

# The GOP Flop

Why Dole and Kemp Lost

by Samuel Francis



Anita Meeck-Wolfeck

As the Republican primaries drew to a finish last spring, the several pundits whom the Grand Old Party carries in its pockets began to sing the praises of the man who was emerging as the winner. Partisans of his rivals—Steve Forbes, Lamar Alexander, Phil Gramm, and others—started lining up to kiss hands and bend knees to the nominee, and by the time of the Republican National Convention in San Diego, there was hardly anyone who even remembered that there had been such things as primaries at all.

The cheerleading for Bob Dole reached a crescendo when he announced the selection of Jack Kemp as his running mate. In 1992, Mr. Kemp had left the convention as the front-runner for 1996, but various *contretemps* in the intervening four years had cast a pall over his chances. In company with William Bennett, Kemp had supported and campaigned for a California ballot measure for school choice, but their support accomplished little, and the measure failed. In 1994, both of them again campaigned against the same state's Proposition 187, ending welfare benefits for illegal immigrants, but again their help for the measure's foes accomplished nothing, and Proposition 187 passed by a substantial margin. By the beginning of 1995, Kemp's political prospects had dimmed considerably, and in addition to his blunders on the California issues, he had also taken other positions that alienated large numbers of conservative and Republican grassroots activists—his championing of NAFTA, for example, as well as his apparent indifference to such blistering social issues as abortion, special legal rights for homosexuals, and, by no means least, his vocal opposition to any effort to abolish or cut back affirmative action, including his opposition to California's Proposition 209. By early 1995,

his star had dimmed to the point that Kemp announced he would not be a candidate for the presidency in 1996, and among other reasons he cited the difficulty he had experienced in raising funds among conservative high-rollers who did not share his eccentric enthusiasms for Martin Luther King, renewing a civil rights agenda, and the economic interests of the urban underclass. His announcement that he would not run was widely greeted as the termination of his political career.

And yet, when Bob Dole called Kemp to his boyhood home in Russell, Kansas, to announce his enthronement as his running mate, the pundits went wild with joy. Despite the dwindling of Kemp's prospects among funding sources and grassroots activists, his cadres inside the Beltway had never lost faith in him, and it was from that cadre that most pundits took their cues. Kemp's whole political ideology of what he calls "progressive conservatism" consists of government by, for, and of the policy-wonks—enterprise zones, public housing experiments, supply-side arcana, and spreading democracy abroad. All these projects imply a scale and scope of national government far larger than what most non-Beltway conservatives have ever envisioned or envision today, and all of them promise a virtually bottomless cornucopia of jobs and power-playing inside the belly of the federal beast. Moreover, nothing Kemp offers threatens the hegemony of liberalism and its premises of a federal government dedicated to the proposition that all people should be made equal, which is why the announcement of his nomination elicited praise from such stalwarts of the Beltway left as David Broder and, from the *Washington Post* editorial page, the comment, "The fact is that Jack Kemp stands for some of the best impulses in the Republican Party."

Yet the exuberance with which the Dole-Kemp ticket was greeted lasted no longer than the summer, and as the ticket failed to blip on the radar screens of the public opinion polls,

*Samuel Francis is a nationally syndicated columnist and editor of a monthly newsletter, The Samuel Francis Letter.*

the same pundits who had applauded at the time of San Diego were increasingly muted by October. More than one Beltway savant of the right assured me at that time that Dole would certainly lose, but it wasn't important anyway. What was really important was to keep the House and Senate, increase the Republican majority in 1998, and really go for the presidential jugular in 2000. By November, the court conservatives had forgotten all about their enthusiasm for Dole and Kemp in the summer, though even after the defeat of the ticket the Kemp diehards were still plotting how their hero could ascend to the White House the next time.

