

## The Gipper Won't Win This One

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May 03, 2007

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**As Republican contenders** for the presidential nomination gather for their first debate Thursday night at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, they are caught between a rock and a hard place. The vast majority of Americans have given up on George Bush, the sitting conservative president. But the die-hards who still support him are loyal Republican primary voters that no Republican candidate can afford to offend.



How can the contenders distance themselves from Bush's failures without alienating their own base? Expect them to invoke the conservative icon Ronald Reagan early and often. They'll call for a return to the faith, pledge to follow in the footsteps of the Gipper and promise a new "Morning in America."

Watch a debate between conservative William Kristol and progressive Robert Kuttner at 12:30 p.m. Thursday on [C-SPAN3](#).

Follow the Failure of Conservatism Conference on [The Big Con blog](#).

But the Gipper can't save them. Bush's signature failures—the war in Iraq, Katrina, Enron and the corporate scandals, failed tax and trade policies, the attempt to privatize Social Security, the posturing around Terri Schaivo and stem cells – can be traced back not simply to the conservative ideology and ideologues that sired them—but to the core conservative doctrine that Reagan championed. The Gipper can't lead Republican candidates out of the wilderness because, to paraphrase him, his conservatism is not the solution to their problem; his conservatism is the problem.

Over the last six years, with Bush in the White House, Tom DeLay ramrodding the Republican Congress, and Karl Rove focused on mobilizing the Republican base, conservatives have largely had their way. Bush pursued the core ideas of each strand of "movement conservatism" largely to catastrophic effect. In each case, he was simply walking in Reagan's footsteps.

The neo-cons got the Iraq war they plotted for, and produced the worst foreign policy debacle in U.S. history. Their toxic mix of militarist unilateralism, scorn for allies and the United Nations, dismissal of international law, embrace of an imperial presidency above the law was Reagan's opening act. In his first term, Reagan scorned détente, arms control, the U.N. and global accords. Reagan also fecklessly exposed U.S. troops in Lebanon—and had the intervention literally blow up in his face. He just had the good sense to cut and run, and then pick on a target easier to deal with—hapless Grenada in the Caribbean.

Under Bush, corporate conservatives took charge of economic policy and pushed through top-end tax cuts, Wall Street trade policies, deregulation and privatization, crony corporate staffing and subsidies, open assault on labor unions, rollback of consumer and environmental protections. The results were stagnant wages, a corporate crime wave, Gilded Age inequality, the worst trade deficits in the annals of time, billions squandered in subsidies to Big Oil and Big Pharma—and an economy now dependent on the good will of Chinese and Japanese central bankers. But Bush was only ordering from the Gipper's menu. He first served up the same noxious policy cocktail—and got the same results, even including the corporate plunder culminating in the savings and loan rip-off that cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars.

Small government conservatives didn't get much from either president, since both favored top-end tax cuts and military spending over balanced budgets. But both Bush and Reagan cut back on spending on the poor and on domestic programs. Both disdained the civil servants they were elected to lead. Both starved vital infrastructure investments from levees in New Orleans to sewers in our cities. Both stocked regulatory agencies with corporate lobbyists intent on gelding the agencies that monitored their former clients. For Reagan, the scandals ranged from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to the Interior department. Bush was less lucky, as Katrina exposed the terrible price of conservative scorn for government.

Under Bush, fundamentalists got mostly gestures and a politics of division—posturing on gay marriage amendments, gag rules on family planning and birth control abroad, curbs on stem cell research, intrusion into the personal tragedy of Terri Schaivo. But Reagan first practiced that playbook, using race to divide, invoking conservative values but ducking pitched battles over them.

Why is Reagan popular and Bush dismissed? Much comes from personal nostalgia for the old performer and from the right-wing campaign to deify him. Unlike Bush, Reagan avoided losing a war. He talked tough but was actually cautious in the use of military force, much to the dismay of the neoconservatives who assailed him. He was also saved by his adversaries – the USSR's Mikhail Gorbachev who essentially sued for peace, and Democrats in Congress who blocked many of Reagan's domestic excesses—like the talk of gutting Social Security. Bush had no such luck. His catastrophic occupation of Iraq has provided al Qaeda and its franchises with recruits across the world, and for the last six years, his allies controlled the Congress and followed his lead.

So what will Republican candidates do? Stay loyal to a failed president? Embrace Ronald Reagan, whose conservative ideology is at the root of Bush's failures? Adjust the right-wing catechism, or choose doctrine over experience?

Perhaps there's one lesson the Gipper can offer. Republicans are going to need someone with Reagan's ability to peddle the unpalatable. No wonder a yet-undeclared TV actor—Fred Thompson—is emerging as their new best hope.