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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## The Long Voyage Home

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Republicans generally like Westerns. They generally admire John Wayne-style heroes who are rugged, individualistic and brave. They like leaders — from Goldwater to Reagan to Bush to Palin — who play up their Western heritage. Republicans like the way Westerns seem to celebrate their core themes — freedom, individualism, opportunity and moral clarity.

But the greatest of all Western directors, John Ford, actually used Westerns to tell a different story. Ford's movies didn't really celebrate the rugged individual. They celebrated civic order.

For example, in Ford's 1946 movie, "My Darling Clementine," Henry Fonda plays Wyatt Earp, the marshal who tamed Tombstone. But the movie isn't really about the gunfight and the lone bravery of a heroic man. It's about how decent people build a town. Much of the movie is about how the townsfolk put up a church, hire a teacher, enjoy Shakespeare, get a surgeon and work to improve their manners.

The movie, in other words, is really about religion, education, science, culture, etiquette and rule of law — the pillars of community. In Ford's movie, as in real life, the story of Western settlement is the story of community-building. Instead of celebrating untrammelled freedom and the lone pioneer, Ford's movies dwell affectionately on the social customs that Americans cherish — the gatherings at the local barbershop and the church social, the gossip with the cop and the bartender and the hotel clerk.

Today, if Republicans had learned the right lessons from the Westerns, or at least John Ford Westerns, they would not be the party of untrammelled freedom and maximum individual choice. They would once again be the party of community and civic order.

They would begin every day by reminding themselves of the concrete ways people build orderly neighborhoods, and how those neighborhoods bind a nation. They would ask: What threatens Americans' efforts to build orderly places to raise their kids? The answers would produce an agenda: the disruption caused by a boom and bust economy; the fragility of the American family; the explosion of public and private debt; the wild swings in energy costs; the fraying of the health care system; the segmentation of society and the way the ladders of social mobility seem to be dissolving.

But the Republican Party has mis-learned that history. The party sometimes seems cut off from the concrete relationships of neighborhood life. Republicans are so much the party of individualism and freedom these days that they are no longer the party of community and order. This puts them out of touch with the young, who are exceptionally community-oriented. It gives them nothing to say to the lower middle class, who fear that capitalism has gone haywire. It gives them little to say to the upper middle class, who are interested in

the environment and other common concerns.

The Republicans talk more about the market than about society, more about income than quality of life. They celebrate capitalism, which is a means, and are inarticulate about the good life, which is the end. They take things like tax cuts, which are tactics that are good in some circumstances, and elevate them to holy principle, to be pursued in all circumstances.

The emphasis on freedom and individual choice may work in the sparsely populated parts of the country. People there naturally want to do whatever they want on their own land. But it doesn't work in the densely populated parts of the country: the cities and suburbs where Republicans are getting slaughtered. People in these areas understand that their lives are profoundly influenced by other people's individual choices. People there are used to worrying about the health of the communal order.

In these places, Democrats have been able to establish themselves as the safe and orderly party. President Obama has made responsibility his core theme and has emerged as a calm, reassuring presence (even as he runs up the debt and intervenes rashly in sector after sector).

If the Republicans are going to rebound, they will have to re-establish themselves as the party of civic order. First, they will have to stylistically decontaminate their brand. That means they will have to find a leader who is calm, prudent, reassuring and reasonable.

Then they will have to explain that there are two theories of civic order. There is the liberal theory, in which teams of experts draw up plans to engineer order wherever problems arise. And there is the more conservative vision in which government sets certain rules, but mostly empowers the complex web of institutions in which the market is embedded.

Both of these visions are now contained within the Democratic Party. The Republicans know they need to change but seem almost imprisoned by old themes that no longer resonate. The answer is to be found in devotion to community and order, and in the bonds that built the nation.

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