As far as I can tell, virtually no one—pundit, policy-wonk, activist, or fat cat—has asked himself how this could happen. How could it happen that a political party that won a majority of House and Senate seats two years earlier, challenging a President whose popularity ratings were at one point lower than those of Harry Truman at his nadir, whose administration and personal household were enveloped in financial and sexual scandals, whose close friends and associates had been forced to resign, charged with felony offenses, subjected to grand jury interrogation, and led away in chains to prison—how could the political party lose the presidential election? Dole's personality and age were the most convenient explanations, and they seem to have provided the excuse the Beltway right needs to avoid any serious reexamination of their ideology, policies, or campaign strategies, but the truth is that personality and age simply don't cut it. Mr. Dole's personality and age were the same in the fall of 1996 as they had been in the spring, when the Republicans chose him as their nominee, and if personality and age were going to undermine the Dole campaign, the party and its barons should have thought of them before they greeted his candidacy so enthusiastically in the summer.

The truth is that in picking Bob Dole and Jack Kemp, the Republican Party deserted what has been its real mainstream since the early 1970's, when Richard Nixon showed the Republicans how to win national elections. It is not that Nixon—let alone Gerald Ford, George Bush, or even Ronald Reagan—remained loyal to the promises of their campaign strategies, but that all of them followed much the same strategy and won the White House with it. In a word, they won the White House because they sought to mobilize the Middle American vote; Bob Dole and Jack Kemp lost the White House in 1996 (and George Bush lost in 1992) because they ignored the Middle American vote or failed to grasp how to appeal to it. The evidence for this lies in the exit polls of voters from every national election from 1972 to last year.

The category of "Middle American" is not simply a political catchword but a reasonably rigorous political and sociological category, at least as rigorous as any such category ever is. Middle Americans consist of middle-income, largely white, working- and middle-class voters. They tend to be distributed in suburbs and rural areas, to be churchgoers, and in the Northeast to be of European ethnic and Roman Catholic background. Various described by Nixon as the "Silent Majority" or the "New American Majority," they also conform to what Ben Wattenberg and Richard Scammon called in 1970 the "Real Majority." What was then known as the "social issue"—mainly crime and the cultural radicalism of "permissiveness" manifested in films and television, the media and education—and is now known as the "culture war" are among their principal concerns as voters. So are affirmative action, which directly threat-

ens their opportunities for upward economic and social mobility; immigration, which also jeopardizes their jobs as well as the safety and integrity of their communities; and, in particular, the economic erosion of their middle-class status and living standards since the 1970's, an erosion directly attributable to the globalization of the American economy and the prevalence of free trade policies. Middle American voters were the backbone of the Wallace movement and of the early New Right, before Beltway direct-mail czars discovered how to manipulate the more radically conservative Middle American impulses. But the Middle American voter is not a conservative in the sense of Barry Goldwater, and while Goldwater's quaint evocation of a classical liberal rugged individualism in 1964 only alienated and threatened working-class Middle Americans in Northeastern suburbs and ethnic neighborhoods, Wallace's commitment to preserve Middle American economic security through what are today sneeringly called "middle-class entitlements" (Social Security, Medicare, unemployment, health, and old-age benefits) won him their support. For Middle Americans, economic security issues trump cultural and social issues; as long as candidates do not threaten the former and champion the latter, they can win Middle American allegiances, but if a candidate is perceived as threatening economic security, no amount of thunder about crime, smut, abortion, and queers will save him.

In the case of both Bob Dole and Jack Kemp, there was never much of a chance that they would or could win Middle Americans. Dole's acceptance speech at the convention tried to play with what he took to be Middle American themes, but he failed to muster the anger and the sense of injustice that animates those whose votes are actually driven by them. Throughout the campaign, Dole failed to express or develop any vision of an America that would be returned to Middle American hegemony. His proposals for tax cuts, by which taxes would be reduced by 15 percent but middle-class entitlements would remain intact and defense spending be vastly increased, were simply never believable except to the Beltway policy-wonks who convinced only themselves. His World War II record and his promises of a renewed war on drugs fell flat and exposed the hollowness of his grasp of what really matters to Middle Americans caught in a war over their own children, their jobs, their communities, and their futures. It is true that toward the end of the campaign both candidates concentrated on California and beat the drum on illegal (but not legal) immigration and affirmative action, with Kemp actually reversing his earlier opposition to Proposition 209 and now vowing his opposition to affirmative action. It was simply too little too late, and no one motivated by these issues could take what the candidates said seriously. Nor did either of them understand how to use the social and cultural issues; they were visibly embarrassed by them and avoided them as much as possible.

