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Earth to GOP: Get a Grip

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IN JANUARY I WAS REBUKED by some readers for predicting that the GOP would lose, and for saying it deserved to lose, too.

“It doesn’t matter that Americans are generally eager to send Mr. Obama packing,” I wrote. “All they need is to be reasonably sure that the alternative won’t be another fiasco. But they can’t be reasonably sure, so it’s going to be four more years of the disappointment you already know.”

I quote these lines less to boast about my prescience than to establish some credibility for what I’m about to say.

Fellow conservatives, please stop obsessing about what other adults might be doing in their bedrooms, so long as it’s lawful and consensual and doesn’t impinge in some obvious way on you. This obsession is socially uncouth, politically counterproductive and, too often, unwittingly revealing.

Also, if gay people wish to lead conventionally bourgeois lives by getting married, that may be lunacy on their part but it’s a credit to our values. Channeling passions that cannot be repressed toward socially productive ends is the genius of the American way. The alternative is the tapped foot and the wide stance.

Also, please tone down the abortion extremism. Supporting so-called partial-birth abortions, as too many liberals do, is abortion extremism. But so is opposing abortion in cases of rape and incest, to say nothing of the life of the mother. Democrats did better with a president who wanted abortion to be “safe, legal and rare”; Republicans would have done better by adopting former Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels’s call for a “truce” on social issues.

By the way, what’s so awful about Spanish? It’s a fine European language with an outstanding literary tradition — Cervantes, Borges, Paz, Vargas Llosa — and it would do you no harm to learn it. Bilingualism is an intellectual virtue, not a deviant sexual practice.

BRET STEPHENS

Which reminds me: Can we, as the GOP base, demand an IQ exam as well as a test of basic knowledge from our congressional and presidential candidates? This is not a flippant suggestion: There were at least five Senate seats in this election cycle that might have been occupied by a Republican come January had not the invincible stupidity of the candidate stood in the way.

On the subject of idiocy, can someone explain where's the political gold in demonizing Latin American immigrants? California's Prop 187, passed in 1994, helped destroy the GOP in a once-reliable state. Yet Republicans have been trying to replicate that fiasco on a national scale ever since.

Conservatives should demand IQ tests of Republican candidates.

If the argument is that illegal immigrants are overtaxing the welfare state, then that's an argument for paring back the welfare state, not deporting 12 million people. If the argument is that these immigrants "steal" jobs, then that's an argument by someone who either doesn't understand the free market or aspires for his children to become busboys and chambermaids.

And if the argument is that these immigrants don't share our values, then religiosity, hard work, personal stoicism and the sense of family obligation expressed through billions of dollars in remittances aren't American values.

Here's another suggestion: Running for president should be undertaken only by those with a reasonable chance of winning a general election. It should not be seen as an opportunity to redeem a political reputation or audition for a gig on Fox News. Mitt Romney won the nomination for the simple reason that every other contender was utterly beyond the pale of national acceptability, except Michele Bachmann.

Just kidding.

Though conservatives put themselves through the paces of trying to like Mr. Romney, he was never a natural standard bearer for the GOP. He was, instead, a consensus politician in the mold of Jerry Ford and George H.W. Bush; a technocrat who loved to "wallow in data"; a plutocrat with a fatal touch of class guilt. His campaign was a study in missed opportunities, punctuated by 90 brilliant minutes in Denver. Like a certain Massachusetts governor who preceded him, he staked his presidential claims on "competence." But Americans want inspiration from their presidents.

Mr. Romney was never likely to deliver on that score. And though I have my anxieties about the president's next

BRET STEPHENS

term, I also have a hunch the GOP dodged a bullet with Mr. Romney's loss.

It dodged a bullet because a Romney victory would have obscured deeper trends in American politics the GOP must take into account. A Romney administration would also have been politically cautious and ideologically defensive in a way that rarely serves the party well.

Finally, the GOP dodged ownership of the second great recession, which will inevitably hit when the Federal Reserve can no longer float the economy in pools of free money. When that happens, Barack Obama won't have George W. Bush to kick around.

So get a grip, Republicans: Our republican experiment in self-government didn't die last week. But a useful message has been sent to a party that spent too much of the past four years listening intently to echoes of itself. Change the channel for a little while.
