

A Breach of Contract

Contributed by Ryan Francis

With the midterm elections about a month away, I am reminded of the 1994 House and Senate elections. At the time of the '94 midterms, the Republican Party had gone 40 years without holding a majority in the House or Senate. The 103rd Congress, which served from 1993 to 1994, had a Democratic Party majority of 258-176 in the House of Representatives and a 57-43 majority in the Senate.

During the fall of 1994, the GOP introduced the "Contract with America". The contract, which borrowed heavily from the text of President Regan's 1985 State of the Union address, was written mostly by Texas Representative Dick Armey and publicized and promoted by Georgia Representative Newt Gingrich. Armey and Gingrich's contract promised floor votes on several pieces of legislation if the GOP were voted into the majority.

The promised legislation in the contract focused on economic issues and congressional reform. In November of 1994, the American electorate voted out of office 34 Democratic incumbents and when the dust had cleared the GOP held a 230-204 majority in the House and a 52-48 majority in the Senate.

This amazing power shift in Washington was fueled by a document that promised Americans responsibility in government and fiscal policy. Despite the success of the Contract with America, the Republican Party over the past 12 years has shifted their focus from responsible spending and a more honest and open legislative branch to religious right pandering and big government.

As stated before, the contract made little mention of moral or values issues. Of the ten different bills promised in the contract, only two have a connection to values—The Personal Responsibility Act and The Family Reinforcement Act.

The PRA was described in the contract as, "Discourage illegitimacy and teen pregnancy by prohibiting welfare to minor mothers and denying increased AFDC for additional children while on welfare, cut spending for welfare programs, and enact a tough two-years-and-out provision with work requirements to promote individual responsibility." This bill was basically welfare reform with a nod toward the problem of teenage pregnancy.

The contract describes the TFRA as, "Child support enforcement, tax incentives for adoption, strengthening rights of parents in their children's education, stronger child pornography laws, and an elderly dependent care tax credit to reinforce the central role of families in American society." The TFRA was the only completely values-focused bill in the contract. The GOP made no mention of abortion, gay marriage, media censorship or gun ownership anywhere in the contract.

Yet, morality and family values are now the focus of the Republican Party that controls both the legislative and executive branches of the federal government. The current Congress (109th) has introduced or passed the following bills: Theresa Marie Schiavo's law, Family Entertainment and Copyright Act, Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, We The People Act (states religious freedom, sexual orientation and gay marriage are not in the federal court's jurisdiction), Constitution Restoration Act (limits the federal judiciary's jurisdiction in cases involving religious liberty) and Workplace Religious Freedom Act. These issues certainly should be discussed and possibly addressed by making new laws, but are there not more pressing issues in the US?

The Republican controlled Congress has done a complete 180 in terms of fiscal policy and the size of government since the 104th Congress. No two issues were hit more repeatedly in the Contract with America than a responsible fiscal policy and a smaller federal government.

The contract states, "This year's election offers the chance, after four decades of one-party control, to bring to the House a new majority that will transform the way Congress works. That historic change would be the end of government that is too big, too intrusive, and too easy with the public's money."

Initially, the GOP made good on its promise. Spending was brought under control and the federal budget actually had a surplus after 2000. Then, President George W. Bush was elected president and federal spending increased dramatically.

Several reasons exist for this sudden increase in spending. President Bush, despite being a Republican in name, is in favor of a larger government while his predecessor President Clinton declared that "the era of big government is over"; in his 1996 State of the Union address.

Another reason for the increase in federal spending is the GOP-controlled Congress no longer had to worry about an opposition President getting credit for federal programs and policies which they passed. An example of this would be President Clinton's failed attempts to pass campaign finance reform and health care reform. Both of which were passed (in some capacity) during the Bush Administration.

However, these two reasons are not conclusive. Though spending did not skyrocket until George W. Bush became President, there was a significant rise in spending during President Clinton's second term in comparison to his first.

September 11th is often cited as a reason for the increased federal spending, but it is often used as a convenient excuse for apologists of the current Republican leadership. The post-9/11 increase in spending has not been only on the national defense or military. Non-defense spending has increased to levels not seen since late 70s and early 80s. The percentage growth of non-defense spending during the Bush Administration has reached levels not seen since the Ford Administration.

Finally, the main reason spending has increased so dramatically since 1995 is the same reason spending was high during the pre-President Regan years: the Republicans have grown comfortable in their seat of power. The only difference is Democrats are supposed to be pro-big government and the GOP is, as the Contact With America continually stated, pro-small government.

Tax cuts are one area in which the Republicans and their current leader President Bush remain close to their conservative roots. The Bush tax cuts have contributed to the current thriving economy, but combined with the increase in spending the tax cuts have also contributed to a ballooning national debt.

Daniel J. Mitchell, PhD of the Heritage Foundation writes, "Regrettably, the benefits of better tax policy have been undermined, especially in the long run, by excessive government spending." Economics is an inexact science in which many intelligent people disagree, but anyone can understand that the combination of lowering taxes and increasing spending results in debt. A debt which citizens of college age and younger will most likely have the responsibility of paying off through a much higher tax burden than the American workforce has today.

The GOP now focuses on energizing the religious right to win elections rather than responsible spending and honest government. A party that used to proclaim sensibility in fiscal policy has now sacrificed the long-term future of the US economy for the immediate satisfaction of the current robust economy.

Rather than working to reduce federal spending and the national debt, Congress continues to pander to the religious base of the GOP. In this year's midterms, polls are indicating the Republicans will at the very least lose a significant portion of their majority and possibly become the minority in both the House and Senate.

Moderates and small government conservatives have been alienated at a time when the GOP desperately needs their votes. The time is now for the Republican Party to remember how they became the majority in the first place.