I should like to have it said of my first Administration that in it the forces of selfishness and of lust for power met their match. I should like to have it said of my second Administration that *in it these forces have met their master.*” Roosevelt biographer James MacGregor Burns described the audience response as a “raucous, almost animal-like roar [that] burst from the crowd, died away, and then rose again in wave after wave.”\textsuperscript{120}

Following Roosevelt’s script, the Democrats henceforth cast themselves as the “party that cares more about people like yourself,” and Republicans were demonized as the “party of privilege.” Class became a tool Democrats used to win presidential contests. As *The Economist* observed following FDR’s 1936 landslide, “The poor won the election from the well-to-do.”\textsuperscript{121} This class-based politics—with its powerful images of Democrats named Mike, Sammy, Mary, and Jane, while Republican men had Roman numerals after their names, attended elite universities, and dated women named Muffie and Buffy—lasted until 1980. Carter’s inability to control inflation, keep unemployment low, and return the Iranian hostages to U.S. soil created a “misery index” that gave Reagan an opportunity to toss FDR’s portrait into the dustbin of history and replace it with a bright new picture of a Republican Party whose 1950s-era values of family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom had more in common with ordinary citizens than the boutique liberalism espoused by many Democrats.

At the same time, the 40-year-long Cold War gave beleaguered Repub-
licans a new lease on life. From 1952 to 1988, Republicans won 7 of the 10 presidential contests, although the party lost Congress, most governorships, and most state legislative seats. The victories of Kennedy in 1960, Johnson in 1964, and Carter in 1976 represented exceptions to the pro-Republican trend. Specifically, Kennedy outhawked Nixon in 1960; following his assassination, the country was not willing to have three presidents in fifteen months; and after the criminality associated with Watergate, the nation was ready for a pious president, a role Carter fulfilled.

Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush maintained their hold on the presidency because Republicans created a powerful post–New Deal image for themselves: tough-minded patriots who drove hard bargains with the Soviet Union, kept the military strong, exercised prudence in sending U.S. troops to battle (even as they rhetorically railed against communism), and responsible economic stewards who would safeguard the military-industrial complex. Although FDR’s New Deal–era image held sway for most other offices, this new Republican picture with its bold anticommunist hues predominated in presidential contests. Put another way, Americans did not use foreign policy as a calculus in selecting members of Congress, governors, or state legislators but did so when casting presidential ballots.

As Republican presidents became the norm, the GOP accrued another advantage, becoming the party of competence. Rather than appointing political hacks to important posts, Republicans cultivated a stable of bureaucratic insghters who served their presidents in several capacities yet always remained careful to cultivate an image of administrative ability, even if that meant foregoing (as it often did) electoral politics. Thus, George H. W. Bush, Dick Cheney, George Shultz, Caspar Weinberger, James A. Baker III, and Donald Rumsfeld occupied a variety of cabinet-level positions and executive appointments. By 1980, 42 percent of voters believed that Republicans were “better able to manage the government,” while only 29 percent preferred Democrats. After five years of the Reagan presidency, 32 percent of respondents associated the Republican Party with “able and competent leadership,” while an additional 25 percent named the GOP as “effective at getting things done.” New York Times columnist Tom Wicker noted that the Democrats’ absence from the presidency had transformed it into “a party of access in which the voiceless find a voice,” while the Republicans “maintain enough coherence and unity to become a party of government.” Even when George H. W. Bush ran into strong political
headwinds in late 1991, two-thirds of voters still associated Republican with competence. 126

Seeking the presidency in 2000, George W. Bush sought to allay concerns about his thin résumé by promising to surround himself with the same administrative managers who had populated previous Republican administrations. According to one poll taken that year, only 2 percent of respondents thought Bush was either qualified or competent to be president. 127 Therefore, Bush’s selection of Cheney as vice president and his all-but-announced intention to make Powell secretary of state sent powerful signals to voters that his incoming administration would be ready to run the government on its first day in office. Recounting his decision to choose Cheney, Bush said, “I don’t know what’s going to come on my desk, but I’m going to need somebody who’s seen things before, who can give me advice to make good decisions.” 128

By 2006, the Republican image of competence was in tatters, thanks to a mismanaged war in Iraq and a tardy, incoherent response to Hurricane Katrina’s devastation of New Orleans. A year later, 46 percent of the public thought Bush was competent, while 49 percent disagreed. 129 As one Republican professional noted after the Katrina disaster, “We’re supposed to be the party of competence. When we look incompetent, it’s a real problem.” 130 Peggy Noonan, a former speechwriter for Reagan and George H. W. Bush, believes that George W. Bush “destroyed the Republican party, by which I mean he sundered it, broke its constituent pieces apart, and set them against each other. He did this on spending, the size of government, war, the ability to prosecute war, immigration and other issues.” 131

The destruction of the Republican brand, coupled with the enormous demographic changes in the American polity, has left both major political parties in a state of transition. On the eve of the 2008 election, the old was dying and the new was waiting to be born. That birth took place on November 4, 2008.