

The GOP Knows Power

Special Report: Today's Republican Party doesn't believe in democracy, at least not when an election is decided by the votes of blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and young urban whites comfortable with multiculturalism. Then, the outcome is deemed illegitimate and deserves obstruction, as Robert Parry explains.

By Robert Parry

Many Washington pundits are scratching their heads over Republican refusal to budge hardly at all in the face of electoral reversals in 2012 whether on the budget, judicial appointments or other initiatives from reelected President Barack Obama. But that confusion misses a fundamental fact about the modern GOP: it is contemptuous of the public will and the democratic process.

Indeed, looking back over the last half century as today's Republican Party was stitched together, the common thread has been a readiness to manipulate elections through dirty tricks, deceptions or the disenfranchisement of voting blocs seen as likely to support the Democratic Party. These strategies weave through GOP actions involving Executive, Legislative or Judicial authority, at both the federal and state levels.

You can see this Republican approach today in voter suppression schemes, aggressive gerrymandering of House districts, expansive use of Senate filibusters, and nasty media outlets that rely on disinformation and propaganda, rather than facts and reason.

Though these tactics didn't stop Obama's reelection and failed to recapture the Senate for the GOP, the tricks did help Republicans keep control of the House despite losing that national popular vote by more than one million ballots. Now, the combination of the undemocratic outcome in the House and the unprecedented use of filibusters in the Senate looks certain to block Obama's agenda and the expressed will of the American people for the next two years at least.

Meanwhile, the Republican-controlled Supreme Court may decide to let the very wealthy buy up even more of the U.S. political process and permit GOP-controlled states to further tilt the electoral playing field against blacks, Hispanics and Asian-Americans by gutting the Voting Rights Act.

All these anti-democratic measures seem to elicit no sense of shame among Republicans, whose concept of freedom and liberty seems to envision "freedom" for whites to rule in perpetuity and "liberty" for the wealthy to prosper at the

expense of nearly everyone else.

Mitt Romney's behind-the-scenes contempt for "the 47 percent" who get government assistance and Paul Ryan's infatuation with Ayn Rand's theories about the "makers and takers" represent the real views of the Republican Party, even as it panders rhetorically to lower-income "cultural conservatives" who often depend on government help for everything from aid to care for disabled kids to scooters for zipping around shopping malls.

To maintain effective control of the country even without majority support Republican leaders simply have to suck in a sizeable percentage of average white voters with appeals to their fears about the "others" taking away their right to celebrate Christmas, their "Second Amendment right" to carry whatever firearm they want wherever they want, their right to be protected against "the gay agenda," their right to believe that the science of global warming is a hoax, etc.

Nixon's Baby

This alliance between the well-to-do Establishment and the easily manipulated Know-Nothings can be traced back to Richard Nixon and the hardboiled "realists" who surrounded him in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the likes of National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and media consultant Roger Ailes.

Kissinger had no compunction about manipulating or destroying democratic systems abroad, if they were viewed as somehow threatening to American power, with Chile being a prime example. So, in the name of that same power, he didn't hesitate to help constrain populist impulses at home. Ailes and other propaganda experts understood how to build a media machine to push all the right buttons of the average white guy.

The end result of these tactics was the securing and maintenance of power for Republicans. From a purely Machiavellian viewpoint, one had to feel a measure of admiration for the sheer audacity and ruthlessness by which the modern Republican Party played this power game.

For instance, with their control of the levers of American power within reach in fall 1968, Nixon and Kissinger saw nothing wrong with undermining President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam peace talks, a move Johnson discovered and called "treason." However, LBJ chose not to expose what Nixon and his team had done.

Yet, having secured the 1968 election by sabotaging Johnson's peace talks and thus extending the war, Nixon grew alarmed at the intensity and radicalization of the U.S. anti-war and the black-power movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. So, Nixon authorized extraordinary steps to spy on and disrupt those

popular uprisings.

A savvy political thinker, Nixon also spotted an opportunity to exploit the white racist backlash toward black civil rights by appealing to those resentments in a “Southern strategy” aimed at whites who opposed African-American advances. Nixon’s playing of the race card brought the states of the Old Confederacy into the Republican fold.

Fear of Exposure

In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg’s leaking of the Pentagon Papers secret history of the Vietnam War from 1945 to 1967 and the decision of major U.S. newspapers to publish this classified record represented another shock to Nixon’s view of the proper order.

Plus, the public outrage over those official lies stirred Nixon’s fears that a missing White House file containing the FBI wiretaps of his own treachery in 1968 could threaten his political future if that file surfaced as a sequel to the Pentagon Papers, arguably even more infuriating and explosive.

