

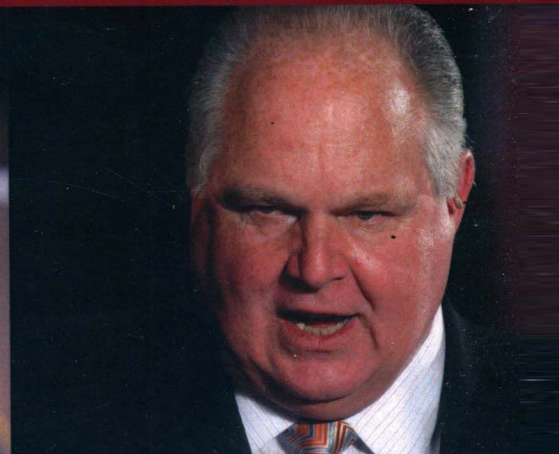
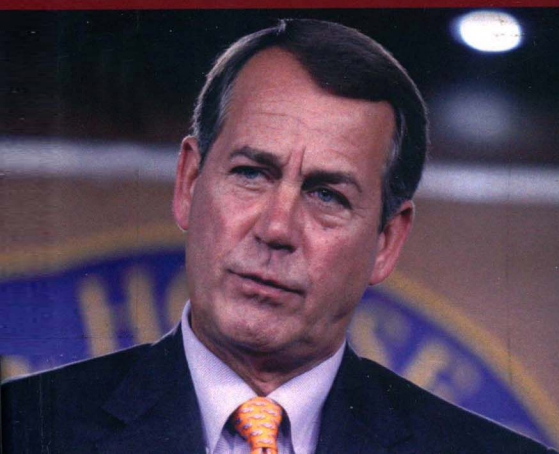


CLARKE ROUNTREE, EDITOR

VENOMOUS SPEECH

PROBLEMS WITH AMERICAN POLITICAL
DISCOURSE ON THE **RIGHT** AND **LEFT**

VOLUME TWO



Venomous Speech

Problems with American Political
Discourse on the Right and Left

Volume 2

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PRAEGER

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Venomous Speech

For my son John, whose political insight and rhetorical
acumen are far beyond his years.

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parents or my baby with Down syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama's death panel." *Politifact.com* dubbed that "the lie of the year."⁴ Alan Grayson, a Democratic congressman from Florida, responded to Republican resistance to health care reform in equally venomous words, claiming: "If you get sick, America, the Republican health care plan is this: Die quickly."⁵ A new Tea Party movement grew up around the issue and added the growing federal deficit to its complaints, as the worst recession since the Great Depression continued to starve government coffers while requiring government spending to support the long-term unemployed and prop up spending on essential state services.

Palin became an unofficial leader of the Tea Party movement and sought to capitalize on unhappiness over the economy and the health care reform law. Her website targeted vulnerable Democrats who had supported health care reform, featuring gun-like crosshairs over photos of selected members of Congress. One of those targeted politicians, Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, was shot by a gunman at a local town hall meeting with constituents. This tragedy raised the concern that such militant rhetoric had spawned the violence.⁶

Giffords's shooting could have served as another wake-up call to the dangers of partisan venom. But despite quick nods toward bipartisanship from both sides, the rancor soon resumed. Republicans continued to push for a repeal of what they termed the *job-killing* health care reform act.⁷ Billionaire real estate developer and *The Celebrity Apprentice* star Donald Trump, who was hinting he might run for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, stirred the pot of birther conspiracy theorists by voicing his skepticism about President Obama's birthplace, leading Obama to release his long-form birth certificate in April in an attempt to put the issue to rest.⁸ Even as the president fended off these fringe, right-wing attacks, he was upbraided by Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus, who complained that "[t]he president ought to spend his time getting serious about repairing the economy" instead of "talk[ing] about birth certificates. . . ."⁹

