HANGING TOGETHER OR SEPARATELY

"Fiscal Crisis Sounds the Charge in GOP's ‘Civil War,'" was the headline of a story in the New York Times Monday (10/21) on the bitter aftermath of the budget shutdown showdown.

Irony abounds. Their most bitter factional dispute ever comes when Republicans are more nearly united on policy than at any time before in the 159 year history of the GOP.

When the Republican Party was formed in 1854, Republicans were united only by opposition to slavery.

There were liberal Republicans not so long ago. Sen. Jacob Javits, R-NY, voted the "right" way just 11 percent of the time in 1973; Sen. Clifford Case, R-NJ, just 8 percent, according to the American Conservative Union. The average ACU rating for all Republican senators then was 58 percent.

Republicans today are more conservative, and more uniformly conservative, than ever before. Last year Maine Sens. Olympia Snowe (48.1) and Susan Collins (48.85) were the only Republicans who had lifetime ACU ratings below 50 percent. The average for all GOP senators was 86 percent.

The rift in the GOP today isn't about policy or principle. Ostensibly, it's about tactics. Mostly it's about culture.

Tea Party insurgents in Flyover Country regard more "moderate" Republicans -- the GOP leadership in Congress especially -- as Establishment "squishes" too comfortable with the status quo, too timid to take on the powers that be.

To Establishment "squishes," Tea Party insurgents are chest-thumping Yahoos who haven't a clue.

Losing -- which, with the partial exception of the 2010 midterms, Republicans have been doing since 2006 -- intensifies factional disputes.

Since Ronald Reagan, every GOP nominee for president has come from (what these days passes for) the party's moderate wing. They've done poorly.

Exhibit A is George H.W. Bush. Running in 1988 as Reagan's vice president, he won comfortably. Running as himself four years later, he got just 37.5 percent of the vote. More forthrightly conservative candidates would have fared better, Tea Partiers think.

Disappointment with George W. Bush fuels ire and angst in the base. Spending and debt exploded on his watch. He wouldn't curb illegal immigration. He paid lip service to global warming and other liberal nostrums, but didn't articulate conservative principles.

Conservatives in Flyover Country feel abandoned, betrayed. No one in Washington speaks for them, it

seems.

This I think is why Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Tex, architect of the spectacularly failed shutdown strategy, received a hero's welcome in San Antonio Saturday, which was a bit like hailing Gen. Custer after the Little Big Horn, or Admiral Kimmel after Pearl Harbor.

But many feel about Sen. Cruz the way Abraham Lincoln felt about U.S. Grant. He told those who complained about Grant's drinking that: "I can't spare this man. He fights."

Republicans can't win if they don't fight, Sen. Cruz says. He's right.

But Republicans also can't win if they fight stupidly. The ugly end to the shutdown "not only was predictable, it was predicted," said Charles Krauthammer, who is no less conservative than Sen. Cruz.

And if they fight each other rather than Democrats, Republicans surely can't win.

"Establishment" Republicans have been too slow to do battle with Democrats, too quick to throw in the towel on the too rare occasions when they have. Too often, their punches have been pulled.

But many in the Tea Party have wildly unrealistic expectations for what Republicans can accomplish with control of just one half of one third of the government, and a hostile press.

It was never possible, as one of the architects of the shutdown acknowledged last week, to defund Obamacare this year. That's because most Obamacare spending is in the form of entitlements, which can be cut only by passage of another law, which isn't going to happen as long as Democrats control the Senate.

House Republicans are doing better than many conservatives in the hinterlands realize. It isn't Speaker John Boehner's fault that what House Republicans say and do isn't being reported fairly.

It's hypocritical to be indignant of any criticism other Republicans make of Sen. Cruz, but to take no note of the nasty things Sen. Cruz has said about other Republicans. Both need to cut it out.

It's preposterous to treat as enemies Republicans who disagree on tactics -- especially after they've been proved right. Among those who've been denounced as "RINOs" by conservatives with larger egos than brains are Rep. Paul Ryan (lifetime ACU rating: 91), Sen. Mitch McConnell (90), and Sen. Marco Rubio (100).

To repeal Obamacare, there must be more Republicans in Congress. It would be nice if they were all down the line conservatives. But that doesn't happen in the real world.

In states like South Carolina, where Lindsey Graham has been a disappointment, and the odds are good someone more conservative than he can win the general election, it makes sense to primary him. But it is

madness to primary Republicans where the likely result is to hand the seat to Democrats.

Had there been four more Republicans in the Senate, a defund strategy might have been viable this year. There'd have been four more had not insurgent conservatives lost races in Indiana, Missouri, Colorado, Nevada and Delaware somewhat less conservative Republicans almost certainly would have won.

It's annoying that Sen. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, voted with us only half the time. But she's been replaced by a Democrat who never does. Majorities are built by bringing more people into the tent, not by throwing them out of it.

It's reasonable to argue the damage Republicans have suffered from the shutdown won't be lasting; that in the long run the GOP will gain from having fought hard against Obamacare. But it's delusional to pretend significant harm has not been done.

Obamacare is falling apart. The news media have no choice but to take notice. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney is even waffling about whether the individual mandate will be delayed. A glorious victory can be won -- if "Establishment" Republicans fight a little harder, and Tea Partiers shift their fire from their allies to their enemy.

When he signed the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin commented his fellow Revolutionaries, "We must all hang together, gentlemen, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." Good advice then, good advice to Republicans now.

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