We now know, based on declassified archival records, that a bitter President Johnson ordered his national security aide Walt Rostow to take the file when Johnson left the White House in January 1969. Subsequently, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover told Nixon about the file, but Kissinger and White House chief of staff H.R. “Bob” Haldeman couldn’t find it.

After the New York Times began publishing the Pentagon Papers in June 1971, Nixon ordered a resumption of the search, including the formation of a burglary team headed by ex-CIA officer E. Howard Hunt with the intent of breaking into the Brookings Institution where Nixon thought the missing file might be locked away in a safe.

Although it’s still not clear what happened to the Brookings burglary, Hunt’s team did conduct other operations, including a May 1972 break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate to rifle files and plant some bugs. Then, on June 17, 1972, during a second Watergate break-in, Hunt’s team got caught. [For more on this history, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Rethinking Watergate/Iran-Contra.”](#)]

The news media’s aggressive coverage of Watergate and the public’s fascination with the scandal, which forced Nixon’s resignation in 1974, revealed other shortcomings in the Republican strategy for getting and keeping power. In the wake of the Vietnam War, the American people and the press corps were no longer so easily conned.

That set the stage for the next act. Republicans and their wealthy patrons recognized the need to build a right-wing infrastructure of media, think tanks and pressure groups. Spurred on by a famous planning memo from corporate lawyer (and later Supreme Court Justice) Lewis Powell and the organizational skills of Nixon's former Treasury Secretary Bill Simon, this infrastructure began to take shape in the mid-to-late 1970s.

The Right's massive investment in media, think tanks and pressure groups also coincided with the dismantling of similar institutions created by the Left during the American civil rights era and the Vietnam anti-war movement. Not only did left-of-center media outlets like Ramparts and Dispatch News disappear but others, like The New Republic and alternative weeklies, were bought up by neocons and corporations.

Well-funded, right-wing think tanks, like Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute, were soon generating a steady flow of policy papers while right-wing "media watchdogs" targeted mainstream journalists who critiqued right-wing claims and thus got tagged as "liberal" or "anti-American."

The Reagan Arrival

In 1980, the Republicans again benefitted from a high-profile foreign policy failure by a Democratic president, this time Jimmy Carter's inability to gain the release of 52 American hostages in Iran, with Republicans once more maneuvering behind the scenes to disrupt the President's negotiations. [See Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative* for the latest evidence.]

Ronald Reagan rode the wave of national humiliation to a big victory and got an extra boost when the Iranians waited until his inauguration to let the hostages go. Inside the mainstream news media like The Associated Press where I was working senior executives celebrated what they perceived to be Reagan restoring American honor.

Once in office, Reagan's team also got to work expanding the right-wing infrastructure. Hard-line CIA Director William J. Casey transferred one of his senior disinformationists, Walter Raymond Jr., to the National Security Council to head up a special inter-agency propaganda initiative aimed at another potential threat to Republican dominance, a skeptical American public.

A key lesson from the Vietnam War was that widespread public opposition to an expeditionary conflict could make the effort untenable. So, the Reagan administration invested vast amounts of energy into what was called "perception management," controlling how the American people perceived foreign interventions in Central America and elsewhere.

From documents that are now declassified, it is clear that the main goal of Raymond's "perception management" was not to inform the American people about the real situation but to push their "hot buttons" and manipulate their fears and emotions. [For details, see Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

The right-wing infrastructure, buttressed by sophisticated government propaganda, proved strikingly effective, particularly since much of the mainstream news media was in a full-scale retreat by the 1980s.

So, despite the blemish of another scandal the Iran-Contra Affair the 12-year expanse of rule by Ronald Reagan and then George H.W. Bush firmly established the pattern of GOP dominance inside Official Washington. Presidents Reagan and Bush also filled the federal courts with Republican judges who could provide another layer of protection for any new abuses of power.

Bashing Walsh

Iran-Contra special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh himself a lifelong Republican encountered that reality as he tried to get to the bottom of the secret arms deals with Iran and the money flowing to Nicaragua's Contra rebels. He faced not only a relentless White House cover-up and a pounding from the powerful right-wing media but he was undercut by Republican judges on the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington.

In his memoir of the Iran-Contra investigation entitled *Firewall*, Walsh described the GOP's court majority as "a powerful band of Republican appointees [who] waited like the strategic reserves of an embattled army, a force cloaked in the black robes of those dedicated to defining and preserving the rule of law."

