

The Thirty-Year Itch

BY MARK SCHMITT

I'VE ALWAYS RESISTED THE IDEA THAT THERE IS "AN inherent cyclical rhythm in our national affairs," as the late Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. put it. Schlesinger suggested that American history moves in 30-year cycles between liberalism and conservatism, between public

and private concerns. But it's hard not to notice that it was exactly 30 years ago that the conservative era dawned, with the introduction of the then-audacious Kemp-Roth tax-cut proposal, in 1977, followed by California's tax-limiting Proposition 13 the next year. Also in those two years, a freshman Utah senator named Orrin Hatch led a 19-day filibuster that brought down a major labor-law reform bill (after which the idea of restoring unions' bargaining power went unmentioned until this year), and Phyllis Schlafly led campaigns to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment and the Panama Canal Treaties. Only the first succeeded, but both mobilized the base for the Reagan revolution to come. In 1978 Republicans gained 15 seats in the House; among the new members were Newt Gingrich and Dick Cheney.

Conservatives still lacked institutional power; even after the 1978 election, Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 119 seats in the House and 18 seats in the Senate, and they also held the White House. But the right had taken control with its agenda, and it was an ambitious and confident one. Its basic principles—cutting taxes as an end in itself, keeping unions weak, deregulating business, embracing unilateral American power, and deploying social issues as needed—have dominated the 30 years since. The Clinton presidency, in retrospect, was a modest interregnum within this long cycle, in which Democrats simply strug-

gled to manage, and to make some incremental progress within, the confines of the conservative agenda, even as they shared some of its assumptions.

It is now a commonplace that the most recent six-year experiment in one-party governance is coming to an ugly end, with little left of the Bush-DeLay agenda except to push the war-on-terror button ever more frantically. But it's possible that even more is going on than that. Perhaps this recent period, a bizarre and unsustainable warp in the sweep of American politics, was just the decadent late phase of the dying culture of post-1978 conservatism.

But a liberal agenda, or an agenda that puts public values above private ones, must be ready, ambitious, and confident enough to take over the next 30 years. Much of the timidity and passivity that have characterized Democrats through the past several decades remains deeply institutionalized in the consultants, candidates, and organizations of the center-left, often presenting itself as hard-nosed political realism. But the Iraq War vote in 2002 has been a sharp reminder to Democratic politicians that caution also carries risks, and the 2006 election a reminder that audacity can sometimes bring rewards.

In the presidential race, and in the work of some creative governors and senators, the outlines of a new agenda are emerging, one every bit as ambitious as the Kemp-Roth bill was in its day: Combine the common elements in Democratic proposals on health care and climate change, and the alliances with business that are possible (but not certain) in both areas, and one can foresee a day when the public sector accounts for a much larger share of gross domestic product, while the economy grows faster, prosperity is more broadly shared, working families are more secure, and, above all, business largely endorses this agenda. By stabilizing health costs and sharing the risks, and by building a series of other supports to help workers navigate confidently through a dynamic economy, we can imagine a new social contract in which government's role in providing security is yoked to, and not considered a drag on, economic growth. The most oppressive assumption of the conservative era, so powerful that it has been largely shared by liberals, has been that we are passive in the face of economic forces, such as globalization, and that anything we do to manage

those forces will cause harm. Taking charge of health care and climate change are not just policy initiatives to be viewed in isolation; they are part of an agenda that directly, if belatedly, challenges that assumption.

The problem with cyclical theories of history, though, is that they are too passive, as

if all we had to do was to wait for the great wheel to make its next turn. As the historian Kevin Mattson has pointed out, Schlesinger and his cohorts were somewhat complacent about conservatism for that reason. The opportunity to set a new agenda may be before us, but it can't happen unless liberals are as daring now as Orrin Hatch and Phyllis Schlafly were then. **TAP**

By both Arthur Schlesinger's theory and observable reality, the conservative era is over.