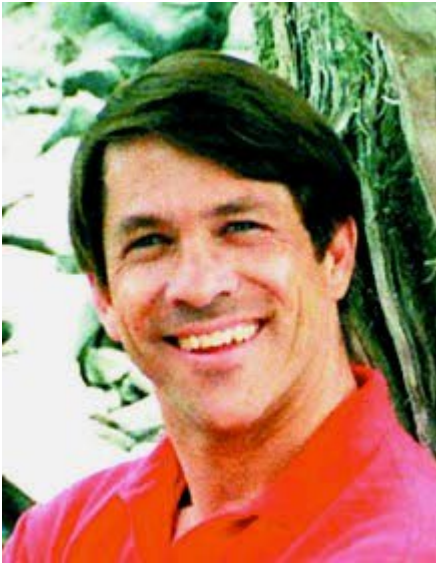


HIS VIEW: Purity vs. pragmatism in the GOP

By William Brock

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Conservatives of all stripes and flavors gathered in Washington, D.C., last week to determine what truths should be self-evident to politicians who call themselves conservatives.

It's not an easy question to answer these days. There was plenty of agreement at last week's conference as to what conservatives aren't - ranging from the anti-Christ himself, Barack Hussein Obama, to that most-craven of political animals, the Republican in Name Only.

Still, the question of what a true conservative is remains unresolved. In this respect, last week's Conservative Policy Action Conference was just as inconclusive as the recent get-together of the Republican National Committee.

The RNC gathering, held in January in Hawaii, had real promise for solving the conservative identity crisis.

One delegate proposed a 10-point litmus test to separate the conservative wheat from liberal riffraff. The questions were pretty predictable, including the holy trinity of guns,

gays and government. (The correct answers, for those of you scoring at home, are "yes," "no," and "no.")

Any GOP candidate who incorrectly interpreted more than two of the 10 fatwas would have been denied funding by the RNC.

Voila! A loyalty test directly tied to campaign cash. It was a brilliant idea, masterfully framed, but it had a fatal flaw. Any candidate who passed the test would be perceived, and rightly so, as an ideological zombie marching in formation with the Far-out Right.

So the muscular litmus test was withdrawn. Desperate for some kind of guidance, the RNC adopted an anemic proposal to "carefully screen the record and statements" of prospective Republican candidates.

That probably won't be good enough for leaders of the Tea Party, who are demanding irreducibly conservative candidates from the GOP. In a story on last week's conservative conference, The New York Times reported, "Tea Party leaders made clear that Republicans could no longer count on the automatic backing of conservatives."

Here's the crux of the matter: The innate urge of conservatives to exclude everyone with whom they disagree must be balanced against the need to collect enough votes to actually win elections. In the winner-take-all world of politics, there's no point in making a principled stand unless a majority of voters will share it with you.

So it's a question of ideological purity versus political pragmatism. It has become an intractable problem with no easy answers.

Take, for example, the recent election of Sen. Scott Brown, R-Mass. On the one hand, Brown is the new Moses for Senate Republicans because he will lead them out of the filibuster-proof wilderness. On the other hand, he probably would have failed the eight-out-of-10 litmus test.

Will Brown faithfully obey the conservative agenda, even though, pssst, he is soft on abortion? Only time will tell, which is maddening for conservatives who want candidates to declare their fealty in advance.

In the eternal tug-of-war between purity and pragmatism, purity is emerging as the preferred quality in candidates for high office.

That's due, in part, to the Grand Ayatollah of conservative ideology, Rush Limbaugh. When he isn't gobbling prescription painkillers, Limbaugh calibrates the moral compass of conservative candidates for national office. Anyone who doesn't measure up risks the wrath of Rush.

And then there are guys like Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., who has established a committee to bankroll primary challengers to GOP incumbents deemed insufficiently conservative.

Sic 'em boys! Growl! Bite! Fight!

So who will conservatives support if RINOs are lurking on the ballot? For Tea Party members, with their new-found interest in the federal deficit, the answer should be tax-and-spend liberals- who at least have the decency to levy taxes to cover the costs of their spending.

That's more than can be said for the last crop of Republicans who wielded power in the White House and both houses of Congress. They transformed a budget surplus into the largest deficit in the history of civilization.

Here's hoping that true blue conservatives won't get fooled again.

William Brock lives in Pullman.