

# 'The Stupid Party'

By IRVING KRISTOL

John Stuart Mill once remarked, from the vantage point of his own liberalism, that a conservative party always tends to be "the stupid party." But such a judgment need not be invidious or censorious. Conservative "stupidity," properly understood, is intimately connected with sentiments that are at the root of conservative virtues—e.g., a dogged loyalty to a traditional way of life, an instinctive aversion to innovation based on mere theoretical speculation, a sense of having a fiduciary relation to the whole nation, past, present and future.

There is always a kind of immunity to fashionable political ideas which is associated with conservatism, and a country that does not have a goodly portion of it is incapable of stable and orderly government. No political or social system can endure without engendering, in a perfectly organic way, this kind of conservative "stupidity." It is the antibody of the body politic.

But there will always come periods in the life of a nation when "stupidity" is not enough. At such times, fundamental questions of political philosophy emerge into the public forum and demand consideration. The life of politics then becomes enmeshed with the life of the mind, for better or worse. Venerable clichés, long regarded as self-evident truths, lose their moral standing as well as all power to persuade. Intellectuals, who are marginal to a healthy society, suddenly become important political spokesmen. Everything becomes controversial, and political argument between partisan theorists replaces customary political debate between politicians. Obviously, when this happens, "the stupid party"—which is always the less articulate party—finds itself at an immense disadvantage. And that, it seems to me, is the situation of the Republican Party in the United States today.

Indeed, this has been the situation of the Republican Party for more than half a century now, which helps explain why it is today such a minority party. True, the Republican Party has won its share of elections during this period, but these successes masked an ever-increasing weakness. In almost every case, a Republican victory has been the consequence of a Democratic default—of Democratic mismanagement, of Democratic corruption, of Democratic factionalism. Through it all, the Democratic Party has more surely secured its position as the majority party and the "natural" governing party. Each Republican administration is marked at birth as an interregnum—which is what it invariably grows up to be.

## A 20th Century Transformation

This is not a purely American affair, as developments in Britain testify. It has to do with the transformation of democratic politics in the 20th Century. This politics has become, at one and the same time, a more naked expression of group interests and a more ideological expression of political ideals. This may seem paradoxical, but it is not. It is in the very nature of ideological politics to anchor itself in specific interests, to draw sustenance from these interests, to mobilize these interests into a party, and in the end to "use" them for its creative purposes.

The politics of "conservative stupidity," however, is uncomfortable with blunt appeals to interest groups, which it feels to be "divisive." True, when it is out of power the Republican Party can benefit, in a general way, from the dissatisfaction various interests may have with an incumbent administration. But it rarely feels the need to link itself firmly to any of them, to establish itself as their "natural" representative. And when in office, it rarely pays much attention to these interests, prefer-

ring to imagine itself as a "national" party whose responsibility it is to be "fair" to all citizens.

Similarly, the Republican Party is made uneasy by too close an association with political ideas. In a better world, this would be a desirable, even admirable, trait. But in such a world, the conservative party would indeed be the "natural" governing party—losing an occasional election, to be sure, but then patiently waiting for the "common sense" of the citizenry to reassert itself. That is not the kind of world we live in, and a conservative party which

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tranquilly watches itself become the party of a minority of registered voters has carried "conservative stupidity" beyond the limits of political reason. Today, a conservative party has to "stand for" a perceived vision of a decent society; it has to be able to articulate the elements and rationale of this vision; and, when it has been in office, one should be able to say what it "stood for," win or lose. Republican administrations since World War II have been sadly lacking in this quality.

It really is ironic that the Democratic Party should have been able to persuade an apparent majority of the American people that it represents the "public interest" whereas the Republican Party is the party of "vested interests." It has been successful in this strategy precisely because it can incorporate its interest-group appeals into a larger ideological perspective. But one has only to compare the Democratic and Republican platforms to see which party is more seriously engaged in interest-group politics. And one has only to observe the behavior of Republicans in office to see how negligent they are of their constituencies, actual or possible.

Take the case of old people, for instance. Old people tend naturally to be conservative. They have lived long enough to be skeptical of politicians' easy promises about "creating a better world" today or tomorrow. And they have experienced enough fiscal adversity in the course of their own lives to appreciate the importance of fiscal integrity—they "know the value of a dollar," as one says. They ought, therefore, to be voting overwhelmingly for Republican candidates. But they do not, and the reason is simple: Republican administrations never show any particular concern for old people. Ever since its idiotic hostility to the original Social Security legislation, the Republican Party in office has never, on its own initiative, gone out of its way to do anything striking for the benefit of the elderly. On the contrary: it always ends up in the position of trying to pare existing benefits for these people.

When one inquires in Washington why this is the case, the answer is always in terms of "fiscal integrity." Programs for the elderly are very expensive; the budget is out of balance; economies must be made. But this is to substitute a narrow accounting perspective on reality for a truly political one—i.e., a comprehensive one. To begin with, the monies saved by a Republican administration will promptly be spent by a Democratic Congress or a subsequent Democratic administration, to whom will

accrue all the political credit. But more important, one cannot achieve fiscal integrity in government until one has a strong constituency in favor of it—and old people must be part of any such constituency. Spending money on old people may be bad for the budget in the short run, but it is a step toward eventual fiscal sobriety. If our senior citizens are not given any stake in the success of a conservative party, but on the contrary are constantly being alarmed and menaced by this party, where shall a conservative politics sink its roots?

## The 'Real' Business Community

Or take the case of "the business community," with which the Republican Party is supposed to have an intimate association. In fact, that intimacy is mainly with the executives of a few hundred large corporations, not with the several million small businesses, which Republican administrations tend to ignore. Such intimacy, in turn, is largely the result of substituting a narrow economic perspective on reality for a comprehensive political one. Our large corporations are crucial economic institutions, and their condition is of great significance for the kind of macroeconomic thinking that goes on in the Council of Economic Advisers, the Treasury, and the Office of Management and Budget. But they have, if anything, a negative value as a political constituency. They suggest a combination of privilege and power which a democracy will always be suspicious of; and they can offer precious few votes. Meanwhile, the real business community (real in political terms), made up of small business proprietors, benefits hardly at all from a conservative administration and is given little stake in conservative successes. Just contrast the consideration with which the Democrats treat trade unions to the petty, grudging concessions which the Republicans make to small business, and the point is only too obvious.

Much the same point can be made about other elements that might add up to a conservative constituency—farmers, homeowners (actual or prospective), and others. There is a possible conservative majority out there—unless a nation is in the process of disintegration, there is always a possible conservative majority out there—but it has to be welded together out of disparate parts; it has to be created, not just assumed. And it can only be created through the unifying power of political ideas.

There are many conservative thinkers in this country now trying to provide such ideas. I happen to have grave reservations about many of those ideas. Too often they are engaged in futile protest against the principles of the welfare state, instead of trying to construct a conservative welfare state. But such disagreement is less important than the fact that all such ideas float around the periphery of the Republican Party. No one seems to take them seriously.

I repeat: The world would doubtless be a nicer and healthier place if large ideas were kept at a distant remove from political power. The close conjunction is a dangerous one. But the world is what it is. It is a world of media, a world where habit and custom are weak before the forces of communication. It is, therefore, a world where ideas and their articulation are indispensable to effective conservative government, because it is only such ideas that can provide definition and coherence to the conservative constituency. "Political stupidity," alas, will no longer suffice.

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