

**Is the Republican Party  
Destroying Itself?**

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## CHAPTER ONE



# The Republican Traps

*“Man is the only kind of varmint that sets  
his own trap, baits it, then steps in it.”*

John Steinbeck, writer

On May 29, 1925, British explorer Percy Fawcett sent a letter to his wife Nina. He was deep in the Amazon seeking proof of a lost civilization, said to be one of great wealth. His final line was, “You have no fear of any failure.”

Those words were Fawcett’s epitaph. An officer in the British Army, he had repeatedly ventured into the Amazon, seemingly immune to its dangers. Other explorers had fallen victim to disease or hostile natives, or had gone mad from battling insects, fatigue, and close encounters with death. Not Colonel Fawcett. He had spent years in the jungle, mapping it for the Royal Geographical Society. His reputation was legendary. His underwriters and acolytes thought that he was invincible. But sometime in the year of 1925, Fawcett disappeared, never to be heard from again.

The epitaph of the Republican Party is not clear, nor is it certain there will be one. There is nothing in today’s balance of power between the

two parties that would predict a dark future for the Republican Party. The GOP holds the presidency and has a majority in the Senate. The Party also looks healthy through the lens of the past four decades. A year after the Watergate scandal forced President Richard Nixon to resign, political scientist Everett Carl Ladd described America's two-party system as a party-and-a-half system. The 1974 midterm election had been a blowout. The Democrats had picked up 49 House and four Senate seats. In the 1976 election, Democrats won the presidency, a two-thirds majority in the House, and a filibuster-proof three-fifths majority in the Senate. It didn't last. Since 1980, the GOP has held the presidency for more years than the Democratic Party and controlled Congress for nearly as many years.

Nevertheless, there's a Fawcett-like hubris to the GOP. The GOP has walked itself into five traps, each of which threatens its future. Judging from history, one trap alone could be enough to send it into a tailspin. After the stock market crash of 1929, the Republican Party, which controlled the presidency and both houses of Congress, was trapped by its laissez-faire belief that the economy was self-correcting. Republicans stuck to their belief even as joblessness soared. Americans weren't willing to wait for the economy to recover on its own. They voted heavily Democratic in the next three presidential elections, ushering in an era of Democratic control. In the period from 1932 to 1968, the Democrats held the presidency except for Dwight Eisenhower's two terms of office and controlled the House and Senate for all but four years.

Today's Republican Party is confronting five traps of its own making. They vary in their lethality but, together, could cripple the party for a generation or more. One trap is its steady movement to the right, which has distanced the party from the moderate voters who hold the balance of power in a two-party system. A second trap is demographic change. Younger adults and minorities vote heavily Democratic, and their numbers increase with each passing election. The older white voters upon whom the GOP depends are shrinking in

number. Within two decades, based on demographic change alone, the GOP faces the prospect of being a second-rate party. Right-wing media are the Republicans' third trap. A powerful force within the party, they have tied the GOP to policy positions and versions of reality that are blunting its ability to govern and to attract new voters. A fourth trap is the large tax cuts that the GOP has three times given the wealthy. The rich have reaped a windfall but at a high cost to the GOP. It has soiled its image as the party of the middle class and created a split between its working-class and marketplace voters. The fifth trap is the GOP's disregard for democratic norms and institutions, including its effort through voter ID laws to suppress the vote of minorities and lower-income Americans. In the process, it has made lasting enemies and created instruments of power that can be used against it.

In the five chapters that follow, each trap will be explained—how it developed, how it coalesced, why it's deadly, and why it will be hard to reverse. These chapters are followed by a final one that explains what the GOP should do if it is to remain competitive. Underlying the final chapter's analysis is a belief that our democracy requires a healthy and competitive two-party system. America would not benefit from the demise of the Republican Party, nor can it flourish from the course that the GOP is pursuing.

The United States needs to restore what historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called the "vital center." It's the place on the political spectrum where interests come together to develop policies that serve the interests of the many rather than those of a partisan few. The vital center was also what the framers of the Constitution were seeking when they debated how best to organize a political system that would govern a large and diverse nation. They divided the powers of government in order to force competing interests to engage in compromise and negotiation in the process of enacting the nation's laws.

Neither party alone can serve the nation's interests. As poet and literary critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed, a vibrant society

requires both “progression” and “permanence.” Without progression, which comes mostly from the left, a society stagnates. In the absence of permanence, which comes mostly from the right, society becomes unmoored from its enduring values. As philosopher John Stuart Mill noted, a democracy requires both a responsible right-center party and a responsible left-center party. “A party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life,” Mill wrote. “Each of these modes of thinking derives its utility from the deficiencies of the other; but it is in a great measure the opposition of the other that keeps each within the limits of reason and sanity.”