In the summer of 2011, the federal government came close to defaulting on its national debt for the first time in history after a cadre of Tea Party Republicans in the House refused to support a debt-ceiling increase, and House Majority Leader John Boehner had trouble reining them in. Standard & Poor's dropped its credit rating for U.S. debt, for the first time in history, from AAA to AA+, noting that the "'political brinkmanship' in the debate over the debt had made the U.S. government's ability to manage its finances 'less stable, less effective and less predictable.'"¹⁰ When Teamster President James Hoffa introduced Obama at a Detroit rally in September 2011, he referred to Tea Party members as sons of bitches, drawing no reproach from the President.¹¹

Unsurprisingly, at the end of 2011, the U.S. Congress hit its lowest approval ratings since Gallup began conducting such polls in 1974. Only 11 percent of

Americans approved of the job Congress was doing in December 2011, with 86 percent disapproving.¹² The Republican primaries ensured that partisan attacks on the President, and Democratic responses to it, would become regular fare on the nightly news. There has been little respite from the polarization that so worries Thomas and Beckel. And, as of this writing, as money piles up in the Obama and Romney camps, the general election promises to be a *battle royale*.

My own grave concern over this situation, and that of the editors at Praeger, gave birth to this project. The authors I recruited to write the chapters herein were asked specifically to focus on problems in American political discourse in an attempt to better understand the dimensions and to root out the causes of our political malaise. However, the dark view of politics presented in these pages is not meant to serve merely as an explication of and lament over problems with our democracy, but rather as a starting point for addressing what ails us. My closing chapter at the end of volume II attempts to draw from what the eloquent contributors to this work have discovered to suggest steps for solving, ameliorating, or at least recognizing what is intractable in the troubled discourse of politics in the United States.

This introduction offers an overview of what I believe are the primary sources of problematic political discourse in our country. The essays that follow will look in-depth at particular problems, describing them and explaining how they are detracting from a political culture that ideally promotes healthy debate in our marketplace of ideas and yields reasoned policies to promote the general welfare of our country and its inhabitants.

Unfortunately, I believe that the lowly state of political discourse in our country is not another variation of the nasty politics we have experienced at various times in our history. What we have today is something completely new—the product of fundamental changes in our political system and political environment that make our current strain of broken political discourse unique and particularly resistant to change. Thus, the vitriolic attacks against President Obama featured in the healthcare debate and the birther movement, the political stalemate in Congress that nearly led to a government default in the summer of 2011, and the frustration of American voters witnessing and sometimes participating in this incivility are signs of fundamental changes that may haunt our republic for years. This chapter seeks to elucidate those changes and to explain how we have reached this sorry state.

The sources of our current problems are not mysterious, but they are recent and, unhappily, they mutually reinforce one another, undermining an efficient and effective culture of democratic participation and governance. They can be readily categorized into four primary sources: the media revolution, the reshuffling of political parties, the campaign finance revolution, and a new culture of fear that is undermining our most basic political values.

THE MEDIA REVOLUTION

There are two important developments in news media that have radically altered the way we receive political information, one cultural and the other technological and economic. A cultural shift among journalists was spurred by the success of *Washington Post* investigative reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in connecting a break-in at the Watergate Hotel to President Richard Nixon's White House. The subsequent scandal not only led to Nixon's resignation from the presidency in 1974, but also inspired a new generation of reporters to adopt a more aggressive approach to covering government. Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* describes the change: "Newspapermen became cinematic heroes, determined diggers who advanced the cause of truth by meeting shadowy sources in parking garages, and journalism schools were flooded with aspiring sleuths and crusaders." Unfortunately, Kurtz laments,

the next generation of reporters pumped up many modest flaps into scandals ending in "gate," sometimes using anonymous sources who turned out to be less than reliable. Journalism became a more confrontational, even prosecutorial business, with some of its practitioners automatically assuming that politicians in the post-Nixon era must be lying, dissembling or covering up.¹³

By 1987, Eleanor Randolph could describe news organizations as "big and brassy, peopled by reporters who snarl questions at the president."¹⁴ Thus, the noble journalist became cynical and the thoughtful writer became confrontational, propagating pessimism about the actions and motives of politicians.

