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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Know-Nothing Politics

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

So the G.O.P. has found its issue for the 2008 election. For the next three months the party plans to keep chanting: “Drill here! Drill now! Drill here! Drill now! Four legs good, two legs bad!” O.K., I added that last part.

And the debate on energy policy has helped me find the words for something I’ve been thinking about for a while. Republicans, once hailed as the “party of ideas,” have become the party of stupid.

Now, I don’t mean that G.O.P. politicians are, on average, any dumber than their Democratic counterparts. And I certainly don’t mean to question the often frightening smarts of Republican political operatives.

What I mean, instead, is that know-nothingism — the insistence that there are simple, brute-force, instant-gratification answers to every problem, and that there’s something effeminate and weak about anyone who suggests otherwise — has become the core of Republican policy and political strategy. The party’s de facto slogan has become: “Real men don’t think things through.”

In the case of oil, this takes the form of pretending that more drilling would produce fast relief at the gas pump. In fact, earlier this week Republicans in Congress actually claimed credit for the recent fall in oil prices: “The market is responding to the fact that we are here talking,” said Representative John Shadegg.

What about the experts at the Department of Energy who say that it would take years before offshore drilling would yield any oil at all, and that even then the effect on prices at the pump would be “insignificant”? Presumably they’re just a bunch of wimps, probably Democrats. And the Democrats, as Representative Michele Bachmann assures us, “want Americans to move to the urban core, live in tenements, take light rail to their government jobs.”

Is this political pitch too dumb to succeed? Don’t count on it.

Remember how the Iraq war was sold. The stuff about aluminum tubes and mushroom clouds was just window dressing. The main political argument was, “They attacked us, and we’re going to strike back” — and anyone who tried to point out that Saddam and Osama weren’t the same person was an effete snob who hated America, and probably looked French.

Let’s also not forget that for years President Bush was the center of a cult of personality that lionized him as a real-world Forrest Gump, a simple man who prevails through his gut instincts and moral superiority. “Mr. Bush is the triumph of the seemingly average American man,” declared Peggy Noonan, writing in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2004. “He’s not an intellectual. Intellectuals start all the trouble in the world.”

It wasn't until Hurricane Katrina — when the heckuva job done by the man of whom Ms. Noonan said, “if there's a fire on the block, he'll run out and help” revealed the true costs of obliviousness — that the cult began to fade.

What's more, the politics of stupidity didn't just appeal to the poorly informed. Bear in mind that members of the political and media elites were more pro-war than the public at large in the fall of 2002, even though the flimsiness of the case for invading Iraq should have been even more obvious to those paying close attention to the issue than it was to the average voter.

Why were the elite so hawkish? Well, I heard a number of people express privately the argument that some influential commentators made publicly — that the war was a good idea, not because Iraq posed a real threat, but because beating up someone in the Middle East, never mind who, would show Muslims that we mean business. In other words, even alleged wise men bought into the idea of macho posturing as policy.

All this is in the past. But the state of the energy debate shows that Republicans, despite Mr. Bush's plunge into record unpopularity and their defeat in 2006, still think that know-nothing politics works. And they may be right.

Sad to say, the current drill-and-burn campaign is getting some political traction. According to one recent poll, 69 percent of Americans now favor expanded offshore drilling — and 51 percent of them believe that removing restrictions on drilling would reduce gas prices within a year.

The headway Republicans are making on this issue won't prevent Democrats from expanding their majority in Congress, but it might limit their gains — and could conceivably swing the presidential election, where the polls show a much closer race.

In any case, remember this the next time someone calls for an end to partisanship, for working together to solve the country's problems. It's not going to happen — not as long as one of America's two great parties believes that when it comes to politics, stupidity is the best policy.

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