

OPINION

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Another undead conservative idea

VIEWPOINT



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Barack Obama assumed the presidency determined not just to promote certain policies but to tidy up our minds as well. Some things we'd been saving, like conservative ideas on national defense and such, would have to go. Those were "the failed policies of the past," and he would not tolerate people clinging to them. Obama enthusiast and New York Times editor Sam Tanenhaus thought he was writing an epitaph when he published "The Death of Conservatism" six months ago.

But we have not cooperated. More to the point, the facts have not cooperated. That \$787 billion stimulus that was guaranteed to keep unemployment at 8 percent or less is now regarded by 75 percent of Americans as a corrupt flop. Seventy-one percent say underwear bomber Abdulmutallab should have been handed over to the military. And 58 percent say he should have been waterboarded.

Now we learn, from a study in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine end it that another prematurely buried conservative idea, abstinence education, works very well indeed.

The Obama administration had disdained and defunded abstinence education in favor of "evidence-based" programs to prevent teen pregnancy. (Note the assumption that liberal ideas are founded on evidence whereas conservative ideas spring from prejudice, ignorance or downright orneriness.) No one study settles things, but this one, conducted by an African-American professor from the University of Pennsylvania, will be hard to ignore.

Between 2001 and 2004, John B. Jemmott III and his colleagues studied 662 African-American sixth- and seventh-graders (average age 12). The kids were randomly assigned to one of four programs. The first emphasized abstinence and included role-playing methods to avoid sex. The second combined an abstinence message with information about condoms. The third focused solely on condom use, and the fourth (the control group) was taught general health information.

Over the course of the next two years, about half of the kids who received the condom instruction and half of the

control group were having sex. Forty-two percent of those who got the combination class were sexually active, but only 33 percent of the abstinence-only group were having sex. Additionally, and this confounds one of the myths of the condom pushers, the study found no difference in condom use among the four groups of students who did engage in sex. "I think we've written off abstinence-only education without looking closely at the nature of the evidence," Jemmott told the Washington Post. "Our study shows this could be one approach that could be used."

Elayne Bennett, founder of the Best Friends program, is delighted that the Jemmott research reinforces her experience with mostly African-American adolescent girls. Offering a mixed program of mentoring, dance, music, and role-playing, Best Friends and its new spinoff, Best Men for boys, has had two decades of success in helping kids abstain from sex, drugs, and alcohol until they graduate from high school. She has found that the kids desperately want someone to tell them it's OK to postpone sex. It's a commentary on our times but there it is -- we need special programs to give kids permission to say no.

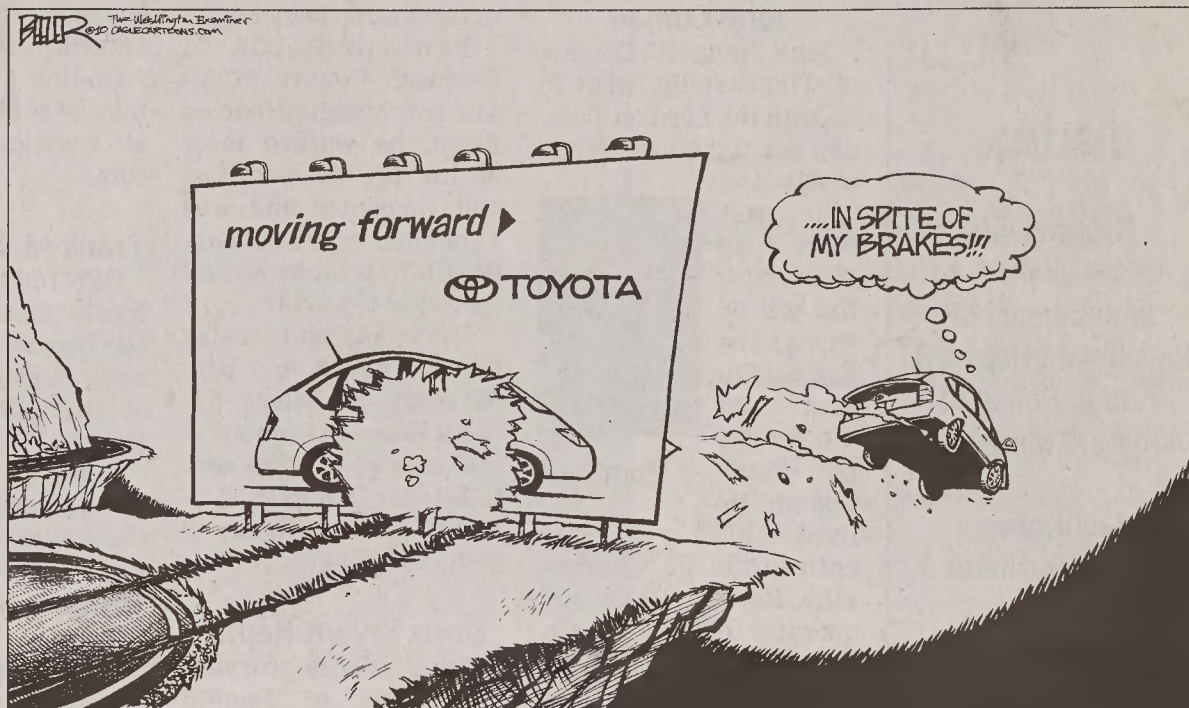
"The opponents," Bennett notes, "have popularized three words, 'Abstinence doesn't work.'" But her program and others like it have excellent track records. Every previous study showing the effectiveness of abstinence programs has been picked apart for one trivial flaw or another, but the new research seems airtight.

