

Fool Us Twice?

Tea Party agenda: Been there, done that

THE BATTLE LINES for next year's general election are being drawn, and the Republican Party has ceded the job to the Tea Party and its fossil-fuel backers, like the Koch brothers. Their prescription for our ailing economy: lower taxes, fewer environmental regulations, and a weak federal government.

If that sounds familiar, it is. From 2001 to 2009, the George W. Bush administration drastically cut taxes and crippled environmental regulations while starving public services like parks and highways. The deficit ballooned (in part because Bush also launched two wars), but the Tea Party ideology got a thorough road test.

Are we better off for the experiment?

A small number of Americans *are* doing better. North Dakota, because of new oil wealth, is booming. Wyoming's coal industry is also, thanks to huge new lease sales approved by the Interior Department. And those at the pinnacle of the income pyramid are doing best of all—the top 1 percent now control 42 percent of the country's financial wealth.

But the vast majority of Americans are worse off—both economically and environmentally. Polls show that Americans know this: More than 70 percent say the country is on the wrong track. Yet the GOP clings to the proposition that we need more of the policies that brought us to this point.

Leaving aside war and recession, look at the environmental harvest of the past decade. More than 100,000 Americans have died because of unnecessary exposure to pollution from coal-fired power plants. Another generation of young American women has been exposed to so much mercury from those same plants that it poses a serious health risk should they bear children. (See “This Much Mercury . . .,” page 46.) One out of every 10 kids now lives with asthma. In many states, families have access to fewer parks, and those parks are less well maintained because of budget cuts. Farmers in Texas are experiencing a catastrophic drought, and those in the Mississippi Valley face devastating floods and tornadoes. Still we continue to fill the atmosphere with greenhouse pollutants.

A decade ago, General Motors and Chrysler could have avoided bankruptcy and downsizing—saving the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of families—if the federal government had required them to make more-fuel-

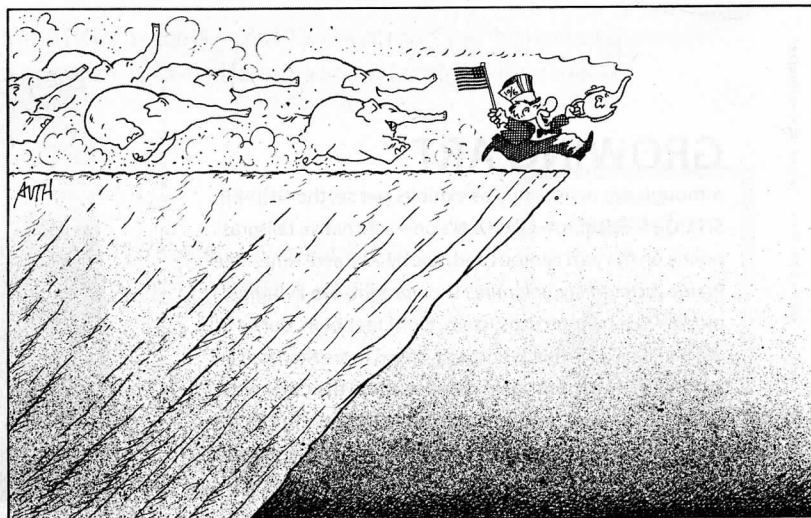
efficient vehicles. Tough fuel standards also would have lowered global oil prices and reduced our dependence on imported oil. The nation could have begun to repair and restore our highways, bridges, mass-transit systems, sewers, and other infrastructure, preparing us to be more competitive in the 21st century.

In 2001 we still had time and funding flexibility to keep our lead in renewable-energy technologies like wind and solar, instead of losing jobs, innovation, and supply chains to Europe and Asia. Proper regulations on offshore oil drilling could have prevented the Macondo blowout in the Gulf of Mexico; enforcement of the Clean Water Act could have saved hundreds of mountains in Appalachia from being blown to smithereens by coal-mining companies.

But we didn't do any of that. And now the philosophy that led to the most devastating decade since the Great Depression is back again, this time in the name of deficit reduction and improving the economy. No serious observer—not economists, not the bond markets, not even the U.S. Chamber of Commerce—believes that the Tea Party approach will accomplish either of these goals. Rather, it will make the next decade even grimmer for most Americans.

We are being asked to double down on failure. As Bush himself once said, “fool me once, shame on—shame on you. Fool me—you can't get fooled again.” ■

CARL POPE is the chairman of the Sierra Club. E-mail carl.pope@sierraclub.org; read his blog at sierraclub.org/carlpope.



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