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OPINION

New GOP chair has tough job ahead

The party needs to reconnect with its base while reaching out to other New Yorkers

BY DESMOND RYAN

The new New York State Republican chairman, Ed Cox, has a branding problem. He has assumed the role of chairman of a party that has to figure out what it is, who it represents, what values it will embrace and how it will define its mission in an unrecognizable political landscape.

It's a party that needs to welcome new faces while maintaining core principles. It needs to connect with its traditional blue-collar base while fending off raids from special interest parties that would splinter its political power. It must move to the center while keeping conservative Republicans at the table.

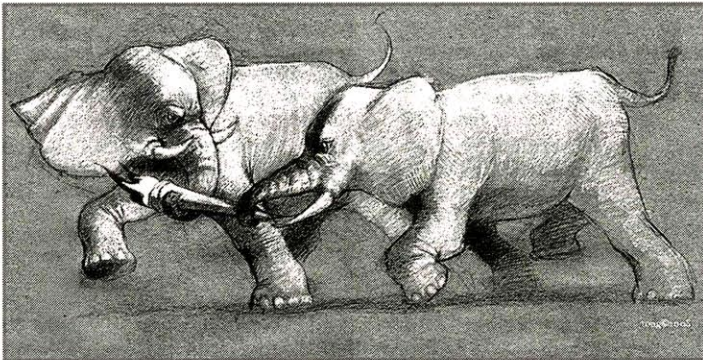
This is not a new place for the New York State Republican Party. After the death of Nelson Rockefeller, the larger-than-life Republican governor and Gerald Ford's vice president, few thought that the party would ever recover its financial or ideological health beyond its strongholds on Long Island. Many observers predicted a lifelong Democratic ascendancy that would be based on

New York's demographic shift and New York City's dominance. The party had become irrelevant, a mere sparring partner for the Democrats.

And then Alfonse D'Amato, Rudy Giuliani and George Pataki came along and swept away the cliches, allowing the Republican Party to dominate for a decade. While they never adopted it as a formal strategy, they embraced the GOP's "Big Tent," conjured by the late political operative Lee Atwater.

Now, once again, the political tide has turned. Cox is at the head of a political organization that seems to be in the wilderness. While there are similarities to the debris-strewn end of the Rockefeller era, chairman Cox has a far more challenging environment to conquer.

The New York State Republican Committee is now on better financial ground because of the pragmatic efforts of his predecessor, Joseph Mondello, but it doesn't have a strong enough Internet presence. The latest generation of voters has been seduced by President Barack Obama and wants to identify with his party. Special interests



TONG ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL TONG

masquerading as political groups, such as the Working Families Party, are distorting sparsely attended elections.

And most ominously for Cox, the Obama White House is putting resources and personal prestige into New York State politics in a manner unseen in recent memory.

No longer an infallible political machine, the White House assault on Gov. David A. Paterson brought a sustained round of public condemnation from people who don't necessarily support the governor. Nevertheless, the Oval Office is seeking to have a direct hand in many of the decisions on who will run and where, as it seeks a bluer than blue Democratic New York.

politics. Yet he appears committed to expanding the party's financial base, creating state-of-the-art digital media programs and offering a party that welcomes both sides of the Republican spectrum.

More than finances, Web sites or enrollment campaigns, Cox will need to find articulate, attractive and diverse faces who the New York State voter believes will not only

How Cox responds to that political assault will be a function of how heavily the burden of taxes will fall on New York's wealthy, businesses and entrepreneurs, who are currently viewed as annuities by this White House. In addition, every angry middle-class homeowner who attended a health care "town hall meeting" is a potential recruit for New York's Republican Party.

Cox also comes with baggage. He was a general in Sen. John McCain's presidential campaign and his party's leading name, Rudy Giuliani, has a notoriously long memory for perceived acts of disloyalty. Cox is also viewed by some as old-guard Republican blue blood, a class woefully unprepared for brass-knuckle

be empathetic but effective. He needs to diminish his own profile as a political operative and elevate those who can stand separate and distinct from the wreckage of New York State politics. And yet, if the Democrats' current leadership of the State Senate is any indication, the best thing he may have going for the GOP is his opponents' ability to generate self-inflicted wounds that will leave the voter looking for — dare I say it? — change.



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