Sex became a focus of much of this prosecutorial reporting. Democratic presidential candidate Senator Gary Hart was an early victim in 1984 when the *Miami Herald* staked out his condominium to confirm that he had an overnight female guest who was not his wife. *The National Enquirer* supported the story by paying for a photo of Hart with model Donna Rice sitting on his lap in front a yacht aptly named *Monkey Business*. As Paul Farhi of *The Washington Post* has noted, recently even more established news organizations have found ways to pay for such salacious stories and photos, getting around professional ethical prohibitions on such payments.¹⁵ Since then, the American public has been introduced to the sex lives of President Bill Clinton, Congressman Bob Livingston, Congressman Mark Foley, Senator Larry Craig, Senator David Vitter, New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey, Congressman Gary Condit, Congressman Barney Frank, Republican senatorial candidate Jack Ryan, the daughter of Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin (Bristol), Governor Elliot Spitzer of New York, Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Edwards, Republican senatorial candidate Christine O'Donnell, and,

most recently, Republican presidential candidates Herman Cain and former speaker of the House Newt Gingrich.¹⁶ Gone are the days when President Kennedy could engage in extramarital affairs while the White House Press Corps “winked and nodded,”¹⁷ never suggesting a whiff of scandal that could escape the Beltway.

Kurtz complained in the wake of the impeachment of President Clinton arising from the Monica Lewinsky affair of “an increasingly tabloid media environment [in which] no one on either side of the political fence is quite sure of the rules anymore.” He added that “even if an approved set of journalistic guidelines existed, someone would undoubtedly come along to break them.” Without clear rules, reporters have made a habit of inquiring about sexual infidelities, as well as drug and alcohol use, and other areas politicians’ lives once considered private.¹⁸

Judy Mann of the *Washington Post* noted journalists covering the Clinton–Lewinsky media frenzy were “trying to make themselves look like the toughest gorilla in the zoo,” when confronting the President, even though “[t]hey weren’t going to get to the truth, but truth had already become a casualty of an adversarial process in which a president had been sandbagged.” She complained that “[f]rom politics to law to journalism to our way of doing science, the confrontational, tear-down way of doing business is everywhere,” pervading our culture.¹⁹

This new adversarial approach to political reporting has been intensified by new economic and technological changes in news reporting that followed on the heels of Watergate. Communication scholars frequently cite changes in when and how people receive and enter into discourse over politics to explain our new political landscape.²⁰ The advent of 24/7 news coverage, since the 1980 launch of CNN by Ted Turner, has radically altered the nature of the public’s relationship to politics and politicians. Instead of turning to Walter Cronkite at the end of the day for a reflective, relatively balanced account of the workings of our republican democracy, we often get live, unfiltered, off-the-cuff reports from news organizations rushing to be the first to break a story.²¹ Terry McDermott calculates that CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News together generate more than half-a-million words in an average day—the volume of a new *War and Peace* flooding our homes every 24 hours.²²

Producing this torrent of news has led the media to cut corners and has increased competition to gain and keep eyeballs.²³ This competition became worse when the shrinking number of corporate owners of electronic media²⁴ began to demand their formerly public-service-oriented news divisions start turning a profit. Starved of cash, pushed to make a profit, and working in an increasingly competitive industry have led to a focus on ever more dramatic and spectacular stories, and a replacement of traditional news gathering and dissemination with a host of cheap, opinionated, and combative talking heads.²⁵

Such an approach has led to the trivialization of news (e.g., the regular focus on attractive white females who have gone missing; entertainment news), the featuring of opinions over facts, and repeated spectacles, such as the almost weekly sex scandals involving politicians, sports stars, and celebrities. Political campaign reporting has become more interested in the “horse race” than in the substance of candidates’ proposals.²⁶

