Time to Follow Reagan's Example

by Phyllis Schlafly November 28, 2008

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Conservatives face a major political challenge, but they can tackle and overcome it as they have done three times before. Three prior examples demonstrate the right way and the wrong ways to put America back on track and bounce back from a disappointing election.

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson won in a landslide over Barry Goldwater; in 1976, Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford in a close election; and in 1992, Bill Clinton crushed the first George Bush. Those defeats and subsequent Republican recoveries contain lessons to be learned.

After 1964, conservatives were persuaded to support the moderate candidate who had cozied up to the Rockefeller establishment, Richard Nixon, instead of Ronald Reagan who was also available. In preferring Nixon and electing him in 1968, conservatives mistakenly overemphasized experience.

The 2008 election showed that popular culture and voter mobilization are far more powerful than public appreciation for experience. Of course, the liberal media covered for Barack Obama's shortcomings in a way they never do for

conservatives, but a strong grassroots campaign can more than compensate for lack of a track record and experience.

After Republicans lost in 1976, Ronald Reagan spent four years working the grassroots, speaking at dinners, answering audience questions, traveling the country by car and train (he refused to fly), making radio broadcasts, and learning from average Americans. By 1980, Reagan had sharpened his conservative philosophy in sync with what Americans want from their leaders.

In the period from 1976 to 1980, grassroots conservatives and Ronald Reagan learned from each other. That's the model conservatives should follow now and educate new leaders.

When the economy and foreign policy fell apart under the liberal presidency of Jimmy Carter, conservatives were positioned to defeat him in 1980. Candidates, consultants and activists today should move outside of Washington, DC and discover what the remaining 99 percent of the country wants.

Barack Obama has promised so many things to leftwing extremists that the Democratic Party's civil war may be ugly. Leftists expect Congress and Obama to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), allow open homosexuals to serve in the military, and pass the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA) to invalidate all federal and state pro-life regulations including the ban on partial-birth abortion.

The anti-war activists who funded Obama's campaign expect him to pull troops out of foreign hot spots, but Obama later campaigned in support of increasing troops in Afghanistan. All sides of Middle East disputes think Obama will implement change in their conflicting directions.

The middle class expects tax cuts from Obama, but his socialist supporters expect spread-the-wealth redistribution to the poor. Obama's supporters want change,

change, change, but he has been stacking his Cabinet with retreads from yesteryear.

The Obama Administration will probably have no more direction or clarity than the Carter Administration. Congressional Democrats can still remember how many of their colleagues lost their jobs in 1994 after they tried to push through Bill Clinton's liberal agenda, including Hillary health care, and they don't want to repeat those mistakes.

It may be that Democrats, including Obama, will try to be reelected rather than to implement the change Obama promised. While they fight over who gets which government titles and bask in favorable media attention, conservatives should educate the grassroots and the potential candidates.

Opportunities to help our nation and please the voters exist at state and local levels for conservative efforts in education, regulation, taxes, social issues, and dealing with illegal aliens. Missouri, the traditional bellwether state, resisted the national trend and not only carried for John McCain but gave Republicans three new seats in the State Senate.

In 1996, Bob Dole failed to learn from Reagan's example. Dole remained for years in the Senate in both mind and body, and was unable or unwilling to run a grassroots campaign against Clinton.

Clinton failed to get 50 percent of the vote in 1996 and could have been defeated by a fresh Reagan-like approach rather than a rehash. John McCain repeated Dole's mistake, trying to run for president from inside rather than outside the Beltway.

Increasingly, voters believe we have one-party government: the party of the D.C. insiders who socialize together, appear in the media, and give handouts and

bailouts to their powerful friends and favored constituencies. Conservatives can defeat that party by campaigning from the ground up, not the top down.

Obama began running for reelection in his acceptance speech in Grant Park in Chicago when he told his supporters that his "change" could take more than one term. Republicans should follow Ronald Reagan's example and focus on the grassroots with a campaign that will be a learning process for both the voters and potential candidates.