Because of his dogged persistence, Walsh also became the subject of ridicule from key columnists and editorial writers at The Washington Post and The New York Times and from television pundits like David Brinkley and Chris Matthews. Walsh was mocked as a modern-day Captain Ahab obsessed by the White Whale of Iran-Contra.

In a Washington Post magazine article, writer Marjorie Williams summed up the Establishment's indictment of Walsh. She wrote: "In the utilitarian political universe of Washington, consistency like Walsh's is distinctly suspect. It began to seem rigid of him to care so much. So un-Washington. Hence the gathering critique of his efforts as vindictive, extreme. Ideological. The truth is that when Walsh finally goes home, he will leave a perceived loser."

In 1992, I asked Spencer Oliver, who was then chief counsel to the House Foreign Affairs Committee and whose phone had been one of those bugged by the Watergate

burglars in 1972, what he thought about the long-term impact of the Watergate scandal.

Speaking as the Iran-Contra inquiry was failing and the Republican cover-up was succeeding, Oliver said, "What they learned from Watergate was not 'don't do it,' but 'cover it up more effectively.' They have learned that they have to frustrate congressional oversight and press scrutiny in a way that will avoid another major scandal.

"It's all politics to them the pursuit and maintenance of power. It is the ultimate example of the ends justify the means and the means are so abhorrent to democracy that they cannot let the people know."

Though Oliver's assessment was made more than two decades ago, it remains an important insight into Republican thinking ever since. Even during interludes of Democratic presidencies, the Republicans stay on the attack, doing whatever it takes to undermine the interlopers interfering with GOP dominance.

For eight years, President Bill Clinton was the target of endless Republican investigations, which ultimately led to an impeachment vote in the House for his extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky and a humiliating trial in the Senate where the Republicans lacked the super-majority to convict him.

Stealing the White House

Then, in Election 2000, Vice President Al Gore won the national popular vote and would have carried the key state of Florida if all ballots legal under Florida law had been counted. But five Republicans on the U.S. Supreme Court stopped the recount and then concocted an absurd legal argument to award the presidency to George W. Bush.

Not only did the right-wing media led by Fox News cheer on this undemocratic result but the mainstream media fell dutifully in line. When a later media recount of Florida's disputed ballots determined that Gore was the rightful winner, senior news executives at the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN and elsewhere hid their own findings so as not to undercut Bush's "legitimacy."

Despite his lack of a mandate, President Bush rode roughshod over the Democrats, enacting legislation that squandered Clinton's surplus by providing tax cuts mostly for the rich and then borrowing to wage war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Bush's gross mismanagement of the government and the economy left the nation in a financial disaster when Barack Obama was elected in November 2008.

With the economy in freefall and with two unresolved wars, Obama and other Democrats hoped that the severity of the nation's crisis would compel

congressional Republicans to cooperate on jobs bills, economic stimulus and other national needs.

However, the GOP never missed a beat, fighting everything that Obama proposed, while Fox and the right-wing media peddled racist conspiracy theories about his “Kenyan birth.” Armed right-wing protesters showed up at anti-Obama rallies and Tea Party extremists disrupted congressional “town hall” meetings.

When the angry Republicans won the House and swept a number of statehouses in 2010, they promptly got busy gerrymandering congressional districts to ensure future GOP victories and devaluing the votes of racial and ethnic minorities. Then, in 2012, came a host of schemes to discourage minorities from voting.

The Republican controlling the U.S. Supreme Court chipped in, too, by striking down federal laws limiting how much corporations and other big-money sources can pour into campaigns. GOP politicians, such as Karl Rove, followed up by organizing groups to funnel that money into an array of negative campaign ads against Democrats.

A primary goal was to defeat Obama in 2012 when it was assumed a Republican president would reclaim control of the U.S. government and finally implement the dream of dismantling Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. However, Obama and the Democrats proved surprisingly resilient, shocking the Republicans on election night by keeping the White House and Senate.

Still, with the gerrymandered congressional districts, the Republicans managed to retain a House majority despite losing the national popular vote by more than a million ballots. And, the election reversals did nothing to change the GOP’s DNA, which still carries the anti-democratic genes of Richard Nixon and his henchmen.

So, Obama’s current charm offensive like his outreach to Republican “moderates” in 2009 is likely to achieve little. That is because Republicans do not believe that elections have consequences, unless they win, of course.

Thus, this week’s retrograde House Republican budget should have come as no surprise, nor should the continued Senate filibustering of Obama’s judicial appointments, nor should resistance to his proposals for immigration reform and gun safety laws. For the modern Republican Party, power, not democracy, is what matters.

[For a limited time, you can purchase Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush family for only \$34. For details, [click here.](#)]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
