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How to Lose an Election Without Really Trying

By FRANK RICH

COULD George W. Bush be a kind of Gipper-in-reverse and win yet one more for the Democrats? Clearly this White House sees him as the gift that will keep on giving. The 2010 campaign against the Bush administration is in full cry, with President Obama leading the charge. The Republicans are "betting on amnesia," he confidently told the claque at a recent fund-raiser. "They don't have a single idea that's different from George Bush's ideas." It's now the incessant party line.

Sounds plausible, but it's Obama who's on the wrong side of that bet, to his own political peril.

Betting on amnesia is almost always a winning, not a losing, wager in America. Angry demonstrators at health care town-hall meetings didn't remember that Medicare is a government program, and fewer and fewer voters of both parties recall that the widely loathed TARP was a Bush administration creation supported by the G.O.P. Congressional leadership. So many Republicans don't know Obama is a natural citizen — 41 percent in a poll last week — that we must (charitably) assume some of them have forgotten that Hawaii was granted statehood. The G.O.P. chairman is sufficiently afflicted with amnesia that he matter-of-factly regaled an audience with the counterfactual observation that the war in Afghanistan, Bush's immediate response to 9/11, began under Obama.

The president is also wrong when he says that every single current G.O.P. idea is a Bush idea. Many are not. And those that are not are far more radical.

A political campaign built on Obama's faulty premises cannot stand — or win. The polls remain as intractable as the 9.5 percent unemployment rate no matter how insistently the Democrats

pummel Bush. To add to Democratic panic, there's their "enthusiasm gap" with the Tea-Party-infused G.O.P., and the Rangel-Waters double bill coming this fall to a cable channel near you. Some Democrats took solace in one recent poll finding that if Republican economic ideas were branded as "Bush" ideas, the pendulum would swing a whopping 49 percentage points in their favor. But even in that feel-good survey, only a quarter of the respondents were worried that a G.O.P. Congress would actually bring back Bush policies.

Bleak as this picture looks for the Democrats, it is so only up to a point. No one knows what will happen on an Election Day almost three months away. One encouraging sign for the party in power is the over-the-top triumphalism of the right. Conservative pundits are churning out daily prognostications with headlines like "Ten More Reasons Dems Are Toast." A recent Wall Street Journal front-page news story hyping a far-fetched Republican scenario for retaking the Senate was something of a nostalgic throwback to the kind of wishful thinking that inspired "Dewey Defeats Truman."

But rather than wait for miracles or pray that Bushphobia will save the day, Democrats might instead start playing the hand they've been dealt. Elections, the cliché goes, are about the future, not the past. At the very least they're about the present. It's time voters were told just how far right the G.O.P. has lurched since Bush returned to Texas. And the White House might also at long last — at very long last — craft a compelling message, not to mention a plan, to offer real hope to the jobless. Repeated boasts of a resurgent auto industry (where the work force is 30 percent smaller than prerecession) won't persuade anyone, and neither will repeated assurances that legislation passed months ago will kick in over the long haul. Some 16.5 percent of America's workers are now either unemployed and trying to find a job, involuntarily working part time, or have stopped looking for work altogether. That figure doesn't even include the many Americans who've had to settle for jobs for which they are overqualified.

For Obama even to stipulate that the G.O.P. has ideas about how to deal with this crisis is generous. Consultants are telling Republicans to advance no new programs at all, given how far a simple no to the president has taken them thus far, and they are following orders. But what we can discern of the Republican "ideas" lying in wait almost makes Bush's conservatism actually seem compassionate.

The public is largely unaware of this because the conservative establishment in both

Washington and the press has been relentless in its effort to separate the G.O.P. from the excesses of the Palin-Fox-Beck-Breitbart bomb throwers and from wacky Tea Party senatorial candidates like Sharron Angle of Nevada and Rand Paul of Kentucky. To hear most non-Fox conservative pundits tell it on Sunday talk shows or op-ed pages, these unruly radicals are just a passing craze. The new post-Bush G.O.P., we're told, is exemplified by responsible, traditional small-government conservative governors like Mitch Daniels (of Indiana) or Chris Christie (of New Jersey).

