Don't Turn the Clock Back to Rockefeller Republicanism

November 16, 1995 by Phyllis Schlafly

Ever since the four-term phenomenon of Franklin D. Roosevelt, two very different factions have wrestled for control of the Republican Party. On the one hand are the grassroots Republicans, Main Street Americans, who labor in the precincts to elect candidates they hope will be faithful after election.

On the other hand are the powerful people who fancy themselves as kingmakers, the wheelers and dealers of the proverbial smoke- filled rooms, also known as the New York or Wall Street or eastern liberal establishment. They include the multinational corporations (whose most recent accomplishment was the Mexican bailout) and the Business Roundtable types, whose fingers of control slither through what is called the media elite.

These kingmakers are Big Government Republicans. They seek to maintain the current high level of federal spending, and they want to control how the money is spent. They are liberals, but their favorite word to identify themselves is "moderate."

In 1940 the New York kingmakers created the 60-day wonder named Wendell Willkie. He was a registered Democrat, but the kingmakers manufactured a new image for him through a media blitz and made him the Republican nominee for President.

In 1944 and 1948, the kingmakers forced the Republican Party to nominate the man who brought the expression "me too" into the political lexicon. Voters opted for the real Democrat in 1944 and 1948, not the carbon copy.

In 1952 the New York kingmakers felt threatened by the rise of the conservative movement led by Senator Bob Taft. The issue was clear: Taft had pledged to reduce the level of federal spending significantly, so the liberal Republicans set out to defeat him at all costs. By the narrowest of margins, the New York kingmakers stole the 1952 Republican National Convention for a military hero, Dwight Eisenhower.

During Ike's two terms, the liberals initiated all kinds of big federal spending programs that have plagued us ever since, such as federal aid to education. It was no surprise that Republican seats in Congress steadily declined.

In 1964, the New York kingmakers tried to force Republicans to nominate Nelson Rockefeller, a Big Government, internationalist Republican Governor who raised taxes, engaged in profligate spending of the taxpayers' money, and me-tooed the liberal Democratic policies. They failed; grassroots conservatives asserted their majority position in the Republican Party by nominating Barry Goldwater and repudiating Rockefeller Republicanism.

The Rockefeller cabal then cooperated with the media moguls in a campaign to defeat Goldwater that was marked by unprecedented hysteria and vicious smears. The result was Lyndon B. Johnson and the exponential expansion of Big Government under the Great Society.

In the following years, conservatives were cowed by a constant refrain. "You conservatives had your chance with Barry Goldwater. His defeat proves America will never elect a conservative, so the best you can hope for is Richard Nixon."

The Nixon regime proved that conservatives are fools to accept half a loaf. In foreign policy, his appointee Henry Kissinger continued the disastrous McNamara policies of abandoning our strategic superiority to the Soviets. In domestic policy, Nixon admitted he was a Keynesian and even inflicted price controls on us.

In 1976 the fainthearted persuaded a scant majority of Republicans to stick with the "moderate," Gerald Ford. However, even that "moderate" Republican National Convention was unwilling to take Rockefeller as Ford's running mate.

Finally, in 1980, Ronald Reagan mainstreamed conservatism as the vision and the values of Middle America. He drew conservative and pro-family Democrats and independents into the Republican Party.

Reagan's vision of conservatism consists of four specific elements: limited government with lower taxes; personal responsibility with a disdain for taxpayer handouts for personal or social causes; military superiority so our armed forces can protect our independence (specifically including SDI); and respect for life and family values.

Each of these four elements of Reagan's conservatism has a large constituency among the American people. The coalition produced the greatest Presidency and the biggest Republican victories of our times. This Reagan coalition is the model for the future of the Republican Party, and casting off any of them would spell defeat for Republicans.

It is a puzzlement why Colin Powell identified himself as a "Rockefeller Republican," when Nelson Rockefeller was the quintessential representative of the eastern liberal establishment. To the grassroots conservatives who are now the dominant majority in the Republican Party, Rockefeller Republicanism means "in your face" Big Government liberalism.

To nominate a Rockefeller Republican in 1996 would be turning the clock back to 1964 when that crowd lost the watershed battle between grassroots conservatives vs. the establishment. It would be as foolish as refighting the Civil Rights Act, the other defining battle of 1964.

The Reagan model teaches us that authentic conservatism is the road to victory. Conservative Republicans don't have to settle for a me-tooer or a liberal or a "moderate" masquerading as a conservative because conservatives have the votes to demand the real thing.