

machine. The old cadre of party bosses were never comfortable with the mix of political ideas these people brought with them but liked their numbers. The "Party of The Rebellion" found its political platform from increasingly mixed socialist and so-called liberal reforms; and in the 1930s the Democrats under Franklin D. Roosevelt engineered a major redefinition of government's role in American society. Often accused since then as the Party of the Left — "The Party of Traitors" — the Democrats usually attempt to fix the national political structure after rapacious Republicans tear it apart with corruption, mismanagement and hate campaigns against political adversaries, primarily women, liberals and racial minorities. The real bankruptcy of the Democratic Party in recent times is that it has done little to stem the wild surge to the right in American politics but has instead short-sightedly accommodated it with opportunistic envy.

The general perception is that the Republican and Democratic parties are converging into a single party. Yet significant differences remain. The Republicans claim to be anti-government and open market though they beef up the military-industrial mafia at the expense of domestic social programs that the Democrats support in the belief that government can improve the lives of poor people and help expand the middle class as a bulwark against an aristocracy of wealth. The Republicans act paranoid in their attempts at exclusivity, each campaign a farther withdrawal from the incredibly diverse mass of citizenry, attacking any shift of power away from the *status quo*, while the Democrats more by default reflect the diversity, perhaps because it has no other home as a result of GOP rejection and the unpopularity and powerlessness of third parties. Self-proclaimed as the "Party of the People" (to offset the "Party of Traitors" label), of disenfranchised minorities, workers and immigrants, the Democrats have in their campaigns favored such liberal causes as labor reform, busing to achieve racial integration in public schools, abortion on demand, abolishing capital punishment, gun control, gay rights, greater representation in politics by women, blacks and young people (the 18 year old vote), and though Democrats have been in power during most of this century's wars in which the U.S. participated, dissenting Democrats have been in the forefront of demands that war be abolished as the nation's major instrument of world power. Paradoxically, the only times Republicans have been in accord with Democratic policies were during these wars; the power to make war is for them the essential leverage for rule over world affairs. In this the GOP shares the view of FDR and all Presidents since World War 2 that the immense wealth and power of the U.S. makes it "responsible for world leadership." Harry Truman, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan were particularly tenacious that the U.S. be "Number One."

This more than any other reason has split the Democratic Party the past half century — the ineffable question about the coexistence of raw power with civil rights. When in 1972 the Democratic Platform said in part that "All Americans should be free to make their own choice of lifestyles and private habits without being subject to discrimination or persecution," it was not only Republicans who declared that the Democrats "had been seized by a radical clique which scorns our nation's past and would blight our future." That year more Democrats defected from the party than in 1948 when two factions split off from the central party, "Progressives" and "Dixiecrats" that orbited outside Truman's center. The next great defection was in 1980; "Reagan Democrats" they were called, primarily white males fleeing, as in 1972, the increasing influence of women, people of color, *McGoverniks* and other riffraff in the Democratic Party. The Party's response was to abandon its traditional base. Since 1980 the Democratic Party has been in pursuit of its primarily conservative defectors instead of shoring up its immense base of working people, racial minorities and women. The Democratic leadership signaled defectors during the 1992 Presidential campaign that it was safe to return to the Party because, a party strategist said, "poor black, Hispanic, urban, homeless, hungry and other people and problems out of favor in middle America will no longer get the favored treatment they got from mushy 1960s and 1970s liberals."

White voters switched from the Democratic Party to the Republicans because they perceived it as a party of minorities while party leaders and candidates regard such a perspective to be a liability. The national tide and strength of the conservative movement is a result of the gains of the civil rights movement which set off a full scale revolt against minority rights as infringements against "traditional" rights and precipitated the political swerve to the reactionary right. And though Democrats have been staunchly labor oriented, much tangible support from the big unions has withered not only as a result of a decade of savage union busting by the corporate elite in league with conservative Republican administrations but also because of the party's sympathies for the mushrooming population of Hispanics and the flood of newer arrivals from Asia and other parts of what until recently was regarded as the 3rd World. Reflecting the world at large which has generally been divided into rich and poor nations, United States politics is an ever-widening bicameral separation between rich and poor within the nation, with the Democrats accumulating a disproportionate membership of the impoverished whose growing presence within the party percolated the white flight that has tremendously benefited the Republicans.