But it's Daniels and Christie who are the anomalies. The leaders who would actually take over should the Republicans regain Congress are far closer to the revolutionaries than most voters imagine. Take Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, who has been relentlessly promoted by the right as the intellectual golden boy of the G.O.P. and who would be elevated to chairman of the powerful budget committee in a Republican House. His much publicized "Roadmap for America's Future" — hailed by Fred Barnes of *The Weekly Standard* as "the most important proposal in domestic policy" since Reagan's voodoo economics — not only revives the failed Bush proposal of partially privatizing Social Security but tops him by replacing Medicare with a voucher system that, like Ryan's skewed tax cuts, would benefit the superrich while raising taxes and medical costs for everyone else.

Ryan's proposal has only 13 co-sponsors in the House (out of 178 G.O.P. members). That number is low, he recently conceded, because his colleagues are "talking to their pollsters, and their pollsters are saying: 'Stay away from this. We're going to win an election.'" Once that election is won, the road will be clear and the ideologues will take over the asylum. Ryan's radicalism will be abetted by the new House speaker, John Boehner, who didn't even wait for the BP well to be plugged to announce that "a moratorium on new federal regulations" would be "a great idea."

In the theoretically more sober Senate, the G.O.P.'s rightward shift is arguably even more drastic. The pernicious Bush economic orthodoxy — tax cuts as a magic elixir to both create jobs and reduce deficits — remains gospel even as two veterans of Reaganomics, Alan Greenspan and David Stockman, have gone public over the past week to disavow it. But factor in the Senate's rush to xenophobia, and Bush, who pushed hard for immigration reform, starts to look like Nelson Mandela.

Now we have a Republican Senate leader, Mitch McConnell, joined by such onetime “moderates” as John McCain and Charles Grassley, calling for hearings to “look into” the 14th Amendment. That Reconstruction landmark, guaranteeing citizenship to anyone born in America, was such a prideful accomplishment of the old Party of Lincoln that the official G.O.P. Web site has been showcasing it to counter the Republicans’ current identity as a whites-only country club. Even Lindsey Graham — who could rightfully be anointed “This Year’s Maverick” by The Times Magazine as recently as July 4 — has joined the 14th Amendment revisionists and is slurring immigrants as baby machines who come to America to “drop a child” for nefarious purposes. The Hispanic-bashing has gotten so ugly that Michael Gerson, the former Bush speechwriter, wrote last week that Graham and McCain “may never fully recover” their reputations.

Given this spectacle, Obama and the Democrats are, if anything, flattering the current G.O.P. by accusing it of being a carbon copy of Bush. But even if the Democrats sharpen their attack, they are doomed to fall short if they don’t address the cancer in the American heart — joblessness. This requires stunning emergency action right now, August recess be damned. Instead we get the Treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner, offering the thin statistical gruel that job growth has returned “at an earlier stage of this recovery than in the last two recoveries.”

The tragically tone-deaf Geithner is on his latest happy-days-are-almost-here-again tour. He made that point in multiple television appearances as well as in a Times Op-Ed page article in which he vowed to “do more” to give workers “the skills they need to re-enter the 21st-century economy.” On the same day his essay appeared last week, The Times ran a front-page report on “99ers,” the growing band of desperate jobless Americans who have exhausted their 99 weeks of unemployment insurance benefits. The 99er featured in Michael Luo’s article, a 49-year-old unemployed corporate worker named Alexandra Jarrin, is a late-in-life college graduate and onetime business school student who owes \$92,000, as she put it, “for an education which is basically worthless.” She’s on the verge of homelessness not because she lacks the skills she needs to re-enter the 21st-century economy. She and countless others like her, skilled and unskilled, lack jobs, period.

The Democrats have already retreated from immigration and energy reform. If they can’t make the case to Americans like Alexandra Jarrin that they offer more hope for a job than a radical conservative movement poised to tear down what remains of the safety net, they deserve to

lose.