

POLITICS

How Republicans Can Get Their Groove Back

By [Carl M. Cannon](#), *National Journal*

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Republican-fatigue is in the air, and not only in Washington, New York City, and Hollywood. In locales where Republicans are accustomed to respectful receptions from voters, GOP activists and officeholders are meeting deep skepticism. On a recent trip home, Rep. **Mike Pence**, a conservative Indiana Republican, was surprised by the amount of criticism he heard directed at **President Bush** and the Republican Congress. "Frankly, if the numbers in my district are this tough ..., " he said, his voice trailing off. Although Pence didn't finish the thought, he didn't have to. [Indiana's 6th](#) Congressional District, where "Hoosiers" was filmed, voted for Bush over **John Kerry** by a whopping 64 percent to 35 percent. That Republicans are even campaigning in such districts is instructive -- and Democrats have noticed.

If November 7, 2006, is looming in liberal imaginations, two Novembers past preoccupy conservative minds. One was in 1982, when **Ronald Reagan's** coattails were snipped in the recession-year midterms that cost his party 26 House seats, and the other was in 1974, when **Richard Nixon's** troubles triggered a cataclysmic landslide -- the 94th Congress featured a 21-seat Democratic majority in the Senate and a 291-144 Democratic advantage in the House. No one is predicting that kind of damage in 2006, but for a Republican Party grown used to ruling, these are worrisome days.

"The 2006 elections will be the most difficult cycle for the Republican majority in Congress since it was minted in 1994," Pence said flatly. "I don't candy-coat that for people."

In Colorado, another state that Bush carried in 2000 and 2004, the mood has changed palpably, reminding Republicans with institutional memories of their worst experiences. **Walt Klein**, a Denver ad man and an influential Colorado politico, was working for former World War II pilot and two-term Sen. **Peter Dominick** in the Watergate year, when Dominick went up against a little-known Democratic carpetbagger from Kansas named **Gary Hart**.

"I was there when Peter Dominick assured people that there simply was no way in the world that Colorado would vote for a guy who was **George McGovern's** campaign manager -- and who'd only lived in the state two years," Klein said. In the end, Dominick got less than 40 percent of the vote. "I can't remember any year since then that I've felt so pessimistic. We're fortunate the economy is going gangbusters. If we had a sluggish economy at this stage of the game, it would just be lights out."



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Republicans all over the country are starting to get this message, even while assuring themselves that they will, in the words of new White House Chief of Staff **Joshua Bolten**, get their "mojo back." But Bolten's assurance raises another set of questions: What would getting their groove back entail, exactly? How can Republicans go about doing this? Is it already too late?

To that last question, Pence has an emphatic answer.

"Heavens no!" he said, adding that Republicans still have time to publicly -- and with legislation -- return to their roots as a fiscally conservative party of limited government. "The best thing we have going for us is the Democrats," Pence said. "We may be the party of Big Government, but they are the party of Really Big Government."

Now, there's an improbable campaign slogan, but Pence is joined in the don't-panic-yet camp by influential GOP strategist **Grover Norquist**. "Nothing is certain in life," Norquist said. "But I much prefer having our hand than their hand. If we work hard, we'll win."

Follow the Numbers

In 2006, continuation of the GOP agenda centers on two quantifiable aims: First, keeping control of Congress, and second, pumping Bush's [poll numbers](#) out of the low 30s and back into the high 40s, so that he's not a lame duck for the remainder of his presidency. Those are the goals. Whether they are attainable is another matter.

"Parties are always defined by their leaders -- the president or the presidential nominee," says GOP political consultant **Roger Stone**, a former aide to Richard Nixon. "That means this is going to be a tough midterm."

In more than two dozen interviews with political scientists and practitioners, several common threads emerged. Naturally, movement conservatives stressed the need to return to Republican basics. Somewhat surprisingly, many of the Democrats interviewed didn't really disagree. Additionally, and with no pun intended toward the Republicans' mascot, there was an elephant in the room during these discussions. That elephant is Iraq, with its thousands of American dead and wounded, and its painstakingly slow progress in establishing any semblance of a functioning government. Republicans do not want to abandon the commander-in-chief on this issue -- almost all of them supported him in the run-up to the war -- but they are manifestly distressed with its progress.