Competition also has led news organizations to settle for smaller segments of the viewing public, with networks like Fox News and MSNBC moving to the right and to the left, respectively, to cement their narrow viewerships, while moving away from journalism’s ideals of objectivity and balance. Such opinion-dominated news has sometimes led to disinformation on important issues. For example, the conservative slant of Fox News contributed to the belief of one-third of its viewers in summer 2003 that the United States had found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (when none had been found) and of two-thirds of its viewers that Al Qaeda was working with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein (when no connection existed).²⁷

The Internet revolution that followed in the early 1990s not only proliferated sources of political information and disinformation, but it also created an echo chamber, whereby otherwise suspect sources of rumors and stories (such as blogs and radical political websites) could bring the most scurrilous and provocative claims into the public sphere, forcing (or enabling) the mainstream news media to respond and, to some extent, legitimize those claims. The persistent and baseless controversy over President Obama’s birthplace is one notable example, whereby partisan radicals seeking to delegitimize Obama spread rumors that even mainstream news programs eventually felt the need to report on, and President Obama himself had to work to dispel them by releasing his long-form birth certificate.²⁸ More recently, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney faced the spectacle of a Dallas minister charging that Mormonism—Romney’s religious affiliation—is not a Christian denomination but a cult. Again, all major news organizations reported the charge of this fringe figure.²⁹

Thus, while the democratization of social media has allowed greater participation, it also has reduced the power of traditional news media organizations to filter out radical views that are disruptive and unproductive for reasoned political discourse. It provides a feeder system for politically slanted news organizations like Fox News to quip, “People are saying . . .” (as Fox frequently does, without identifying who those people are³⁰), drawing upon the Internet rumor mill to raise questions about global warming, health care reform, Obama’s religious affiliation, and the like. For example, electronic media propagated the rumor that Speaker of the House Republican John Boehner was having an affair, catching the eye of news sources as diverse as *The New York Post*, *Salon.com*, and *The Daily Hurricane*.³¹

THE RESHUFFLING OF POLITICAL PARTIES

The second major source of problematic political discourse involves the most profound restructuring of major American political parties in the past 100 years. This, of course, is the conversion of the South from solidly Democratic to solidly Republican in a single generation. The South had been Democratic since the end of Reconstruction. The change from blue to red began slowly when President Truman added a civil rights plank to the Democratic Party in the 1948 election, but really gained steam with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 during the Johnson administration. Johnson famously told an aid that the passage of that progressive legislation would lead the Democrats to lose the South for a generation.³² But the change that followed has had much more long-term consequences.

The process was described by Kevin Phillips, a young political adviser who recognized the tide-change and was recruited into Richard Nixon's administration. He told the *New York Times* in 1970 that, as a Bronx native, he realized a change in attitudes as

the old bitterness toward Protestant Yankee Republicans that had for generations made Democrats out of Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants had now shifted among their children and grandchildren, to resentment of the new immigrants—Negroes and Latinos—and against the national Democratic party, whose Great Society programs increasingly seemed to reflect favoritism for the new minorities over the old.³³

Phillips quickly realized the potential for a revolution, particularly in the South. So he warned Republicans not to try to weaken enforcement of the Voting Rights Act, even though the GOP would never get more than 10–20 percent of the black vote. He reasoned:

The more Negroes who register as Democrats in the South, the sooner the Negrophobe whites will quit the Democrats and become Republicans. That's where the votes are. Without that prodding from the blacks, the whites will backslide into their old comfortable arrangement with the local Democrats.³⁴

Richard Nixon relied on one of Senator Strom Thurmond's former advisers, Harry S. Dent Sr., in 1968 to develop his southern strategy to peel away southern votes from Democrats "by reassuring Southerners that, as president, he would not be too aggressive on civil rights issues."³⁵

