

Paul Krugman: Trump Isn't an Aberration—He's the Logical Conclusion of 40 Years of Conservative Lies

The *Times* columnist traces the origins of movement conservatism.



Photo Credit: YouTube/Bloomberg

Anti-Trump Republicans love to claim Donald Trump is an aberration, a fake conservative destroying their ideals of individual liberty, small government and even smaller taxes with a cavalcade of lies. Conservative senators like Lindsey Graham and John McCain grandstanded last week about the GOP's broken health care policy and the erosion of senatorial norms. But what these speeches conveniently ignore is that Republicans have been lying to their constituents for years.

As Paul Krugman argues in his Monday column,

"the Republican health care debacle was the culmination of a process of intellectual and moral deterioration that began four decades ago, at the very dawn of modern movement conservatism—that is, during the very era anti-Trump conservatives now point to as the golden age of conservative thought."

It all started back in 1970, Krugman continues, when Irving Kristol, a political commentator and the "godfather of neoconservatism," endorsed supply-side economics,

"the claim," according to Krugman, "refuted by all available evidence and experience, that tax cuts pay for themselves by boosting economic growth."

Fellow conservatives ate it up, grateful to have a palatable explanation for taking from the poor and giving to the rich.

Krugman notes that Kristol was downright gleeful about his deception,

"[conceding] to having had a 'cavalier attitude toward the budget deficit,' because it was all about creating a Republican majority—so 'political effectiveness was the priority, not the accounting deficiencies of government.'"

This flagrant disregard for the truth about the economy ultimately set the stage for the GOP's lies about the Affordable Care Act, and again today during its quest for repeal. In 2009 Republicans raged against Obamacare for not covering enough people while shutting down all discussion of universal

healthcare. Remember when they made giant out-of-pocket costs the cornerstone of their policy? Well, Republicans have conveniently forgotten that, as they shout about the act's high deductibles. Caught in their own lies, the *GOP* needs to create even more to try to destroy *Obamacare*.

The issue, as Krugman sees it, is

"once you accept the principle that it's O.K. to lie if it helps you win elections, it gets ever harder to limit the extent of the lying—or even to remember what it's like to seek the truth."

Which is not to say that the past 40 years have been entirely free of Republican political courage. Krugman points to the *Affordable Care Act's* origins in a 1989 *Heritage Foundation* proposal. Yes, the plan Republicans have spent the past seven years trying to destroy had roots in an idea from one of their favorite think tanks. George H.W. Bush even proposed a cap and trade system for regulating acid rain, which would ultimately become law. Still, these moments of grace are few and far between.

Krugman would like to be optimistic that a bipartisan solution is possible, but he's not holding his breath. He concludes,

"Republicans have spent decades losing their ability to think straight, and they're not going to get it back anytime soon."

[Read the entire column :](#)

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Who Ate Republicans' Brains?

When the tweeter-in-chief castigated Senate Republicans as **"total quitters"** for failing to repeal the *Affordable Care Act*, he couldn't have been more wrong. In fact, they showed zombie-like relentlessness in their determination to take health care away from millions of Americans, shambling forward despite devastating analyses by the *Congressional Budget Office*, denunciations of their plans by every major medical group, and overwhelming public disapproval.



Senator Lindsey Graham on Thursday, speaking about the proposal to repeal the *Affordable Care Act*. Credit Cliff Owen/Associated Press

Put it this way: **Senator Lindsey Graham** was entirely correct when he described the final effort at repeal as *"terrible policy and horrible politics,"* a *"disaster"* and a *"fraud."* He voted for it anyway — and so did 48 of his colleagues.

So where did this zombie horde come from? Who ate Republicans' brains?

As many people have pointed out, when it came to health care Republicans were basically caught in their own web of lies. They fought against the idea of universal coverage, then denounced the *Affordable Care Act* for failing to cover enough people; they made *"skin in the game,"* i.e., high out-of-

pocket costs, the centerpiece of their health care ideology, then denounced the act for high deductibles. When they finally got their chance at repeal, the contrast between what they had promised and their actual proposals produced widespread and justified public revulsion.

But the stark dishonesty of the Republican jihad against *Obamacare* itself demands an explanation. For it went well beyond normal political spin: for seven years a whole party kept insisting that black was white and up was down.

And that kind of behavior doesn't come out of nowhere.

The Republican health care debacle was the culmination of a process of intellectual and moral deterioration that began four decades ago, at the very dawn of modern movement conservatism — that is, during the very era anti-Trump conservatives now point to as the golden age of conservative thought.

A key moment came in the 1970s, when **Irving Kristol**, the godfather of neoconservatism, embraced **supply-side economics** — the claim, refuted by all available evidence and experience, that tax cuts pay for themselves by boosting economic growth. Writing years later, he actually boasted about valuing political expediency over intellectual integrity:

"I was not certain of its economic merits but quickly saw its political possibilities."

In another essay, he cheerfully conceded to having had a "cavalier attitude toward the budget deficit," because it was all about creating a Republican majority — so "political effectiveness was the priority, not the accounting deficiencies of government."

The problem is that once you accept the principle that it's O.K. to lie if it helps you win elections, it gets ever harder to limit the extent of the lying — or even to remember what it's like to seek the truth.

The right's intellectual and moral collapse didn't happen all at once. For a while, conservatives still tried to grapple with real problems. In 1989, for example, **The Heritage Foundation** offered a health care plan strongly resembling *Obamacare*. That same year, George H. W. Bush proposed a **cap-and-trade system** to control acid rain, a proposal that eventually became law.

But looking back, it's easy to see the rot spreading. Compared with Donald Trump, the elder Bush looks like a paragon — but his administration lied relentlessly about **rising inequality**. His son's administration lied consistently about its tax cuts, pretending that they were targeted on the middle class, and — in case you've forgotten — took us to war on false pretenses.

And almost the entire *G.O.P.* either endorsed or refused to condemn the "death panels" slander against *Obamacare*.

Given this history, the Republican health care disaster was entirely predictable. You can't expect good or even coherent policy proposals from a party that has spent decades embracing politically useful lies and denigrating expertise.

And let's be clear: we're talking about Republicans here, not the "political system."

Democrats aren't above cutting a few intellectual corners in pursuit of electoral advantage. But the Obama administration was, when all is said and done, remarkably clearheaded and honest about its

policies. In particular, it was always clear what the A.C.A. was supposed to do and how it was supposed to do it — and it has, for the most part, worked as advertised.

Now what? Maybe, just maybe, Republicans will work with Democrats to make the health system work better — after all, polls suggest that voters will, rightly, blame them for any future problems. But it wouldn't be easy for them to face reality even if their president wasn't a bloviating bully.

And it's hard to imagine anything good happening on other policy fronts, either. Republicans have spent decades losing their ability to think straight, and they're not going to get it back anytime soon.

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