Many Republicans also suspect that their fates are tied to Bush, even while they come to the reluctant conclusion that there may not be much the president can do to help himself, or them.

"If the troops came home tomorrow, I think it would still be tough for Bush to get back up to the mid-40s," Klein said. "It's almost as though he's become a caricature of himself. It was sad to see the stuff from this year's White House Correspondents' Dinner, when Bush had a Bush impersonator onstage with him."

After 9/11, the Bush "brand" -- to use a marketing term -- improved markedly. There was, as with all respected brands, an implied promise in the Bush presidency.

"A good brand promise is memorable and desirable," in the words of British marketing consultant **David Straker**. "A good brand promise evokes feelings, because feelings drive actions. Volvo offers feelings of safety. Mustang offers feelings of excitement."

Even among his detractors, Bush was seen as genuine, forceful, and competent in an unsafe world. He was a Volvo -- or maybe a Humvee -- to **Bill Clinton's** Mustang. But now, a majority of Americans have concluded that this Humvee wasn't armor-plated and it should have been, that the Bush administration didn't live up to its "brand promise."

Barring some sort of spectacularly failed terrorist attack -- foiled by Bush's Department of Homeland Security -- this slide will be a difficult problem to fix, and Republicans know it. Top GOP strategists were worried long before Bush's approval numbers reached their current level (31 percent in a [May 5-7 Gallup poll](#)). Early this year, **Frank Luntz**, who helped frame the 1994 GOP manifesto known as the [Contract With America](#), produced a white paper for Republican congressional candidates that sounded the alarm.

"In the 14 years I have worked for a Republican majority -- including two years that led up to the 1994 landslide -- I have never seen the GOP so far behind the Democrats on so many issues and attributes," Luntz wrote. "This document is more than a message plan. It is a wake-up call for every Republican to return to their roots in policy, principles, and language. What brought you to power in 1994 can keep you in power in 2006 -- but only if voters hear it and believe it."

The 25-page paper, which was circulated in GOP offices on Capitol Hill, is vintage Luntz. Most of it identifies "words that work," including numerous examples from the Democratic members whom he respects -- and who are getting better at communicating their ideas. "You can't count on the ineptitude of Democrats to give you a victory this year," he warns bluntly.

The trouble for Republicans, however, is that even if voters give them high marks for their record in recent years -- and few do -- there is an inherent problem in holding the levers of power for so long.

"Ostensibly, the Republicans' problems are that people don't like Iraq, they are mad as hell at gasoline prices, and they've never gotten over the response to Hurricane Katrina," says Democratic consultant **Bill Carrick**, who is based in California. "But really, it's more basic than that. They control everything in the federal government. That means that every failure of government -- hell, every crisis in the world -- is theirs to deal with."

A recent [Pew Research Center poll](#) underscores Carrick's point and illustrates the breadth of the Republicans' vulnerability. In November 2002 -- the time of the last midterm elections -- 27 percent of those surveyed said that Congress had accomplished "less than usual." In April 2006, that number stood at 41 percent. Other questions made it clear whom the public blames for this supposed inactivity. Fifty-six percent said that a factor in their vote will be "which party controls Congress"; and by 51 percent to 41 percent, respondents said flatly that they intend to vote Democratic.

"The American public is angry with Congress, and this is bad news for the Republican Party," said **Andrew Kohut**, the director of the Pew poll. "The belief that this Congress has accomplished less than its predecessors is markedly higher than at any point in the past nine years, and by a wide margin Republican leaders are blamed for this."

Do Something, Anything

Bush aides express aversion to the example of **Jimmy Carter**, whose counterproductive (though misnamed) "[malaise](#)" speech was perceived as unnerved and unpresidential. But Bush may have the opposite problem: His natural impulse is to stubbornly insist that everything is fine.