People usually form their opinions first and look only for evidence that supports their prejudices. That's another reason the Jemmott research deserves respect. He didn't conduct his research to support abstinence education. He's simply reporting on what works.

It's always been an open question whether supporters of so-called "comprehensive sex ed," with its heavy emphasis on "safe sex" and condoms, actually believe in abstinence at all. They always argued that "no matter what we say, the kids are going to have sex anyway so they might as well be safe." But they never adopted that logic with, say, cigarettes. They didn't lobby for mandatory filters on the grounds that the kids were going to smoke willy-nilly.

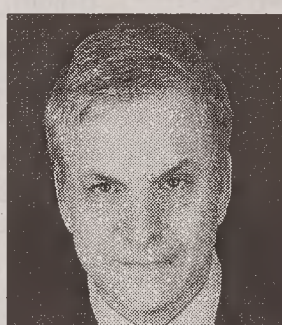
Well, this will be a test. The Obama administration has vowed to fund "evidence based" programs. Will they reverse their decision to completely defund abstinence ed?

To find out more about Mona Charen and read features by other Creators Syndicate columnists and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate web page at [www.creators.com](http://www.creators.com).



The GOP's dubious populism

VIEWPOINT



JOE CONASON  
 Syndicated Columnist

The most revealing moments in President Obama's State of the Union Address were not in his remarks, but the reaction to them by those listening on the Republican side of the aisle.

When he proposed to recover a "financial responsibility fee" — in plainer English, a bank tax — from the largest and most heavily leveraged Wall Street firms, the Republicans sat on their hands and scowled, while Democrats cheered and whistled. And when he warned that the Supreme Court's latest decision would open the political process to mega-corporations and their foreign owners, the Republicans were so enraged that they have since accused him of lying.

On both counts, the politics and policy are subject to reasonable disagreement — but the facts support the president. More importantly, however, is what both issues say about the continuing character of the Republican Party at a time when its leaders are counting on the "conservative populism" of the "tea party" movement to revive the party's fortunes.

Consider the possibility of unchecked foreign influence in American political campaigns, a change that would seem certain to irritate the self-styled super-patriots of the Republican right. Although Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito appeared to mutter that the president was "not right" during the speech — and was then echoed by every right-wing commentator, from The

Washington Times to The Wall Street Journal — non-partisan observers believe that Obama is indeed correct.

"With the corporate campaign expenditure ban now being declared unconstitutional, domestic corporations controlled by foreign governments or other foreign entities are free to spend money to elect or defeat federal candidates," said J. Gerald Hebert, executive director and director of litigation at the Campaign Legal Center in Washington. Fred Wertheimer of Democracy 21, a longtime reform advocate, explained why that is true, despite existing legal prohibitions against any contribution or expenditure by a "foreign national" to influence a federal, state or local election.

The current statute defines a foreign corporation as any firm that is "organized under the laws of or having its principal place of business in a foreign nation." So a company organized in Germany or headquartered in China would still be subject to the existing ban on donations.

"But there are domestic corporations — those organized under state law in the United States — which are and can be controlled by foreign interests," Wertheimer noted. Until the Supreme Court overturned the ban on corporate spending in the Citizens United decision, those foreign-controlled companies were subject to the same restrictions as American-owned firms. By striking down that prohibition, the court's Republican majority freed any foreign-controlled domestic company to spend its funds directly to influence our elections.