The Democratic Party leadership has chased its fleeing whites into the conservative vice of the Republicans and has left behind the vast majority of its membership. As a result the two parties appear to converge into a single interest group with a carbon copy sameness and respond to an increasingly narrow, affluent and conservative constituency. Perhaps the question is not about a third party but creating a truly second party.

The chaotic diversity of the American political system not only pits such special interest groups as race, religion,



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ethnicity, gender, capital and labor, but inside each general category are limitless special cells, each of which appear in direct opposition to those of every other cell, a multiplicity of special interests the two party system is unable to adequately quell or represent.

With only two parties through which to realize their ambitions mainstream politicians show little interest in responding to minority interests or, in fact, to registering into the parties the millions of blacks, Hispanics and caucasian poor who seldom participate in the political process because although the involvement would swell each party's ranks, it would also broaden the base of each party and threaten the *status quo*. Entrenched incumbents count on fewer people voting to maintain power and on ever larger contributions from wealthy and corporate sponsors who use their money to turn campaigns into public trials of fear and loathing.

Though candidates of the two parties publicly appeal to the masses for their votes they usually serve the minority at the nation's upper end. It is not entirely the fault of office seekers that the system is tilted toward the top. Elites take root in every society and wield disproportionate power unless a counterbalance restrains them. In a democracy that force of resistance is constitutionally the power of ordinary people. Political parties are formed to reflect and channel the passions of ordinary people and publicly represent them fairly, efficiently and powerfully, in theory at least, with a minimum of corruption and disruption. The two party system fails this purpose. It is too exclusive and compressed, and it eliminates too many people and ideas from the actual process of governance and elections. The parties in reality serve politicians not voters.

Although there are many who fear that more political parties will open up the process too much and render it unstable and ultimately unmanageable, the nation is too large, too populous, too complex to be adequately represented by only two. The current system of only two viable political parties has resulted in shrinking democracy. Only more democracy, more political parties, will reverse the decline.

On average, less than 50% of eligible voters in this country vote. The nonvoters are usually economically handicapped and suffer most from inequities and corruption. Disgust and powerlessness, not apathy, alienates citizens from the polls and are a major source of a great public discontent that expressed

itself last November. An example is the popularity of limiting terms of political office at all levels, a sign that even those who do vote are attempting to directly seize the political process. That momentum might be tapped more pertinently the next few years by concentrating on registering to vote the many millions who have either dropped out of the political process or were never given much of a chance to be involved in it. If these millions were to rise from their bitter despair and lethargy and use nothing more than their constitutional right to register and vote they could begin a revolution as sweeping in its effects and change as the original revolt against English rule, which was as corrupt and shortsighted as the current American government. This revolution is underwritten in the nation's basic principles and is more binding than the ancient right to remove emperors in old China or revolt against kings in medieval Europe. This revolution is within the law, it is supported by the law, in essence at least if seldom in practice; and the law not only provides its mechanics, the law in a sense depends on electoral uprisings to maintain its legitimacy.

The creation of a new political party or a spawn of parties might have disruptive effects, a worst case scenario being a civil war such as occurred when the Republicans replaced the old Whig Party and is occurring in the new republics whose multiple births ripped apart the Soviet womb. The risks here at home are tremendous, yet the American political apparatus needs massive and real change which is not being provided by an antiquated two party system that represents only a privileged minority. The *New American Revolution* proposed by the *nouveau* Cromwellian parliament will soon taste very stale, a hackneyed sequel to an old revolution that gave propertyed white men supreme dominance over the nation.

These are the questions: Is the Democratic Party fatally weakened and should it be replaced with a new party or several confederated parties or can it survive and revive and sweep into power a government truly representative of this polyglot nation? Should political parties reflect national interest only or expand and affiliate internationally as with the Green Party?

"We cannot escape history," Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican, warned. Neither significance nor insignificance will protect us. What we do in the crises of our era, our own fiery trial, "will light us down in honor or dishonor to the latest generation."

The above is a rewrite of a talk given at a community political forum January 8 that was held at the Netel Grange in Lewis & Clark, Oregon.

VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

I don't have anything to say to anyone.
I want to go somewhere dark
and shut my eyes and ears
and curl into myself.

The savior is coming
who wears black all over
who makes no noise
who knows peace and quiet
who demands nothing
who is like a great dark bird gliding
slow over hills and fields as the sun sets.

~STEVE CLEVELAND

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