Lee Atwater, as Ronald Reagan's Harry S. Dent Sr., told an interviewer that he implemented the southern strategy by using code words, since he noted, you

cannot use racially charged words, so “you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff. You’re getting so abstract now that you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a by-product of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites.”³⁶ He was more explicit in George H. W. Bush’s presidential campaign with the controversial Willie Horton ad, in which a convict on furlough (given a weekend pass) from Governor Michael Dukakis’s Massachusetts raped a white woman from Maryland, suggesting that the Democratic presidential nominee was soft on crime. Roger Ailes, the current president of Fox News, was a media consultant to the Bush campaign at the time and noted of the ad: “The only question is whether we depict Willie Horton with a knife in his hand or without it.”³⁷

The consequences of this exodus of Southern white Democrats to the Republican Party are manifold. Richard H. Pildes argues that this realignment purified the parties ideologically and made them less likely to work across party lines.³⁸ Before this realignment, he argues, the United States essentially had a “four-party system” because

[p]artisan loyalties did not neatly track ideological ones, as they do today. The Democratic Party was a coalition of Southern Democrats, extremely conservative on race or any issue that conceivably touched on race, along with moderate to liberal Democrats from other parts of the country. This in turn enabled the Republican Party to sustain its own divided coalition of liberals and moderates, mostly from the Northeast and the West Coast, and much more traditional, old-line conservatives from the Midwest and other rural areas.³⁹

With parties internally divided across ideological lines, Democrats and Republicans frequently had to reach across party lines to pass legislation. For example, northern Democrats and liberal Republicans united to approve statehood for Alaska and Hawaii over the resistance of southern Democrats and moderate Republicans. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 changed that, Pildes argues, by dividing southern conservatives from their uneasy alliance with northeastern liberals. As the southern strategists noted, antiblack sentiment drove white southerners into the hands of the welcoming GOP. With the ideological purification that followed, that need to reach across the aisle has been eliminated.

Pildes offers strong evidence for what he calls the “hyperpolarization” of American politics over the past generation.⁴⁰ He argues that “in the Senate, the most conservative Democrat is now more liberal than the most liberal Republican,” and the number of moderates in Congress have fallen from 30 percent to 8 percent in the House and 41 percent to 5 percent in the Senate since the 1970s.⁴¹ Part of this polarization is a result of more active, committed, and extreme party members showing up to the polls in primaries, whose turnout for

House elections has averaged a third of that of the general election.⁴² Voters also are more partisan, sharply dividing their approval ratings for President Obama at 82 percent for Democrats and 18 percent for Republicans in 2011. The average difference in ratings of presidents by party members since Carter has been almost half that 64-point gulf.⁴³

While I agree with Pildes that structural changes account for much of the ideological purification of the parties and of the rise in problematic political discourse, I believe that we have to account for the rhetorical contributions of leaders like Reagan, Clinton, Bush II, DeLay, Pelosi, Boehner, and others to understand why this restructuring occurred, how it has been sustained, and the role of those rhetorical choices in creating the current state of political discourse. Pildes treats the ideologies of conservative and liberal as if they represent one perspective. At the very least, we can distinguish these two political positions on social and economic issues. And, despite Pildes's efforts to draw attention to "something deeper about American democracy [that] accounts for this polarization, rather than the personalities of particular presidents or political leaders,"⁴⁴ his structural approach presumes ideological alignments that did not have a single cause (i.e., the Voting Rights Act of 1965), but multiple causes, some of them distinctly rhetorical.

For example, although one tends to think of today's Republicans as conservative on social issues—with George W. Bush's positions on abortion, premarital sex, stem cell research, gay marriage, and the like evangelically conservative—that hardly represents the natural direction for the GOP to turn. Consider today's conservative litmus test of abortion policy: Bush's grandfather, Connecticut Senator Prescott Bush was a supporter of Planned Parenthood, as was archconservative Barry Goldwater.⁴⁵ When *Roe v. Wade* was handed down on January 22, 1973, President Nixon made no statement on the matter, and he appears to have supported abortion in some cases.⁴⁶ President Ford's wife Betty was asked by Morley Safer on *60 Minutes* in 1975 about *Roe v. Wade* and she stated: "I feel very strongly that it was the best thing in the world when the Supreme Court voted to legalize abortion, and, in my words, bring it out of the back woods and put it in the hospitals where it belongs. I thought it was a great, great decision."⁴⁷

