

Republicans this week paid a heavy price for their failure over the last few years to live up to the principles and standards the American people believed they represented when they took the House of Representatives from the Democrats a decade ago.

This year's election turned out to be just what many in the GOP leadership and those of us outside Congress had feared: a referendum on the performance of Republicans in the White House and the Congress rather than a contest between competing ideological visions.

Indeed, this may have been the least ideological election in modern memory with voters rejecting Republicans across the board not because they rejected where Republicans want to take the country so much as their performance in taking us their.

In recent years conservatives have been shocked as Republicans who have spent a lifetime professing a belief in a smaller, limited national government band together to spend more money on Washington solutions to state and local problems than their Democratic predecessors.

It took the Republican Congressional leadership elected in 1994 but a few months to decide that the most important item on their agenda was to simply hold onto their majority even if it meant surrendering their principles. The end was in sight when late in 1995, then Speaker Newt Gingrich called his troops together and promised his appropriators would give them anything they needed to be re-elected.

Conservatives have watched Republicans elected by promising the highest standards in terms of integrity come to Washington to do good and stay to do well ... for themselves, their families and their friends and in the process demeaning the offices to which they were elected.

Conservatives like Randy “Duke” Cunningham and Bob Ney saw the main chance when they got here and went for it. It’s true, of course, that there are as many and perhaps even more corrupt liberal Democrats serving in Congress, but that doesn’t excuse those who came to town dedicated to reform and conservative principle.

We have witnessed the hypocrisy of Republicans leaders who came to Washington swearing an allegiance to upholding traditional values work to protect those among their number who have flaunted those values, morals and standards.

We won’t know until the investigation is complete who knew what about Mark Foley’s e-mails, but his colleagues had a pretty good idea of what he was up to and ignored it. What’s worse is the fact that the head of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee actually urged Foley to run again this year in spite of what he and others knew.

We have stood by as Republicans have flaunted, twisted and ignored rules to achieve their own partisan rather than principled ends; leaders who have used earmarks to seduce reluctant members to vote for legislation they knew was wrong and kept votes open for hours while they and their White House allies bludgeoned their colleagues into line in support of such legislation.

With the results in the time has come for conservatives, Republicans and those who made them pay for their performance to demand better.

First, House Republicans should heed the advice of Virginia Congressman Eric Cantor who has called for postponing the leadership elections now scheduled to take place on November 15th, but two days after Congress returns.

A delay of even a few days will give new members and old a chance to ponder their future and decide whether they want to continue doing business in a way that brings shame to their party or go back to the principled conservatism of Ronald Reagan. If they decide they want to go back and get their act together, they will elect Mike Pence of Indiana as their new Minority Leader. Pence has emerged in the last few years as the smartest, most articulate and well liked conservative House leader many of his colleagues will ever meet. He revitalized the House Study Committee, took on the big spenders in his own party and proved to be both tough and principled. He's just the sort of leader the House Republicans need to lead them out of the wilderness into which they've managed to wander.

There are other good conservatives in the House who are ready to help Mike put things right and will step forward to do so.

The new leadership should work with the White House when the President is right and even with the new Democratic Congressional leadership when good ideas come from that quarter.

They should remember that many of those Democrats who were elected yesterday ran as moderate conservatives in districts that are traditionally conservative. Democratic candidates didn't articulate much in the way of a concrete agenda, but they did make promises to those whose votes they sought. Many of them promised they won't raise our taxes, demanded fiscal responsibility and attacked their GOP opponents for their participation in the spending binge that has characterized Washington in recent years. Many also disclaimed any intention of abridging traditional second amendment rights and declared themselves pro-life.

If these candidates were sincere and it should be assumed that they were until they prove otherwise, Republicans should be able to work with them on substantive issues where there is agreement.

At the same time, Republicans should go back to the principled stands that made America's voters proud to vote for them; that brought millions of traditionally Democratic voters into the Republican fold ... voters who deserted them this year simply because they believed they'd been had.

Nancy Pelosi has said that she wants to reform the way Congress does business and has in the past supported many of the same reforms that have been suggested by the Republican Study Committee and other Conservative members.

In fact, she and 162 of her colleagues signed on to a package of procedural reforms before the election that included earmark reform, limits on the leadership's power through the Rules Committee to alter legislation before it reaches the floor, a requirement that members actually have a day to read the legislation on which they are being asked

to vote before the vote is called and a limit on the amount of time a vote can be kept open.

These are needed reforms and if she and her colleagues were serious when they endorsed them, they will enact them as their first order of business in the next Congress.

We would be better off as a nation and as conservatives if the leaders of the two parties in and out of Congress would fight out their differences on substantive issues questions for the simple reason that most Americans have the common sense and intelligence to support the conservative position on important issues when there is a fair debate.

The Democrats acknowledged this themselves this year by running candidates who they urged to support many of the substantive positions their Republican opponents were articulating because they knew as we must remember that while the American people were willing to reject the feckless and halfhearted leadership they saw from Republicans in Congress they want to support people who share their conservative values.

Most conservatives in and out of Congress think of themselves as conservatives first and Republicans second, but most of us are Republicans because we believe most Republicans share the principles and values we wish to see reflected in public policy.

At the same time, however, we are and have always been willing to cross party and ideological lines to accomplish those goals and continue to be willing to do so.

We hope that the party in which most of us have invested our trust will learn the right lessons from what happened yesterday and work to redeem that trust lest it be lost forever,