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## Are There Any Responsible Republicans Out There?

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The defeat Tuesday of Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana in the Republican primary -- trounced by a Tea-Partier -- is one more nail in the coffin of the GOP's conservative wing. Conservative? Isn't Lugar a hands-across-the-ideological-divide bipartisan moderate?

During his 36 years in the Senate, Lugar certainly had some bipartisan moments, but on most of the key issues facing the country, he was a mainstream conservative. He earned 0% from NARAL (for his consistent anti-choice voting record), the Human Rights Campaign (for his anti-gay stances), the AFL-CIO (for his votes on labor issues), and the ACLU (for his votes on civil rights and civil liberties), and a big 5% from the League of Conservation Voters. In contrast, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce gave Lugar a near-perfect 96% voting record -- for example, by voting "no" to repeal federal tax subsidies for companies that move US jobs offshore and voting "yes" to bar the EPA from regulating greenhouse gases. He got a 100% seal-of-approval from the Christian Coalition. The National Rifle Association was certainly pleased with Lugar's vote to prohibit lawsuits against gun manufacturers.

Today, the Republican Party is torn between conservatives and ultra-conservatives. The party has shifted so far to the right that Lugar is considered a voice of reason just for acknowledging that global warming is real. (The Tea Party candidate who defeated him, state Treasurer Richard Mourdock, dismisses it as "junk science"). This explains why media pundits and even his Democratic colleagues are heaping praise on the 80-year old Lugar. He doesn't religiously follow the Limbaugh litmus test.

Back in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, there was a power struggle within the Republican Party between moderates (like Senators Jacob Javits of New York, Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, George Aiken of Vermont, Charles Percy of Illinois, and Mark Hatfield of Oregon, and NY Gov. Nelson Rockefeller) and conservatives (led by Senators Robert Taft of Ohio and Barry Goldwater of Arizona), with folks like President Dwight Eisenhower and Senator (later VP) Richard Nixon walking a tightrope between these two poles.

During the past two decades, the Republican Party has been kidnapped by the ultra right wing zealots. The gang leader was Newt Gingrich, who helped orchestrated the GOP's 1994 take-over of the House. Since then, the party has moved steadily and relentlessly to the right, with the likes of Tom DeLay, Dick Armey, Phil Gramm, Mitch McConnell, Jim DeMint, Darrell Issa and Tom Coburn leading the lunatic fringe. Things have gotten so out of hand that someone like Goldwater, who was considered a right-wing extremist when he captured the GOP nomination for president in 1964, would be considered a Republican moderate today. These GOP leaders pay homage to Ronald Reagan, but they are all to the Gipper's right.

In 2001, Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords left the GOP become an independent, then retired in 2006. In 2009, another GOP moderate, Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, realized he was so out of sync with the activists in the party that he became a Democrat, and lost his next election to a Tea Party Republican, Pat Toomey. Earlier this year, GOP Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine, a moderate by today's standards, was so fed up with her party's right-wing zealotry that she announced she wasn't going to run for re-election. Right now the only member of the Republican Senate's "reasonable" caucus is Susan Collins of Maine.

The same dynamic is true in the House. The 2010 mid-term elections brought a huge wave of new GOP faces to Congress, almost all of them Tea Party sympathizers.

We saw the results in this year's GOP presidential primary candidates: Gingrich, Perry, Huntsman, Caine, Paul, Bachmann, Santorum, and Romney. They all tailored their messages to appeal to the party's right-wing activists. Not a moderate among them.

The takeover of the GOP by its Tea Party wing was made possible by two key forces. One was the emergence of right-wing media, including Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes' Fox News and the radio talk-show extremists like Limbaugh, Mark Levin, Glenn Beck, and dozens of others on local stations. They were the Tea Party's cheerleaders and megaphone, honing and broadcasting their message, encouraging people to join up, and helping create a national movement out of a disparate crazy-quilt of local organizations.

The other was the growing influence of wacky billionaires like the Koch brothers, Harold Simmons, Sheldon Adelson, and others who hate taxes, regulation, and unions with such a passion that they are willing to invest their fortunes in right-wing candidates, think tanks like Cato and Heritage Foundation, lobby groups like Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, super PACs, radio stations and magazines. The Tea Party would not have arisen without the support of this right-wing infrastructure to provide the grassroots zealots with resources, connections and a platform, including the advice of well-connected influence-peddlers like former Rep. Dick Armey.

The right-wing stranglehold on the GOP is pushing the party further and further away from where most Americans are on most issues, from government regulation of big business to same-sex marriage. They seem content to be the party whose governing philosophy is "No." This is ultimately why Obama has found it virtually impossible to get major parts of his agenda through Congress. The McConnell-Boehner leadership team either shares the Tea Partiers extremism or lacks the political skills to broker compromises. This is ultimately a self-defeating strategy for the Republicans, but the zealots who now control it don't seem to care.

Are there any responsible Republicans who will speak out against the takeover of the party by the right-wing lunatic fringe? Are there any long-term Republicans who have the courage of Joseph Welch, the Republican Boston lawyer who helped bring down Sen. Joe McCarthy when, during the televised Senate hearings on alleged Communist infiltration of the U.S. Army in 1954, at the height of the Cold War, looked the Wisconsin senator in the eye and asked: "Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness... Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?"

The audience in the hearing room burst into applause. It took this catalyst to get the Senate Republicans to censure McCarthy, who quickly lost his influence.

Are there no Joseph Welches around today? Are there any Republicans among former office-holders, corporate CEOs, university presidents, or clergy who worry that that Tea Party, Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, Dick Armey, the Koch brothers, the Heritage Foundation, Karl Rove, Dick Cheney, and the Religious Right are leading the party over a cliff -- and are willing to say so publicly? Why hasn't someone like Colin Powell pulled together a group of such high-profile Republicans -- conservatives but not crazies -- who will stand up to the Limbaugh lunatics, the Cantor crazies and the Tea Party extremists?

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