Staff changes in the White House were the first sign that Bush may be overcoming this instinct. But

although the new hires have gotten good reviews, the moves haven't yet translated into tangible benefits because the public, unlike the punditry, cares more about policy than personnel.

"Changes in the White House are a solid start," said **Ginny Wolfe**, a former aide to Senate Majority Leader **Bill Frist** who is a vice president at Manning Selvage and Lee. "Now, the new folks in place over there have to make clear that not just faces have changed -- but that there really is a new day dawning in the West Wing. For the White House and the GOP in general, I have just one word: 'Action.' As in, take some. Get a solid immigration bill. Be strong on the protection of our borders. Start to deal with the deficit."

Democrats who recall a second-term challenge of their own offer similar advice. "They need an agenda," said **Donald Baer**, former director of communications in the Clinton White House. "They need something to do. Things need not be epochal. You show the voters you know there are problems, and the president has plans to deal with them."

Two issues, energy and immigration, came up repeatedly. If Republicans and Bush want to change Americans' perceptions, bold strokes in these two areas are a logical place to start.

"He must take hold of the energy issue," said political scientist **John P. Burke** of the University of Vermont. Doing so, Burke believes, would entail Bush-initiated summits with automobile manufacturers and energy producers, as well as an urgent overture to Congress that included not just industry-friendly ideas about increasing refinery capacity, new oil sources, and a return to nuclear power but also specific incentives for synthetic fuels; nuclear, solar, and wind power; higher fuel-economy standards; and sweeping conservation measures.

Two veteran Washington Republicans, **Craig Shirley** and **Al Felzenberg**, suggested a moratorium on federal gasoline taxes -- an idea initially floated by Democratic leaders. Both say that it would behoove Congress to exhibit a sense of urgency.

"They can start by remembering who sent them to town, and why," Felzenberg said. "They can stop taking vacations. Two weeks off for Easter? A week for St. Patrick's Day? How long off for Presidents' Day? They can forgo their raise. They can start staying in town and working, rather than going home to dedicate traffic lights. They can actually pass lobbying reform. And they can do it without waiting for Bush."

Some of this advice is conflicting, and much of it has a can't-get-there-from-here quality to it: Strategists urge Bush to work with congressional Democrats, but admit in the next breath that Democrats won't meet him halfway. Likewise, Republicans know that federal legislation against gay marriage galvanizes their social conservative base, while also knowing that it alienates libertarian-minded voters, whose support they need in swing districts with moderate Republican members.

Those paradoxes underscore the party's limited options. But the status quo is not working.

"President Bush needs a bold stroke, and reaching out to Democrats now is the only logical move," said **Mike McCurry**, Clinton's former press secretary. "The president should declare a 'politics-free zone' in the Oval Office for the next 31 months. He should invite Democratic leaders and majority leaders as equals to the White House and demand some consensus agenda that 'we' will advance regardless of who wins in November."

Culture of Ethics

When Democratic Party leaders **Nancy Pelosi** and **Howard Dean** unveiled their "culture of corruption" talking point against the Republicans a year ago, it reminded many listeners of the reputation for rhetorical excess that the San Francisco congresswoman and the former Vermont governor share. Not anymore. Former House Majority Leader **Tom DeLay**'s indictment for his Texas fundraising activities took down the Republicans' "Hammer." Former Rep. **Randy (Duke) Cunningham**, R-Calif., is now in prison for accepting \$2.4 million in bribes; the guilty plea of superlobbyist **Jack Abramoff** -- and his cooperation with prosecutors -- have put other Republicans in the Justice Department's crosshairs.

"To restore public confidence, they need to do something dramatic," Democratic consultant **Brad Bannon** says. "The first thing that I would do if I were advising them would be to bite the bullet and enact a very strict lobbying reform bill. The 'culture of corruption' argument is hurting the Republicans, and before they move forward legislatively, they need to convince Americans that they are not in the thrall of the special interests."

Many Republicans agree, at least rhetorically, but it's unlikely that the reform measures passed recently by the [House](#) and [Senate](#) -- which don't even ban paid trips with lobbyists -- will alter the public perception.

