

The Washington Post

TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 1996

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The Case for Practical-Minded Republicanism

My father, Sen. Jacob K. Javits, died 10 years ago this month. He is remembered by his family and fellow New Yorkers for his brilliance, originality and heart. It might be said, and is at times, that his brand of progressive Republicanism nearly died with him.

Yet, with the presidential candidates now looking to capture the political and economic "middle"—middle-class and middle of the political spectrum—his brand of vigorous non-ideological problem-solving may be ripe for the times. Colin Powell was thought to embody this Republican stance, and his putative candidacy reflected its electoral potential.

Today's parties are polar opposites, with Democrats postured as defenders of government and the poor and Republicans as the proponents of business, deregulation and reduced government. Both will seek to capture the votes of the middle, but both lack a philosophical approach that harnesses government and business resources to jointly address problems such as income stagna-

tion, international competition, poverty, and environmental degradation.

Progressive Republicanism approached the dichotomy of public-versus private-sector supremacy with assertive legislative solutions in the 1960s and '70s that channeled business energies in ways that least interfered with private-sector productivity while addressing social needs. So long as the private sector alone was not meeting these needs, even historically orthodox Republicanism called for government action: Abraham Lincoln with civil rights, Teddy Roosevelt with antitrust, Robert Taft in education and housing.

Progressive Republicanism recognized that the market economy was the real engine of growth and advancement for Americans, but that where it failed to answer the needs of the people, government should step in and guide the economic system to produce the results demanded.

The free market was preferable because it worked best to produce wealth while maintaining incentives for further

growth. In addition, my father and many other sons of immigrants like him had reason not to trust government to be fair or competent. Many immigrants of this generation had just escaped the ingrained autocracies and bureaucracies of European governments, and saw in the free market a refuge from the prejudice and injustice of unchecked governmental power. Thus a strong market emphasis was itself a sphere of power, one that could rein in the dangers of an all-powerful state.

But if government, particularly democratic government, were to cede its responsibility for the health and welfare of its citizens to that marketplace, the private sector had better meet the weighty responsibility of performing for society's security and betterment. Where it fails, it invites government intervention.

Examples of the need for governmental intervention, in my father's legislative career, included the pension legislation called ERISA, job training programs, medical research, and assis-

tance to the disabled. The Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act was emblematic: It required government procurement to give a preference to the blind and severely handicapped so long as the product met requirements.

The legislative intent was not to displace the private sector but to modify its workings to benefit and bring justice to those who are ignored or mistreated. Through the use of legal guidelines, incentives and disincentives rather than governmental dictation, the private sector could be made to produce a measure of social and economic fairness.

Conservative Republicans have for so long fought government programs indiscriminately that they may lose out on constituencies and issues that are popular and viewed as essential. In the past, many conservative Republicans fought against civil rights and basic safety and health legislation such as OSHA or the Clean Water Act.

Today, issues of income disparity,

poverty and its concomitant crime, and catastrophic illness should be Republican issues. These are recognized social problems that require the greatest understanding of how government action can help make the private sector responsive. They should not be ceded to the Democrats, whose traditional mistreatment of the private sector produces more government bureaucracies and the wrong kind of intervention.

Strangely, in an era of common goals—economic equity, the need for international competitiveness, a clean environment and fair treatment of those less fortunate, the disabled, and the aged—it is the means, not the ends, that have once again produced partisan gridlock. The progressive Republican way is the pragmatic alternative that should reemerge in the debate.

The writer is a Washington labor lawyer and former chairman of the National Mediation Board.