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If Barack Obama is as gracious as he appears, his first action as president-elect this morning will be to send a bouquet of flowers to George W. Bush. No one has done more to make his presidency possible than Bush by embarking upon a democratization crusade, by presiding over a financial crash and by taking the GOP down along the way. Bush-hatred will likely dissipate as the president becomes even more of a cipher in his final months, but Obama should always have a soft spot for him. Perhaps he can even stop by to visit him at his Texas ranch as Bush clears sagebrush and reflects, if he's capable of it, upon his years in office. Senator John McCain, by contrast, was a profile in courage last night. After an unseemly campaign against Obama, he delivered an honorable — no, noble — speech last night. McCain noted the terrible stain that the legacy of slavery has left upon America and that the election of Obama helps to efface it. He also offered to do whatever he could to assist Obama in these perilous times — a gesture that Obama should take up.

The danger for the GOP is that the boos from the yahoos that McCain had to shush last night will determine its direction over the next four years. If these are dangerous times for America, they are doubly so for the GOP, which suffered a body blow last night. The 2006 election was an earthquake. Last night was the tsunami.

Obama's win in Virginia was a potent sign that the GOP can no longer rely on the South — not to mention the West — for safe votes. There are now two Democratic senators from Virginia. It will not be easy to dislodge them. Nor will it be any easier to regain control of the House, particularly given the gerrymandering powers the Democrats will enjoy. The loss of Ohio to Obama was also a depth charge in the belly of the GOP.

What is the precise problem the GOP faces? The pictures of Joe Biden's and Barack Obama's families embracing last night spelled it out — the Democratic party now far more closely resembles the demography of America than does the GOP. A lily-white party will never again win another presidential election. That's over. The tremendous upsurge of immigration into America over the past several decades means that whites will not remain in the majority much longer. What's more, Obama reversed the trend that Ronald Reagan set — he gobbled up the youth vote.

The Liberal Ascendancy

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Republicans who are counting on Obama being another Jimmy Carter should think again. For one thing, Obama's political career has been based in the Illinois state legislature and the Senate. He's not hostile to legislators, as was Carter. He's also likely to put together a solid team that includes either, or perhaps both, Chuck Hagel and Richard Lugar. Obama will pursue the reverse of the Bush-Rove polarization strategy. His will be to embrace as much of the opposition as he can. Had Bush struck out on such a course after September 11, he might have had a successful presidency.

The temptation for the GOP will be to move right — into the wilderness. It should resist it. It will be interesting to see if William Kristol and other neocons argue that the mistake McCain made was not to move even further to the right. But as Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff of the German Marshall Fund points out, the GOP needs to make the same move that European conservatives have had to make—to become a modern, conservative party. In my view, that means emphasizing low taxes and supporting investment in high technology. It will also mean dumping the hatred of elites. The sanest voices on the right, who are pointing to the GOP's travails, are the two Davids — Brooks and Frum. So far, they haven't gotten much traction. But if the GOP embraces Sarah Palin as its candidate in 2012, it will be condemning itself to political impotence.

For now, the moment is Obama's. He has the opportunity to create the anti-Reagan coalition, which is clearly his aim. In my view, the pundit class continues to underestimate his real ambition. He wants to go down as one of the great presidents in history. Creating a new and revived and modern liberalism — his ultimate goal — would allow him to go down in the history books as one of the greats. He's already gotten off to an amazingly fast start, and is unlikely to slow down any time soon.

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