"We have a trust problem," said prominent California Republican and second-generation Reaganite **Karen Spencer**. "The currency in Washington used to be keeping your word. Now it's money. I don't know how they can legislate their way back to that if they aren't willing to do real lobbying reform. I'd take a close look at [California's law](#). Meals are limited to \$10 a month. Lobbyists can't host fundraisers, although they can attend them. We've lived under this since 1974 -- and it works."

Amen, said **Rob Stutzman**, another California Republican, who just left his job in Gov. **Arnold Schwarzenegger**'s administration. Stutzman was in the Balkans recently, advising the center-right party in Macedonia that fell from power not because of its ideas but because of scandal.

"The intellectuals over there are all quoting Reagan, and they understand their future is with free markets, but they were thrown out of office four years ago because they were corrupt," he said. "If you're going to engage in that kind of behavior, you're going to lose your mandate to govern."

Finding Their Inner (Fiscal) Conservative

In a sign of just how far George W. Bush-era Republicans have fallen in terms of fiscal grace, the White House last week touted a Congressional Budget Office [report](#) asserting that because of a surging economy, the current federal budget deficit is now projected to be as low as \$300 billion instead of the \$423 billion estimated by the administration in February.

"If we want to get our groove back, the party could reclaim its mantle for what it's supposed to believe in and stand for," Stutzman says. "For me, that would start with spending. As much as Bush has contributed to malaise in the party, Congress is the poster boy -- between scandals and deficit spending. We need to talk about the size of government and show fiscal restraint."

When both are run by the same party, Congress and the White House prove to be mutually enabling institutions: Congress has yet to say no to any major Bush budget request; the president has yet to veto a spending bill -- or any legislation, for that matter. Nonetheless, members of Congress, not Bush, are up for re-election in 2006, and the notion is growing in GOP ranks that Congress must do something dramatic to change public perceptions.

"They need to start acting like Republicans," says **Craig Shirley**, a political consultant and author based

in Alexandria, Va. "Like all off-year elections, this is a base election. The reason 1974 was an atrocious year for Republicans was because turnout was off by about 10 percent. It's not because Democrats were so energized, but because Republicans were depressed because of Nixon and **Gerald Ford**. The Republican Party is not faced with a tsunami -- they're faced with an undertow."

That's a scary thought for Republicans, few of whom doubt that Democratic voters are motivated this time around. Moreover, if it's harder for Republicans to embrace Bush, abandoning him outright in their gerrymandered GOP districts is unthinkable. What they can do, however, is emphasize their own principles.

"It's hard to find your groove when you're dancing to someone else's beat," says **Kenneth E. Collier**, a government professor at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. "It must be disheartening to conservatives who came to Washington to cut pork-barrel spending and who now watch while pork increases and the deficit rises. Some of them must be asking what kind of Faustian bargain they've struck. Pork helps them stay in power but at the cost of some of their ideas."

Republican leaders say that they get this and that the anti-earmark language of the House lobbying measure demonstrates it. They also predict that Congress will soon move on the litany of issues constituting the brand of populist conservatism that brought Republicans to power in the first place. These include the line-item veto, making the tax cuts permanent, a federal bill codifying marriage as being an exclusively heterosexual institution, and immigration legislation that seeks to put American workers -- and legal emigres -- ahead of illegal immigrants.

"We need to get our party away from Wall Street," says Stone, the GOP consultant, "and back to where our people are, which is Main Street."

Owning Iraq

The GOP's biggest problem, however, may not be Wall Street or Main Street, but "the Arab street," or, rather, the streets of an Arab capital -- Baghdad -- in a country that the Bush administration invaded but only partially occupied, and has not yet managed to govern.

Iraq is not a subject for pithy quotations or easy policy fixes, and no one interviewed suggested that it was. But what can Bush do to improve the situation in Iraq? What can Republicans say about Iraq in the meantime?