At least some of the founders of the "tea party" movement found this development disturbing — and that may be why the Republicans reacted so angrily when the president mentioned it. The same may be said of the new tax on big banks, which Republicans have vowed to reject even though

it is designed to recoup the costs of the bailout that was so unpopular among their "populist" constituents.

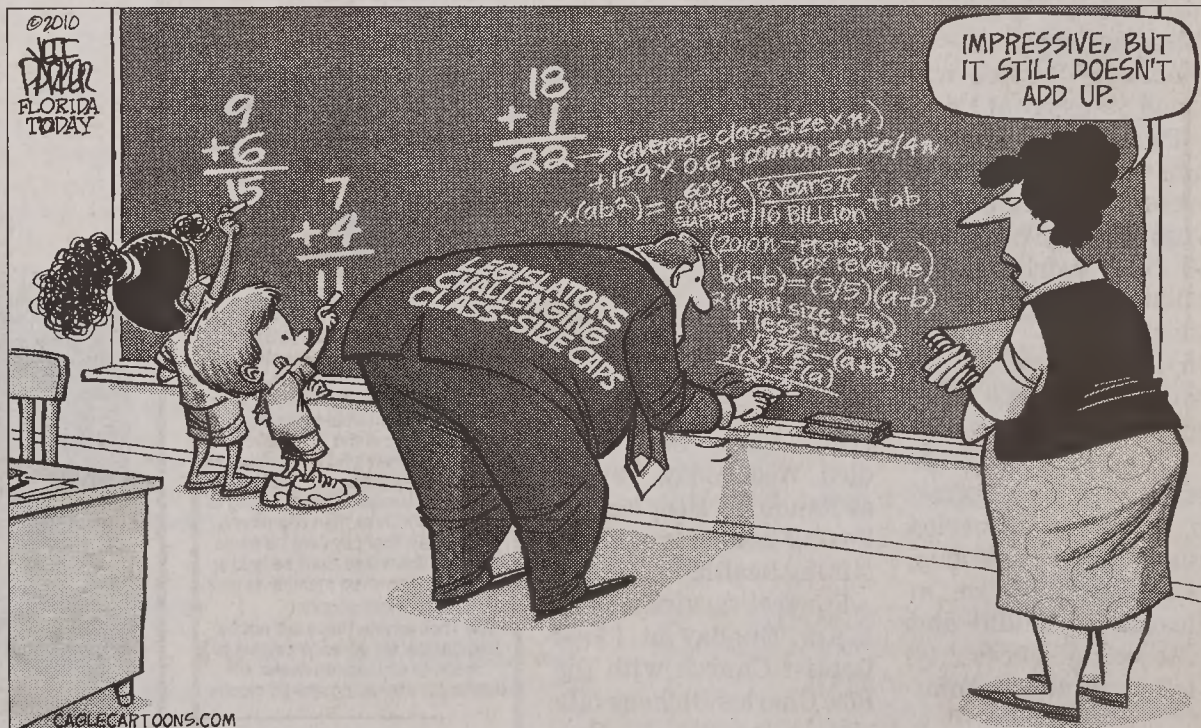
Again, the facts are simple enough. The legislation that established the Troubled Assets Relief Program — with many Republican votes — required the president to claw back the program's hundreds of billions of dollars through a dedicated tax. As designed by the Obama economic team, that tax falls solely on the largest financial firms and penalizes them according to the degree of leveraged risk those firms have taken on. Its designation as a "responsibility fee" is not merely a way to avoid uttering the word "tax," but recognizes that the economic and social costs of the recession must be charged to those companies and their irresponsible (and sometimes illegal) practices.

Again, the Republican response is anything but populist, unless that term has lost all meaning. The Republican National Committee chairman, Michael Steele, and an array of the party's elected officials marched to the microphones to parrot the same arguments articulated by the bankers: They've already paid back the money! They're going to pass the tax on to their consumers! And a recession is no time to raise taxes anyway!

The new GOP idols, Scott Brown of Massachusetts and Marco Rubio of Florida, were the most eager critics of any attempt to tax the bankers.

The more Republicans claim to change, the more they remain the same. The more they wrap themselves in dubious populism, the more they will defend the wealthy and powerful, without respect to national sovereignty and the national interest.

Joe Conason writes for the New York Observer ([www.observer.com](http://www.observer.com)). To find out more about Joe Conason, visit the Creators Syndicate website at [www.creators.com](http://www.creators.com).



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