

The Suicide Wing of the GOP vs The Realists

☒ Here's the problem for Republicans as we move toward the elections in 2014 and 2016: The majority – sometimes known as the establishment – can't trust the populist wing of the party – sometimes known as the suicide wing – to do what's best for the GOP's prospects ... and they can't nuke them either. It's never smart to go to war with your base.

According to two new polls, Republicans are taking most of the blame for the partial government shutdown. A Washington Post/ABC News poll found that 70 percent of American adults disapprove of the way congressional Republicans are handling budget negotiations. Sixty-one percent disapprove of Democrats. As for President Obama, his approval rating actually went up, to 45 percent, from 41 percent at the end of September.

And in a Pew survey, by a margin of 38 percent to 30 percent respondents said Republicans are more to blame for the shutdown than President Obama.

Yet the suicide wing of the party says "We did the right thing. We stood up for our principles." That's usually a good thing. But in politics you have to have a plan. And Senator Ted Cruz and the House populists didn't. They're a minority in the GOP, but a loud and at times menacing minority. And so the more moderate (read that "reasonable") Republicans went along with their silly scheme first to repeal ObamaCare and when that didn't work, to defund it. Memo to the suicide wing: Don't go to war without a plan. Don't enter a conflict without an endgame. Don't pick a fight you can't win.

In his New York Times column, Ross Douthat, a thoughtful

conservative, acknowledges that politics is a tough business and failure "is normal enough" before launching into a broadside against the populists.

"But there is still something well-nigh unprecedented about how Republicans have conducted themselves of late," he writes. "It's not the scale of their mistake, or the kind of damage that it's caused, but the fact that their strategy was such self-evident folly, so transparently devoid of any method whatsoever.

"Every sensible person, most Republican politicians included, could recognize that the shutdown fever would blow up in the party's face. Even the shutdown's ardent champions never advanced a remotely compelling story for how it would deliver its objectives. And everything that's transpired since, from the party's polling nose dive to the frantic efforts to save face, was entirely predictable in advance."

He's right, of course, but true believers don't think that way. All they know is that they're right. And that's enough for them, even if a majority of American voters don't quite see it that way.

Still, nobody right now knows how all this will turn out.

The good news scenario for Republicans is that the American people may yet turn on the president. They may at some point see him as uncompromising and obstinate and start to shift blame over to him for the mess in Washington.

The bad news scenario is that this won't happen, that the GOP brand is so tarnished that the party will continue to take the lion share of the blame and that they'll stand no chance of taking over the Senate next year. It's not likely they would lose the House, but if you offend enough voters, anything is possible.

But it could be even worse. If the GOP puts up another

moderate like McCain or Romney in 2016, millions of hardline conservatives may very well sit out the election. But if they put up a take-no-prisoners hardliner, millions of more moderate Republicans may stay home.

As I've said before: The Republicans need a charismatic conservative who can bring the factions together. They need a conservative with the skills of Barack Obama – yes Barack Obama, my hard right friends – who brought both regular liberals and far lefties together to win two elections.

One more piece of bad news: I don't see anyone like that on the horizon. Not at the moment anyway.