The GOP move to the right on social issues was not an inevitable realignment, but a calculated strategy to pull more people into the Republican Party. It was inaugurated by Reagan in his alliance with the Moral Majority in the early 1980s, continued by Bush I in his courting of the Christian Coalition in the 1990s, and cemented with Bush II's appeal to Focus on the Family and other evangelical groups in the 2000s. It was particularly well suited to drawing Southerners into the GOP because, in addition to their aversion to blacks entering the Democratic Party, more than half of all southern Christians were evangelical.⁴⁸

This new Christian emphasis, I would argue, dovetailed with a decades-old situation within the GOP to move it toward an extreme kind of rhetoric. That tradition sprang from the fact that the Republican Party was a minority party in Congress from FDR's inauguration in 1933 until the Newt Gingrich's *Contract with America* swept Republicans back into the majority in 1995.⁴⁹ The Republicans controlled both houses of Congress for only four years of that 62-year period (1947–1949 and 1953–1955) and held the Senate during only six of the remaining years during Reagan's tenure (1981–1987). Over that period, Democrats typically enjoyed substantial majorities. Although the Democrats held the Senate by only one or two seats in the middle of Eisenhower's administration, that was the exception to the rule because from JFK's inauguration until Reagan's inauguration, the Democrats averaged 61.4 senators, for better than a 20-seat advantage in that body. At the height of their power in 1937–1939, Democrats in the House had three-and-a-half times more members than the Republicans, with their smallest majority at 13 seats in 1943–1945.

That kind of domination, I believe, created a culture of arrogance among the Democrats that went with their majority position,⁵⁰ while the Republicans became the voices in the wilderness who could do little more than complain about the direction of the national government. Republicans finally earned a voice in 1952 when the war hero Eisenhower managed to win the White House, but they were rebuffed when the Democrats discovered that Eisenhower's popular vice president had covered up a crime after he entered the White House. So it was a tremendous victory for the Republican minority when an actor from California managed to capitalize on the realignment promises of the southern strategy and take both the White House and the Senate for the first time in 28 years.

In the face of this turn, the Democrats used what power they could to maintain control. In the 1984 eighth congressional race in Indiana between Democratic incumbent Francis McCloskey and Republican Richard McIntyre, a razor-thin election where the lead changed five times during various recounts, the Democratic-controlled House spent 40 hours debating which candidate should be seated. The Democrats used their majority to ensure victory by seating the Democrat, incensing their GOP colleagues.⁵¹ They also held lengthy, high-profile hearings over the Iran–Contra scandal in the summer of 1987, after they had regained control of the Senate. And, as a final rebuff to the popular Republican president, they dismissed his nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court, Robert Bork, with Sen. Edward Kennedy painting him in the darkest terms, warning:

Robert Bork's America is a land in which women would be forced into back-alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens' doors in midnight raids, school-children could not be taught about evolution, writers and artists could be

censored at the whim of the Government, and the doors of the Federal courts would be shut on the fingers of millions of citizens for whom the judiciary is—and is often the only—protector of the individual rights that are the heart of our democracy.⁵²

When Reagan's mild-mannered vice president George H. W. Bush was dismissed after only one term—the first Republican elected president to be so limited since Herbert Hoover—the Republicans were galvanized. They evinced an almost visceral hatred of Bill Clinton, whose rather modest policies were labeled derisively as “liberal.” With the help of a \$100 million campaign by the health services industry, conservatives pushed back Clinton's efforts to pass universal health care.⁵³ Building on the momentum of that victory, Newt Gingrich put together a *Contract with America* that nationalized congressional races and won Republicans control of both houses for the first time in almost 50 years. Since that victory, Republicans have stood toe-to-toe with the Democrats.