Indeed, Kemp, at last unleashed before a national spotlight, soon began making declarations that sounded as though they had been scripted by the sworn enemies of Middle America; and given the influence of Empower America, the neoconservative Beltway think tank where Kemp, Steve Forbes, and William Bennett stashed themselves between 1992 and 1996, on the Dole-Kemp campaign, they probably were. Campaigning in East Los Angeles and Harlem, Kemp hailed not only his favorite heroes, Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln, but also Nelson Mandela, and threw in a good word for Louis Farrakhan as well. As for the "Southern strategy" by which Republican presidential candidates from Nixon to Reagan

had sought to pull a once solidly Democratic South into the Republican column, Kemp explicitly repudiated it. "All too often in the past," he told the *Boston Globe* in September, "we've had that Southern strategy that said we want to go after the white vote, and had better not try to get black votes because it might lose white votes. That is shameful. Shameful." Kemp did not want merely to attract more blacks to the party but to forge them into the base of the party. Speaking of the Northern black urban voting bloc, he said, "It's not the Republican base, but it should be."

No one could quarrel with Kemp's desire to bring more blacks into the party, but he never seems to grasp that, to accomplish this goal, the party would have to abandon a number of issues and policies that have enabled it to win both Southern whites and Northern working-class voters over the last two decades. In saying explicitly that the Southern strategy was "shameful," a moral as well as a political error, Kemp (and his party) were openly turning against the very voting groups that have put Republicans in office from the days of Nixon to those of Newt Gingrich.

As for Dole, he immediately renounced his own party's plank on immigration and seldom if ever referred to abortion again after the primaries. Given the salience of those issues to rank-and-file Middle American Republican voters—of immigration in California and several border states of the West, and of abortion to the "religious right" that today makes up about a third of Republican voting strength—it was clear that the nominee either misunderstood the very voters to whom he was appealing or was deliberately seeking to move the party in a radically different direction. On affirmative action, while Dole as a senator had sponsored a bill to abolish it at the federal level, he distanced himself from the bill in his latter days as Majority Leader and failed to make it an issue except in the last desperate weeks of the presidential campaign in California.

As noted, the November exit polls show that the Dole-Kemp ticket lost key national constituencies that Republicans—even losers like Gerald Ford—had carried from 1972 through 1988. Indeed, the latter year, when George Bush's campaign presented itself as the natural heir to Ronald Reagan and Lee Atwater brought immortality to Willie Horton, was the last in which the Middle Americans rallied to the Republican banner. By 1992, with Atwater dead and the Bush campaign run by professional Republicans and Beltway courtiers, Middle Americans were deserting, first to Pat Buchanan in the early primaries, then to Ross Perot in the general election. The same trend was apparent in 1996, though Perot proved to be a spent force, and President Clinton in both campaigns was careful to present himself as the champion of the beleaguered middle class and an enemy of crime. Clinton too failed to mobilize the passions that animate the Middle American soul, but the image he and his spinners designed at least avoided doing or saying much to alienate such souls and drive them to Dole or Perot. It is all very well to say that Perot in both 1992 and 1996 took votes from Bush and Dole and that the Texan's campaign was a major reason for their defeat, but the point is that neither Perot nor any other third party candidate could have harmed them had they retained the confidence of the Middle American constituencies.

