

Big government Republicans must return to Reagan roots

Every once in a while, somebody writes a book that makes you want to tie complete strangers to a chair and hold the pages in front of them until the writing burns into their eye sockets. "The Elephant in the Room" is such a book. Written by journalist Ryan Sager and just released, it's required reading for anyone interested in the future of American politics.

Sager's book is subtitled, "Evangelicals, libertarians, and the battle to control the Republican party." Living in El Paso County, where the dominance of the Republican party by Christian conservatives is so depressingly obvious, it's easy to think the battle is lost. But it isn't. And it is worth fighting.

The book argues that libertarian voters (economically conservative but socially liberal) will decide the majority party within the next 10 years. And not just any libertarian voters, but libertarian voters in Midwestern states, such as Colorado. The "Elephant" Republicans don't want to talk about "big government conservatism." That conservative thinkers could accept such an idea as anything other than a pachyderm-sized oxymoron is testimony to the movement's intellectual bankruptcy.

Too many Republicans are hopelessly captivated with the idea that big government can be used to promote conservative ends. This is a surrender to the idea that government growth is inevitable, a repudiation of Barry Goldwater conservatism and a slap in Ronald Reagan's face.

For years Republicans have controlled Washington and the spending has increased beyond anything the supposedly demonic Clinton ever asked for. A Republican administration has given us the first new entitlement program in a generation (the Medicare drug benefit). A Republican administration has given us a federalized education initiative whose only accomplishment is to grow the Department of Education.

Which is the party of limited government and spending restraint? It is not the GOP. Instead, the party has adopted a new philosophy: "Anything goes, as long as we stay."

The question is, what will Republicans do about it? Sager's book makes the decision clear: Move away from Bush, and back toward Reagan. Rediscover your limited government vision. Listen to the libertarian



OPINION

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voices within your party. Otherwise, as the voting demographic moves toward the Midwest, the Democrats will steal us away.

Why is the Midwest so important? Because in the next 10 years, that's where the electoral votes will be. Americans are moving away from densely populated coasts and into the Midwestern states, heading as always toward economic opportunity and freedom. If the Democrats play their cards right, they could lure fiscally conservative but socially tolerant voters away from their Republican roots. That in turn

could give them the White House.

Consider the case of my good friend Mikey Weinstein. Mr. Weinstein was a prominent attorney in the Reagan administration and a committed Republican. Fed up with the increasing influence of the Religious Right in the military, and his party's refusal to act, he jumped ship. Now the founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation and well connected politically, he is actively supporting Democratic candidates, including his U.S. Air Force Academy classmate Jay Fawcett. And where is Mr. Weinstein from? New Mexico, a Midwestern state.

Christian conservatives who vote Republican should ask themselves if big government conservatism has been worth it. Instead of vouchers for private schools, your party wants intelligent design in public ones. Instead of lower taxes to promote charity, your party wants more taxes for faith-based charities.

Your party elected Reagan, who trusted Americans to run their own lives. Now it has elected Rick Santorum, a senator who wants to run your life. Read his book "It Takes a Family," then re-read Barry Goldwater's "The Conscience of a Conservative." Then weep for what your party has become.

Sager is a loyal Republican, so his message is one of hope. It's not too late, but it's close. If the party can't turn its back on the Bush years and return to its limited government roots, President Hillary Clinton will be in charge of No Child Left Behind and a \$1.2 trillion expansion of Medicare. Republicans will have only themselves to blame.

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