I would argue that the tone and appeal of Republican rhetoric can be explained by (1) their oppositional stance, (2) their evangelical fervor, and (3) their antigovernment policies. I do not believe that their recent victories have altered what they developed as a bomb-throwing backbencher style. That style has been catalyzed for many Republicans by a sense of evangelical calling that the moral rhetoric of Reagan initiated, leading legions of southern Christian politicians to Washington, D.C. Their evangelical discourse of good and evil bled into their political discourse and gave them a sense of righteousness in their cause. That righteousness, and a need for payback from the Democrats, led to the sorry spectacle of the impeachment of Bill Clinton for an extramarital affair and his attempts to cover it up. That righteousness was on display after they lost the Senate in 2007, as they filibustered 275 times through 2010—the most in the history of the Senate—including 70 percent of all major bills.⁵⁴

That righteousness also attached to Reagan's strategy of running against the government of the United States, complaining in his first inaugural address, that “[i]n the present [economic] crisis, government is not the solution to our problems, government *is* the problem.”⁵⁵ Although Republicans had long resisted government regulation, by the 1950s, they had generally accepted the New Deal.⁵⁶ Reagan's antigovernment stance inaugurated a new political trajectory whose end appears the dismemberment of the New Deal. This trajectory found Bill Clinton bending to Republican efforts to change welfare as we know it, George W. Bush attempting to privatize part of Social Security, and 2012 Republican presidential candidate Governor Rick Perry calling Social Security a Ponzi scheme, as conservatives in Congress argue that we can no longer afford our entitlement programs.⁵⁷

In their righteousness, many Republicans have adopted a no-compromise policy that has led to gridlock on Capitol Hill, reflected most dramatically

in the political stalemate in the summer of 2011 when the nation almost defaulted on its debt because a cadre of freshmen Tea Party Republicans refused to compromise on a debt-ceiling increase. This no-compromise approach was championed by Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay in his farewell speech to the House. DeLay resigned from Congress in 2006 after he was indicted (and later convicted) of money laundering related to his efforts to funnel illegal political contributions to Republican congressional candidates in Texas.⁵⁸ The defiant DeLay, nicknamed “The Hammer” for enforcing party discipline,⁵⁹ warned his colleagues against reaching across the aisle, urging that “partisanship, Mr. Speaker, properly understood, is not a symptom of democracy’s weakness but of its health and its strength, especially from the perspective of a political conservative.” He insisted:

It is not the principled partisan, however obnoxious he may seem to his opponents, who degrades our public debate, but the preening, self-styled statesman who elevates compromise to a first principle. For the true statesman, Mr. Speaker, we are not defined by what they compromise, but [by] what they don’t.⁶⁰

DeLay’s anti-statesman legacy reflects and has shaped the current political environment.

Ironically, although the Republicans are certainly more righteous about their positions than Democrats, their oppositional positions typically offer only measures and not an ultimate vision of good government. That is why Republican candidates running for the 2012 nomination were for less government regulation, lower taxes, a simpler tax system, a stronger military, and the like.⁶¹ Just like George W. Bush, leading Republicans will recommend tax cuts to spur an economy in recession, to maintain momentum when an economy is out of recession, or to give money back to taxpayers when times are good.⁶² They offer an all-purpose solution that does not regard conditions and has no clear end-state. They offer *direction* (less, lower, stronger) not a *destination*. They do not describe a government with the *appropriate amount* of taxation, regulation, defense, environmental protection, and so forth.

Democrats have found themselves defending the status quo, though tax cuts and unfunded wars during the Bush administration have combined with the current economic downturn to make that defense harder in light of fiscal problems. Ironically, the near doubling of the national debt during George W. Bush’s tenure (when antigovernment Republicans managed to grow government spending to unprecedented levels) has created conditions whereby the question has shifted from “Should America have a safety net?” to “Can we afford it?” Although Democrats have a clear vision of what the country should look like (a fair distribution of wealth, a clean environment, a safe workplace,