The exit polls of 1996 can be compared to what, for the purposes of this article, I will call the "NFR average," the average vote won by Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan in the presidential elections of 1972, 1976, and 1980

and 1984, in certain poll categories that are sociologically associated with Middle Americans—racial, ideological, regional, religious, income, and size of place. The same comparison can also be constructed for 1988, the last year of Middle American GOP loyalty, and 1996. What these comparisons show is that the Bush, Dole, and Kemp camps are steadily losing the base vote of the Republican Party and are leading the party toward eventual political suicide at the national level. (The exit poll statistics can be found in the *New York Times* of November 10, 1996.)

Thus, while Jack Kemp may regard Republican appeals to white voters as "shameful," white voters supported Nixon, Ford, and Reagan (the NFR average) from 1972 through 1984 as well as George Bush in 1988 by more than 59 percent. But whites supported the Bush of 1992 and the Dole of 1996 by only 40 and 46 percent respectively. Whites in the South supported Nixon, Ford, and Reagan by a whopping 65 percent and Bush in 1988 by an even larger 67 percent, but in 1996 white Southern support for Dole had dropped to 56 percent, up from Bush's even worse showing of 49 percent in 1992. (Nor was the presence of a white Southerner on the Democratic ticket an adequate explanation; Clinton in 1992 and 1996 won only 34 and 36 percent of the white Southerner vote, only marginally better than Dukakis's 32 percent in 1988.) Nationally, white men went for Nixon, Ford, and Reagan by more than 60 percent and Bush in 1988 by 63 percent, but only a pitiful 40 percent went for Bush in 1992 and 49 percent for Dole in 1996.

Ideologically, those voters who identify themselves as "conservatives" were also zealous for Republican presidential candidates from the 1970's through the 1980's. The NFR average from 1972 through 1984 was more than 74 percent. But Bush in 1992 received only 64 percent of the "conservative" vote, the lowest in recent history, while Dole was able to pull it up to 71 percent. Since virtually no self-described conservative was going to vote for Clinton and only a handful of eccentrics for Perot, and since Jack Kemp continued to enjoy a favorable press in most conservative media, Dole was able to keep pace with his Republican predecessors, but not at quite the same level.

Regionally, both Bush in 1992 and Dole last year lost significant support in key Republican strongholds, the South and the West (Dole actually lost Arizona, which had not gone Democratic in a presidential election since 1948, as well as California, even though the state is the birthplace of Jack Kemp). From 1972 through 1984, the NFR average for the South and the West was 57 percent and 55 percent respectively, and for Bush in 1988 it was 58 and 52 percent. In 1992 Bush won 43 percent of the Southern vote and only 24 percent of the Western, while in 1996 Dole performed only marginally better in the South with 46 percent and considerably better in the West (but 15 points behind his predecessors of the 1970's and 1980's) at 40 percent.

The same pattern is clear in categories of religious identification. Among both white Protestants and Roman Catholics, Nixon, Ford, and Reagan gained some of their strongest support. The NFR average for white Protestants is 67 percent and for Catholics 50 percent from 1972 through 1984. Bush in 1988 won 66 percent of the white Protestant vote and 52 percent of the Catholics but in 1992 took a mere 47 percent of white Protestants and a measly 35 percent of Catholics, while in 1996 Dole and Kemp managed to capture 53 percent of white Protestants and only slightly improved their standing with Catholics at 37 percent. Incidentally, Kemp's militant loyalty

to Zionism failed to draw Jewish voters to the ticket; Jews voted for Dole-Kemp by a mere 16 percent, a far cry from the third of the Jewish vote consistently won by Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Bush through 1988.

Two of the most typically Middle American categories are those for family income and the size of the place where the voter lives. The same pattern of Middle American erosion is evident in them too. As for middle-income groups, with incomes from "15,000 to above 50,000" dollars a year, the NFR average for 1976 (figures for 1972 are not available) through 1984 is 57 percent, while for Bush in 1988 it was still nearly 56 percent. But in 1992 Bush took only 39 percent of these middle-income categories, while in 1996 Dole and Kemp, despite all their chatter of tax-cuts and perhaps because of their chatter about the interests of the urban underclass, won only 41 percent, recapturing a mere two percent of the middle class. In the lower portions of the middle-income categories, Bush in 1992 and Dole in 1996 won percentages in the upper thirties, in contrast to the more than 50 percent consistently won by earlier Republican candidates.