"There's not much at their disposal," says conservative journalist **Jay Nordlinger**, who wrote speeches for Bush during the 2000 campaign. "But [they must] defend the war. Remind Americans to be proud of the help they are rendering to the world, and to our own country. If Republicans won't do it, no one else will."

John McCain agrees with that, as far as it goes. But several weeks ago, the senator from Arizona expressed dismay to *National Journal* that the president wasn't exerting greater pressure on the Iraqis to form a government. When a leader whom U.S. officials consider competent was finally chosen, administration aides touted the result as a validation of their patient approach.

"We are on the path to victory," White House press secretary **Scott McClellan** assured the nation in his last week on the job, while drawing attention to the new Iraqi government. "We are winning in Iraq."

Increasingly, this kind of phrasing strikes a majority of Americans, and many of Washington's elected officials, as facile. **Peter Beinart**, author of the new book *The Good Fight*, says that this glibness has

allowed Democrats and many independents to simply tune Bush out.

"I think Bush has to separate the debate about what we do now from the debate about whether we were right to go in the first place," Beinart told NJ. His suggestions: Replace Defense Secretary **Donald Rumsfeld** with someone who opposed the war initially, or publicly signal that **Vice President Cheney's** influence has diminished. "It won't matter if Iraq goes south. But at least he could buy a little more time to see if the Iraqi political class can create a legitimate, functioning government."

Another defense-minded Democrat, **Kenneth Pollack** of the Brookings Institution, has remained a supporter of the Iraq war but is critical of the way the administration has prosecuted it. Pollack helped organize an Iraq Policy Working Group at Brookings, which produced a 70,000-word [report on Iraq](#). He distilled those findings into seven recommendations: Make protecting civilians and infrastructure the top priority; shift from offensive to defensive military operations; expend more military resources in Iraq's population centers; train Iraqi police and military better; create a unified U.S. civilian/military command structure in Iraq; decentralize political power (and oil revenue); and bring in the international community.

Meanwhile, former Army Gen. and Persian Gulf War commander **Barry McCaffrey** returned from Iraq with the sobering assessment that it will take at least seven more years for that country to become stable -- if Americans can wait that long.

For his part, Bush maintains that we must and insists that as long as he is president, we will. But there is a common element in the demands being made of the president, whether from those who hated this war from the outset or from those who support it even now: He must be more realistic. They would ask him to listen carefully to his own assertion that freedom is not America's gift to the world, but rather God's gift to every man and woman in the world. This is a noble sentiment, but also an implicit acknowledgment of the limits of American power.

It is time, they say, for Bush to swallow his pride and ask for help. "Both the United Nations and the international community still have critical roles to play in Iraq, not so much for the legitimacy they may bestow but because they can call upon large numbers of people with vital skills for political and economic reconstruction," Pollack said. "However, getting those people to come to Iraq is going to require a major improvement in the security situation, and a greater willingness on the part of the administration to consult and listen to the U.N. and other nations."

All Politics Is Politics

Elections are not won on policy alone, however, and even the most wonkish of operatives say that playing smart politics is the GOP's true challenge.

James Greenwood, a retired Republican House member from Pennsylvania, believes that with partisanship at an all-time high, it will be difficult to enact legislation that has much appeal beyond the Republican base.

"They may be best off at home listening to their constituents," Greenwood says. "The voters are in pain over the war, gas prices, immigration, and the deficit. It might be a good time to feel that pain at a lot of town meetings and listening sessions. People don't care what you know until they know that you care. They also ought to be out taking credit for the Medicare prescription drug act. Despite its shaky start, it's doing pretty well and a lot of good now."

But just don't mention the name of the person who actually pushed for that law.

"The basic problem is Bush," said **Nelson Polsby**, a University of California (Berkeley) professor. "Therefore, the optimum GOP strategy for others on the ticket is to run without mentioning him, roughly what they seem to be doing."

Another academic, Virginia Tech's **Charles E. Walcott**, who is co-editor of *Congress and the Presidency*, suggests that Republican candidates in 2006 jettison not only Bush but also **Newt Gingrich**, who led them to the promised land in 1994 with his notion of national elections.

