In President Obama’s first run for the presidency, he met the unlikely but formidable force of Sarah Palin, John McCain’s vice presidential running mate. Palin’s down-home-Dorito, folksy appeal went over big when she said, “What's the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull? Lipstick.” Catchy.

Obama had the misfortune of using the lipstick scenario when he said later, “You know, you can put lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.” The McCain campaign went into apoplexy and put their cool, “articulate” opponent on the defensive. How dare he call Palin a pig. The soap opera drama of that campaign eclipsed even the best episodes of Glenn Close’s TV series Damages. You can’t make this stuff up.

But “lipstick on a pig” is what came to my mind when I heard of Karl Rove’s newest brainchild, The Conservative Victory Project [2]. If his Midas touch (which proved to be so much tin foil after they lost the 2012 election) can’t elect a Republican president, then maybe he can use it to reinvent the party. Karl, read my lips: You can’t put lipstick on a pig.

The so-called moderate wing of the Republican Party’s policies are not so different from their Tea Party cousins, it’s just that the Wall Street crowd is trying to send a message to the southern rabble that says, “Use your inside voice.”

Of course, who can blame Republican candidate hopefuls from distancing themselves from a party whose pointy white hood is showing. It’s embarrassing as well as downright unelectable in the 21st century. And with this new debate on the Second Amendment and white men in camouflage cargo pants (tricky) hunkered down in the wilderness with their assault rifles selling wolf tickets to the
government, well, it smacks a little of the Civil War (the movie Lincoln, notwithstanding, but Django definitely, look out.) Then there is Indiana Senator Richard Mourdock talking about rape that is heaven-sent, not to be confused with Todd Akin’s “legitimate rape.” And then there is Republican governor Bobby Jindal throwing the Republican Party under the bus by calling it “the stupid party.” What with meddling in women’s underwear with ultrasound abortion legislation and insulting people of just about every color, the optics for Republicans are not good.

But this is not the first time that the Republican Party has gone all AR15 on America. In the 1960s there was George Wallace. George Wallace was a staunch racist, Alabama governor, and four-time presidential candidate who stood in the way of black students to enter the University of Alabama in steely, Charlton Heston “cold-dead-hands” determination to thwart federal orders for integration. In the 1972 presidential election, George Wallace went up against Richard Nixon as an Independent. He had a formidable lock on a considerable percentage of southern voters and 8% of voters elsewhere. Nixon was afraid that Wallace’s candidacy would kick the election into the House of Representatives where he would lose. The Wallace popularity was mostly backlash from the civil rights movement, much like the Tea Party antics reflect the racist meltdown of whites feeling threatened by an Obama presidency and changing demographics.

Although in Republican circles Wallace is treated now like an embarrassing uncle who drinks too much at parties, a book by biographer, Dan T. Carter, lays the birth of the neoconservative movement of the ‘80s at Wallace’s feet. In his book, The Politics of Rage, Carter writes:

“If [Wallace] did not create the conservative groundswell that transformed American politics in the 1980s, he anticipated most of its themes. It was Wallace who sensed and gave voice to a growing national white backlash in the 1960s; it was Wallace who warned of the danger to the American soul posed by the “intellectual snobs who don't know the difference between smut and great literature”; it was Wallace who railed against federal bureaucrats who not only wasted the tax dollars of hardworking Americans, but lacked the common sense to 'park their bicycles straight.'

Nixon went full throttle to destroy Wallace for his own political advantage, but Wallace’s extreme views and civil rights clamor compelled Nixon to morph to the center to recover the Republican Party. Indeed, after he was elected president, it was Nixon who came out with health care. According to Wikipedia: “In February 1971, President Richard Nixon proposed more limited health insurance reform—a private health insurance employer mandate and federalization of Medicaid for the poor with dependent minor children.”

He also created the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air Act that conservatives have been trying to dismantle. He gave a nod to the civil rights of Native Americans so much so that a tribe renamed their capital “Nixon.” It is not that I am trying to extol the virtues of Richard Nixon. My point is simply to talk about how the Republican Party has rebranded itself over the years. Nixon’s lefty bent which is a sign of the ‘60s, shows not only a trend for rebranding, but today the Party has taken a sharp lurch to the right on overall policy. The extreme Tea Party agenda talking points are coming out of the mouths of legislators in Congress. The Republican brand today is about shrinking government to the extent that we don’t even need the EPA to protect us from industrial swill. They don’t just believe in small government, but want to shrink government to minute proportions. They are about insulting minorities and women, and for this
right wing party of “no”, compromise with the Democrats is the c-word.

As extreme and racist as the Republican Party may seem today, according to Dan Carter, the Party is being true to its Wallace roots. Carter says that Wallace actually transformed into Ronald Reagan:

“As soon as another figure came along who could take his message and domesticate it and make it more appealing than Wallace the person, then Wallace was going to be sidetracked. Ronald Reagan takes many of the same ideas, many of the same values, many of the same things that Wallace did, but in a much more appealing way, and sells them to the American people. So I think Wallace would have eventually been eclipsed by a Reagan or someone like that if he would not have been shot.”

In response to Karl Rove’s attack on the rowdy relatives of the Republican Party, today’s Huffington Post headlines read, “Joe Walsh Super PAC Launches To Oppose Karl Rove, Establishment Republicans.” For sure it’s going to be a battle royale. The Tea Party conservatives are bringing tea bags to a party where the country club conservatives are drinking Chivas. But make no mistake about it, they are not fighting over policy. They’re just fighting over what shade of lipstick to wear.

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