And the same decline of Middle American support for Republicans is apparent in size of place. Nixon, Ford, and Reagan carried more than 60 percent of suburban and rural voters from 1972 through 1984, and Bush in 1988 carried them in the high fifties. Bush in 1992 took only 39 percent of the suburban and 42 percent of the rural voters, however, while in 1996 Dole and Kemp carried only 42 and 46 percent respectively.

Since Richard Nixon and his campaign technicians designed the Southern Strategy and similar appeals to the Wallace voters and other Middle American categories, the Republican Party appeared to be on the verge of inaugurating a genuine political revolution in the United States, not only in terms of electoral realignment but also in terms of the eventual content of public policy and legislation. Even when Republican Presidents betrayed their Middle American commitments (as they often did more than they lived up to them), the influence of a social force outside the liberal elites of Manhattan and the Beltway could never be ignored and at least had to be stroked and courted. If the Republicans did ignore or betray those forces, they could expect another Wallace-like movement that would eat into their votes and threaten to throw elections to the Democrats. While Nixon did not hesitate to steal Wallace's issues, he and his successors knew that the possibility of a Middle American revolt constituted a standing check on both their own party and that of their major rivals.

The Democrats have learned something since the 1970's; they no longer nominate candidates like George McGovern, and the Bill Clintons and Al Gores have figured out how to pursue their essentially McGovernite agenda in the guise of patriotism and family values. The Republicans can no longer count on the Democrats to commit suicide for them. What is worse, the Republican Party today is not the same as the GOP that nominated Nixon and his successors. The emergence of the Beltway conservative (really neoconservative) intelligentsia in the late 1970's and 80's created an elite group that now exerts immense influence on Republican policymaking, legislation, speechwriting, and electoral strategies, and that group has little connection to or sympathy for Middle Americans and their concerns. Groups like Empower America and its sisters in the think tanks and magazines of Washington now play major roles in determining what the party and its leaders think, read, hear,

say, and do, as well as on whom they appoint, elect, and nominate. By 1992, this apparatus had developed sufficient power within the party to prevent George Bush from connecting to the Middle Americans who are the real once and future base of the Republican Party if it is to have a future, and by 1996 the same apparatus shaped the nomination and presidential campaigns of two of its own Beltway brothers, Bob Dole and Jack Kemp. The alienation of their ticket from the party's Middle American base is the reason they lost the election, and deserved to lose the election, against an opponent who should have been more vulnerable than any other since George McGovern himself. If the Democrats keep learning and the Republicans keep failing to distance themselves from the Beltway right and to return to their core support in the Middle American heartland that gave them the White House for most of the 1970's and 80's, the party can expect to keep losing in the future.

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## Krummholz

by Alan Sullivan

Hunched like an anchorite behind its boulder,  
A treeline pine weathers the winter storms.  
Its knotty branches shrink as nights turn colder.  
Caught in its tufts, a fluted snowdrift forms.

When summer bares the mossy flanks of bosses  
And lakes of lupine bloom on alpine meads,  
The stunted pine regrows its winter losses,  
Cracking the rocks to meet its meager needs.

Under its boughs the mantled squirrels nibble  
On tender forage plucked from fields of sedge.  
Below its roots the braids of snowmelt dribble  
In purling pools from ledge to jointed ledge.

Off-trail two hikers hunker in its cranny  
For shelter from the wind-bedeveled sky.  
At dusk the twisted *krummholz* looks uncanny,  
Its limbs outstretched as though to prophesy.

Driving our tentstakes deep in prickly humus,  
We pitch our camp and gather sticks to burn.  
The resin-scented plumes of smoke perfume us  
While overhead the Bear and Draco turn.

As embers fade, our tangled limbs keep burning,  
A blaze no dozing squirrels smell or see  
Though tufted ears might hear us turning, turning.  
O! Crooked love beneath the crooked tree.