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GOP sideshow obscures a nation seized

All eyes have been on the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire's primary this week, but fewer are seeing that the Republican presidential race is effectively a sideshow. Conservatives now so dominate news and political communication that they'll command American politics for the New Year and for the foreseeable future, because they planted the seeds of victory beginning 80 years ago.

Here's how they've won: Three years after the shellacking President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave them in 1932, conservatives began an "American Way" campaign to push the country to the right after World War II, resulting partly in the union-slowng Taft-Hartley Act.

Their push to the right sputtered, however, once the civil rights and anti-poverty movements helped deliver a second shellacking in the election of 1964.

With that, conservatives regrouped, made common cause with the Christian right, bypassed the news media by creating their own networks, and founded new institutions to push the country right: the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Cato, Hudson, Manhattan, and, later, the Federalist Society, to name but a few.

By 1978, 70 of those institutions were in place, reversing the national discourse from public good to private gain. They also helped oust a half-dozen Democratic senators — including Iowans Dick Clark and John Culver — then elected Ronald Reagan president. By 2000, there were 500 of them.

The Reagan administration not only helped form one of the 500, the Federalist Society, to push the judiciary to the right — it also buried

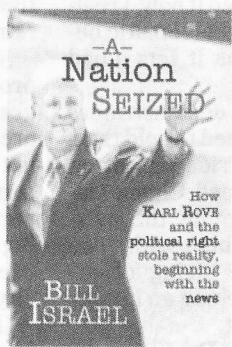


bisr@att.net

BILL ISRAEL, Ph.D., is associate professor and director of graduate communication studies at St. Mary's University in San Antonio. He is an Iowa native. Contact:

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Bill Israel's book, "A Nation Seized: How Karl Rove and the Republican Right Stole Reality, Beginning With the News," is published by Marquette Books.



broadcasting's Fairness Doctrine. With that, 4,000 right-wing talk radio hosts sprang up, so many that at their annual convention, a dissenter underscored the power shift by wearing a mask, shouting "Hi-O, Silver," and declaring himself "The Lone Liberal." The right-wing media pile-on followed: Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, Laura Ingraham, Ann Coulter, the American Spectator, the Wall Street Journal editorial page, and Fox News.

By 2000, the coordinated power of the 500, the new right-wing media, and the manipulations of strategist Karl Rove made it possible for George W. Bush to lose by a half-million popular votes but win 5-4 in the Supreme Court.

Bush brought on another shellacking in 2008, but their institutions undiminished, conservatives

struck back in 2010 and began re-districting the country, with more right-leaning courts to affirm them, thanks to the Federalist Society.

And so, a Supreme Court that once affirmed the doctrine of one man, one vote, last year effectively flattened it by encouraging the wealthy to buy elections. This year, Grover Norquist and Americans for Tax Reform are uncorking unlimited corporate contributions, while the Philanthropy Roundtable funnels in unlimited cash from the foundations of the right: the Koch brothers, the Olins, Scaifes, Coors, Bradleys, and more.

To focus the money flood to maximum effect, Rove is directing a quarter-billion dollars nationwide, tipping elections down to the precinct level, after outlining how to do it when we taught "Politics and the Press" together at the University of Texas at Austin.

In 2010, for example, those methods transformed the Texas House from a narrow 75-73 Republican majority to 101-49. Anyone who witnessed the removal of Supreme Court justices in Iowa and the challenges to collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and Michigan now knows that's only the beginning.

In short, no matter which Republicans win Iowa and New Hampshire — no matter, even, whether Barack Obama beats the nominee — it's no longer the presidency that's the main event: it's everything else.

Conservatives over decades have so mastered American news and political communication that Democrats look doomed for the next generation. It's why I argue that conservatives now own the government of the United States. We have effectively become a nation seized.