

Bush's triumph conceals the great conservative crack-up

A comment by Andrew Sullivan in the London Times March 20, 2005

How conservatives in the USA have met their enemy.. .And it is themselves...

(I have not changed the British spellings...)

It should be the best of times for American conservatism. Republican majorities in the House and Senate, a re-elected Republican president, an increasing number of Republican governors and a rightwards tilt in the judiciary. While the British Tories and German Christian Democrats flounder, America's right seems to flourish.

Well, that's the cover story. Beneath the surface, however, American conservatism is in increasing trouble. The Republican coalition, always fragile, now depends as much on the haplessness of the Democrats as on its own internal logic. On foreign and domestic policy alike the American right is splintering. With no obvious successor to George W Bush that splintering will deepen.

Take foreign policy. At the moment Bush is riding high as his democratisation push seems to have made some modest progress in the Middle East. But the Iraq war was deeply controversial among conservatives before the war and it has become more so since. Old school conservatives — or “realists”, as they call themselves — had no time for nation building or for wars of liberation among cultures they viewed as irredeemably undemocratic.

Neoconservatives — many of them former Democrats and liberals — saw spreading liberty as integral to a successful foreign policy. The Iraq war brought the two wings together on the threat from Saddam's weapons of mass destruction.

When the WMDs failed to appear, the insurgency grew, and the commitment of 140,000 troops to secure freedom among Arabs seemed to stretch endlessly ahead, restlessness on the right revived. It was suppressed for political reasons before polling day but Bush's re-election and his lack of any obvious successor have allowed the divisions to blossom.

If you look at the magazine *The American Conservative*, for example, you will find Patrick Buchanan's Stone Age conservative isolationism almost indistinguishable from the hard left's in its loathing of Middle East policy.

Last week a more mainstream conservative journal, *The National Interest*, saw a slew of editors quit because it published a tough realist article criticising the Iraq invasion. The neocons left to form a rival journal, *The American Interest*. Francis Fukuyama of “end of history” fame, was one of them.

Back home the differences over fiscal policy are also profound. President Bush has added \$1 trillion (£520 billion) to the national debt in only four years and is proposing to add at least another \$2 trillion with his social security reform. With his Medicare prescription drug benefit, about whose massive expense he deceived Congress, he has enacted the biggest new entitlement since Lyndon Johnson. Bush has increased spending on medical care for the poor by 46%. He has doubled education spending in four years; federal housing spending has gone up 86%.

Compared with Bill Clinton, he's an extreme, big government liberal. In fact the only real difference between the Democrats and Republicans at this point is that the Democrats believe in big, solvent government and the Republicans believe in an even bigger, insolvent government. Conservatives are complaining. Two powerful think tanks, the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation, have published critiques of Bush's fiscal policies. Heritage called for

an outright repeal of the new healthcare entitlement.

Bush's social security reform plan appears all but dead in the Senate, because he is now trying to flatline some minor but sensitive domestic spending, veto any attempt to rein in the far more expensive entitlement explosion while keeping his tax cuts. Moderates and fiscal conservatives are finally saying no.

Unless the Republicans are going to add even more trillions to the national debt, something has to give. Tax rises are off the table. And the divisions are so deep among Republicans that they may not be able to pass a budget this year at all.

On social policy the rifts are not as deep, largely because the religious right now all but owns the Republican party. Gone are the days when Ronald Reagan said: "The basis of conservatism is a desire for less government interference or less centralised authority or more individual freedom and this is a pretty general description also of what libertarianism is."

The Republicans have plans to intervene directly in many people's lives — spending billions on sexual abstinence education, marriage counselling, anti-drug propaganda, a war on steroids, mentoring programmes for former prisoners, and on and on. Got a problem? Bush's big government is here to help.

Where Republicans once believed that states should have priority over the federal government, Bush has pushed in the opposite direction. Last week the religious right wanted a federal ruling to prevent a Florida woman in a persistent vegetative state from having her life-support cut off. This is a job for the federal government?

They have overruled state laws on medical cannabis and tried to prevent states from making their own policies on gay civil marriage. In the 1980s Republicans wanted to abolish the federal Department of Education, believing local control was best. Bush has all but ended local control, introduced national standards and added a huge increase in federal spending. No wonder Ted Kennedy, the arch liberal Democratic senator, voted for the bill.

How these contradictions can be resolved is hard to see. Is conservatism now paternalist, spending huge amounts of federal money to guide people into more moral lives? Or is it about restraining government so people can make up their own minds how to live?

Do deficits matter? Is the point of foreign policy the pursuit of national interest or the spread of human freedom? Or are they inextricable? Are tax cuts defensible if accompanied by big spending rises? Is American libertarianism dead? Bush's four years have put all these questions on the table.

In my view if a Democratic president had Bush's record, the Republican party would have come close to impeaching him for his adventures in big government, fiscal insanity and foreign policy liberalism. But it swallowed its principles and covered up its differences to keep him (and itself) in power. The consequences are slowly becoming clear.

The race to succeed Bush will become, in part, a battle for the future of American conservatism. I have no idea how it will turn out. But I do have one clear prediction: the Republican internal battle in the next four years is going to be bloody. After the mid-term elections in 2006 it will be brutal.