

The Potential Impact of Jindal's Message

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Bobby Jindal's response to President Obama's speech on Tuesday was deservedly panned by pundits across the political spectrum. Avoiding the temptation to make ad hominem attacks on Governor Jindal due to his awkward folksiness, and extraordinarily reductively inaccurate analysis of the problems in our economy and his proposed solutions is not easy, but I will try.

Jindal's speech, nonetheless, suggests that the Republicans are not going to try to reinvent their party, but will instead go back to the playbook which, for the most part, has served them well over the last third of the twentieth century. The following passage from Jindal's speech, while singularly unoriginal, taps into something powerful in Republican mythology.

"Democratic leaders say their legislation will grow the economy. What it will do is grow the government, increase our taxes down the line, and saddle future generations with debt. Who among us would ask our children for a loan, so we could spend money we do not have, on things we do not need?"

While the delivery evoked the image of a high school debater struggling through an awkward opening statement and the anecdotes that followed were not exactly Reaganesque in their charm or delivery, the central messages, that the Democrats are the party of tax and spend and that government is part of the problem, were the ones that have helped Republicans get elected reasonably consistently for most of my lifetime and would not have sounded out of place coming from Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich or any number of Republican politicians who have led their party to big victories over the last decades. While the Republican Party may seem to be all out of ideas and, at least for now, not really relevant to policy making in Washington, we should not underestimate the resonance of these appeals.

In recent decades, hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested by conservatives in convincing the American people that the Democrats are the party of tax and spend and that government is part of the problem. Although any reasonably serious observer of politics over the last decade can see that the Democratic Party certainly has no monopoly on taxing and spending, Jindal's narrative about the Democratic Party is still powerful. The Bush administration, as we all know, took fiscal irresponsibility and deficit spending to levels unprecedented in American history, but for many voters, the Democratic Party still remains the party of tax and spend. Thus, while Jindal's critique is not precisely true, it is believable, and in politics the latter is at least as important as the former.

While it is not, in any meaningful sense, the case that the Democratic Party is the party of tax and spend, they are a party of tax and spend. Of course, the other party of tax and spend, or more precisely, borrow and spend, is the Republican Party. For Jindal, and other calculating Republican strategists, this nuance can be brushed over, because what matters is not which party

is fiscally responsible, but which party voters see as being more fiscally responsible. Jindal is betting that the Republicans are still seen this way by voters who will be willing to forget the Bush years, or dismiss them as an aberration, just as many quickly forgot the massive debts run up by the Reagan administration. Over the next few months, charges like those made by Bobby Jindal, will become increasingly common. The Republicans will likely repeat these charges, which after decades, voters are primed to believe, until they begin to sink in.

The task for the Democrats, at all levels, is to remind voters that this analysis is not true; and that it was Republican policies of tax, borrow and spend, albeit largely on foreign policy fantasies rather than useful infrastructure and programs, that created the debt problem our country will face for years to come. It should also be kept in mind that the real cost of the Iraq war will likely dwarf even this massive stimulus bill. No Republican should be allowed to get away with a speech like the one Bobby Jindal made without the Democratic leadership; and not just, or even primarily, the White House, pushing back and reminding Americans about the enormous debt the Bush administration ran up, and the shoddy record of Republican fiscal prudence, which goes back for decades. Moreover, it is critical to proactively take this issue away from the Republican Party by attacking them for their fiscal incompetence and the rampant spending during the six years that their party controlled congress and the presidency.

Even in a best case scenario, the economic recovery will be slow. The Obama administration, as is evident from the proposed budget, is not close to being finished with the work we all need them to do. It is imperative that the serious efforts to rebuild our country and our economy not be sidetracked by desperate Republicans who suddenly have gotten religion regarding balancing budgets. Jindal's speech is easy to dismiss, but the potential power of his misleading message must be taken seriously.