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7 of 10  
**John Fund: Why Bayh Is Quitting the S...**

8 of 10  
**Judy Shelton: The United States: Debt...**

9 of 10  
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OPINION | FEBRUARY 16, 2010, 10:55 P.M. ET

## Why Bayh Is Quitting the Senate

*'I do have a sense of deja vu,' the senator says, 'and the movie doesn't have a happy ending.'*

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By JOHN FUND

Before Indiana Sen. Evan Bayh suddenly announced he will not seek re-election in November he had issued several warnings to fellow Democrats. Last month, for example, he told Gerald Seib of this newspaper that his party's liberals were "tone deaf" to the fact that they'd "overreached" in their agenda. "For those people," he said, "it may take a political catastrophe of biblical proportions before they get it."

Mr. Bayh knows something about high-water political floods. As a 24-year-old law student he helped run his father's 1980 Senate re-election and saw him go down to defeat under the Reagan landslide. In 1994, Mr. Bayh was governor of Indiana and thankful he wasn't before the voters when they revolted against Bill Clinton. "Every 14 or 16 years we seem to have to relearn this lesson," Mr. Bayh said. "I do have a sense of deja vu, and the movie doesn't have a happy ending."

He isn't the first observer to note the misfortune that befalls modern Democrats when they gain control of the presidency and both houses of Congress. After Jimmy Carter won the White House, Ronald Reagan assembled a group of his former aides in Los Angeles in early 1977 for a pep talk about how the GOP loss would only be temporary if they learned from the party's mistakes and returned to first principles. He quoted from a John Dryden ballad memorized as a youth: "I'm a little wounded, but I am not slain. I will lay me down for to bleed a while. Then I'll rise and fight again."

Conservatives, he said, should be of good cheer. Democrats win the White House when they campaign as moderates, but once in office they find it impossible to do so even if they want to "because the unions and their Congressional leadership won't let them."

But governing as liberals meant Democrats undermined the trust voters placed in them. They also enacted policies that increased economic uncertainty and retarded job creation. "When liberalism fails, people notice. They may even protest," Reagan told his aides, pointing to California's nascent Proposition 13 tax revolt—the "Tea Party" of its day. "And it's then they'll listen to you again if you have a clear set of ideas based on sound principle."

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Aides such as Peter Hannaford realized he was planning to run for president again envisioning just such a scenario. The rest is

history.

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In early 1993, before he succumbed to Alzheimer's, Reagan met with some of his appointees in New York City. The circumstances were remarkably similar to those of 16 years prior—Republicans had lost heavily in the last election due to scandal and economic miscalculations. Larry Kudlow, a Reagan budget official who is now a CNBC host, recalls that the Gipper reminded those at the meeting of what he'd said in 1977.

Bill Clinton had also campaigned as a moderate but was already governing as a liberal—and Reagan said it wouldn't fly with voters. "He said the failure of liberalism would again present Republicans with an opportunity if they ran on a pro-growth, antitax agenda that reasserted America's place in the world," Mr. Kudlow says.

And now, once again, Democrats have overreached and are in danger of suffering a historic defeat.

All of this makes one wonder if Democrats will ever have a "Tony Blair" moment and make a conscious return to the political center. After his Labour Party suffered three straight defeats, Mr. Blair took over as leader. He marginalized its left-wing extremists so the middle class could trust his party with power.

Mr. Blair told the Times of London he realized the "default mechanism" of Britain was closer to that of the Conservative Party, and that his party must move to the center. He then won three straight elections. Now that Labour is returning to its class-warfare roots under Gordon Brown, it once again faces electoral defeat.

So far, Democrats show no signs of thinking the U.S. is a country whose "default mechanism" in politics is to the center-right. They retain faith that Barack Obama can work some magic and make things better. But should he continue to slide in polls and the horror movie Mr. Bayh refers to is replayed this fall, they may want to rethink matters.

At age 54, Mr. Bayh is leaving Congress but declines to rule out another run for office. Should Democrats ever be open to a Tony Blair message, no doubt Mr. Bayh could be persuaded to return to the arena. He's won five times in a red state while compiling a voting record significantly more liberal than Arlen Specter's or Olympia Snowe's. Yet today he's viewed by many Democrats with disdain as a conservative collaborator.

Nothing better sums up the Democrats' self-inflicted problem.

*Mr. Fund is a columnist for WSJ.com.*

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