"Their problems stem from factors that not even **Karl Rove** can control," Walcott says. "Under those circumstances, maybe the best advice to GOP officeholders would be to junk Newt Gingrich's playbook and instead steal a page from **Tip O'Neill**'s: All politics is local. With generic Democrats beating generic Republicans handily in the polls, the wise Republicans will, as indeed they are, try not to be generic," he continues. "Instead, conform to the district or state and its concerns. If that means abandoning the president on immigration, for example, so be it. If it means accusing one's opponent of sleeping with farm animals, that's OK, too."

Democrats are expecting this kind of trench warfare. In fact, they have already begun waging it themselves. The upshot -- and this is hardly a surprise in the current polarized political environment -- is not just one hardball election, but 40 or 50 of them, wherever there is a truly contested seat in 2006.

James Campbell, a University of Buffalo political scientist, believes that Republicans must press the advantage in subject areas where voters are still skeptical of Democrats.

"My advice is to regroup under a theme of 'We are the party dealing with reality' -- from the hard, cold reality of the war against terrorism, Iraq, and Iran to Social Security reform and energy policy," he said. "Republicans have been the 'daddy' party for some time -- in contrast to the 'I feel your pain,' let me put a Band-Aid on that boo-boo Democratic 'momma' party -- and they need to play to that strength."

He suggests a light touch, not vitriol, when doing so, believing that if you get voters to laugh at liberal excess, it might reduce the ridicule being heaped on the president.

Such comments would be music to Grover Norquist's ears, if only he could hear more Republicans saying them. Norquist is the president of Americans for Tax Reform, but he's more than that. He's a master GOP strategist who has in some ways assumed the mantle that was Karl Rove's before he became bogged down in White House paperwork and a special prosecutor's investigation. Norquist is unconvinced that electoral Armageddon is just around the corner. Call him the un-Luntz.

"Where's the math? Show me the 15 House districts the Democrats will pick up," Norquist said in an interview. "Democrats are the mommy party. They don't do math. They tell stories. One of their stories: Because of Hurricane Katrina, poverty was rediscovered in America and it became a left-wing Democratic country. Most people don't see that. They saw looters."

Knowing that he's spitting into the wind of conventional wisdom, Norquist says the same things about corruption -- and Iraq.

"Democrats were winning on Iraq as long as they stood there mutely, pointing at Bush," he said. "But then they started talking about what they wanted, and it reminded people of the old joke: 'How do you like your wife?' 'Compared to what?' How do you like Bush's Iraq policy? Compared to immediate pullout of the troops? So then they switched to 'culture of corruption.' "

In Norquist's view, there has already been a preview of how the corruption issue will play in November. It was the special election in [California's 50th](#) Congressional District to replace the imprisoned Cunningham. The Republican candidates got 55 percent of the vote; the lone Democrat got 44 percent.

"So much for the theory that Democrats would be energized and Republicans would stay home, ashamed because of DeLay and Abramoff and Cunningham -- and this was at ground zero of the culture of corruption!" Norquist said. "We've held Congress through war, recession, a \$7 trillion loss in the stock market, in elections with an incumbent Democratic president and against two serious Democratic presidential candidates. This is not a weak, untested majority."

In the end, the answer may simply be that politics is cyclical and that after 12 years of GOP congressional rule and six years of an activist Republican president, the voters are ready for a change.

Some conservatives have already resigned themselves to that fate and are putting the best face on it by comparing 2006 to 1976, a year that resulted in Jimmy Carter, yes, but that also paved the way for Ronald Reagan. The punch line of this narrative is supposed to be "Speaker Pelosi," with all the liberal excess that the name implies.

To be sure, Pelosi has her foibles, and a House full of liberal committee chairmen bent on investigating Bush during wartime might try Americans' patience. But most Republicans agree that if the best they can do is campaign on the unspoken theme that, as bad as they are, Democrats might be worse, then 2006 could be a tough year.

"That Pelosi stuff is some weak-ass spin," Stutzman concedes. "We need to get our own house in order."

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