



TOM TOMORROW ('THIS MODERN WORLD')

THE BIG ELECTION

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rights gains, busted labor unions and repealed government regulations on business. Inevitably, depredations that were the cause for civil rights protections and business regulations once more became common practice. The nation's banks operated as casinos, corporations consumed each other in feeding frenzies that left millions unemployed and millions of dollars in defaulted debts, environmental protections were voided in favor of overdevelopment; and the nation moved from the world's wealthiest to a debtor nation. Carter might have added that among the divisions in America that would result from Reagan's Presidency were rich from poor as the richest got richer and the middle class shrank toward poverty.

As historian Arthur Schlesinger said of Dwight Eisenhower's election in 1952, after twelve years of Democratic Presidencies (FDR's four terms and Truman's one), the return of business to power in 1980 brought with it "the vulgarization which has been the almost invariable consequence of business supremacy." Anti-intellectualism, Schlesinger said, "has long been the anti-Semitism businessman." Adlai Stevenson, who twice lost to Eisenhower (in 1952 and 1956), called the election of Republicans to the White House the replacement of the New Dealers by the car dealers.

Stevenson was especially disturbed by the virulent anti-communism and never subtle racism of his Republican opponents. He responded to Eisenhower's Vice Presidential choice Richard Nixon's slander that the "communists in the United States and Russia wanted a Democratic victory" — an attitude nourished by the GOP throughout the Cold War — with the eloquence he was famous for: "Because we believe in a free mind, we are also fighting those who, in the name of anti-communism, would assail the community of freedom itself ... the pillorying of the innocent has caused the wise to stammer and the timid to retreat. I should shudder for this country if I thought that we, too, must surrender to the sinister figure of the inquisitor, of the great accuser..."

Nelson Rockefeller, a moderate Republican who lost the 1964 GOP nomination to Barry Goldwater and his ultra-rightwing supporters, said much the same thing at that year's Republican Convention. Heckled by a chorus of boos, shouts and hisses, Rockefeller said, "These things have no place in America, but I can personally testify to their existence. And so can countless others who have also experienced anonymous midnight telephone calls, unsigned threatening letters, smear and hate literature, strongarm and goon tactics, bomb threats and bombings, infiltration and takeover of established political organizations by communist and Nazi methods."

Ronald Reagan knew even as he invoked FDR's name that the New Deal and its offshoots (HST's 'Square Deal', JFK's 'New Frontier', LBJ's 'Great Frontier') had run their course, and

he was the figurehead who danced happily on their graves. Yet the electorate, unwillingly stuck with the bill for the high-rolling 'Casino '80s' and hearing the hounds of the avaricious rightwing that always vindictively reverses the blame of its excesses and stupidities onto those who attempt to prevent them, began to realize that the ebullient patrician of the New Deal had it right when he said in a campaign speech in 1932 that the federal government has a responsibility to assist the business community to "develop an economic constitutional order" in which the distribution of wealth would be fair and every working man and woman would be assured the "right to make a comfortable living." In other words, "a new deal" for the majority of Americans.

Roosevelt's New Deal was anathema to America's crippled business culture of the 1930s and the Republicans of that era reviled him as a socialist. Yet, as Norman Thomas, perennial socialist candidate for President insisted, FDR "did not carry out the socialist platform, unless he carried it out on a stretcher." And Gore Vidal, grandson to a U.S. Senator and cousin of a Vice President and Presidential candidate (Al Gore), has written about FDR: "There was no plan. There was no New Deal, or any deal at all except that of a very wily, bold card player who, once

he'd lost a hand, would say, 'Let's deal again.'" Despite the antipathy directed at him by his own wealthy patricianate and by rabid anti-communists and business organizations who thought the New Deal was directed from Moscow (Harry Bridges, leader of the ILWU, defined "communists" as "anybody who wants a nickel more than the boss is willing to pay"), FDR's popularity with most Americans was summed up by a working man in 1936 (his second candidacy of four terms), "Mr. Roosevelt is the only man we ever had in the White House who would understand my boss is a son-of-a-bitch."

George Herbert Walker Bush presented himself as the "Guardian of the Reagan legacy" in both his successful 1988 Presidential campaign and his reverse in 1992, a legacy that Garry Wills wrote was a "deficit that turned us from a creditor nation to a debtor nation."

Father Bush started his political career as a Goldwater extremist and "believes he must always court the extreme rightwing, which from the start has always been suspicious of him," Wills wrote in 1992. Bush's courtship of the Republican extreme right disturbed moderates in the party who attempted to disassociate from the anti-intellectual and evangelical fanaticism it continues to represent under his son's tenure. Molly Ivins called the GOP convention in Houston that year "a feast of hate and fear." She sardonically cited Pat Buchanan's keynote speech as the convention's highpoint. Indeed, listen to what he said:

"There is a religious war going on in this country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself..."

The Cold War was over by 1992. A new war was necessary, the new enemy this time was within — or as Ivins interpreted the new crusade, paraphrasing Buchanan's grim call to arms, America's cities were to be retaken (with "M-16s") "block by block, from the Americans who have with fiendish cleverness infiltrated their own country." This "ethnic cleansing" proposed by the Republican Party was designed as a "religious war" upon the poor, the homeless (whose presence became a fixture of the Reagan/Bush years as a result of Republican monetary and social policies, and whose continuing presence remains the true legacy of that era), gay and nonwhite people, and "uppity women" whose demand for an equal role in American affairs faced grim resistance. "These are people who want others under discipline," Garry Wills wrote of GOP extremists, "and who want to be under discipline themselves." Wills wrote that with the end of the Cold War, the Republican Party, "which took its coherence from anti-communism is coming apart," and he asked, "How is it possible for people who have an authoritarian view of society in general to be effectively anti-authoritarian in politics?"

Earlier this past summer when Reagan died, the country spent a week amidst a Gilbert & Sullivan pageantry of burying an ex-President. His two inaugurations were the most opulent ever (paid for by his wealthy benefactors who celebrated buying the Presidency), and his funeral was pomp and platitude with a lot of arrogant bloviation from his latest successors who claim his mantle over his dead body. He seems to be the only President with an *ism* after his name (we've had Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, etc., but no previous *ism* attached to a Presidential reign — and Reaganomics is also new).

Richard Nixon had the misfortune of dying during the tenure of Bill Clinton. He was buried as an embarrassment with minimum pageantry. His last error was to die while the Democrats were in the White House.

Hugh Sidey, *Time/Life* political writer for 40 years, wrote of Richard Nixon's landslide reelection in 1972, "These are the days when the ghosts of Jefferson and Lincoln and the other great American Presidents walk through the American mind. Who really is this man we have in the White House for four more years?" That is the essential question that should be asked about George W. Bush before any consideration of a second term.

With Sidey's Nixon, we can address the campaign and character of Bush II who ardently pursues a second term as President (re-election is not an adequate description of his

DEMOCRACY BEGINS AT HOME

Democracy begins at home. First in the heart; from there it radiates through the house into the neighborhood and community. It is found in smaller places rather than in massive standardized illusions of popular culture that reflect vapid manipulation and mendacity as well as gross distortions of Constitutional purposes and interpretations.

Democracy is a pragmatic compromise between the yearning for freedom and the urge to frustrate it. It is an elaborate though inherently fragile system of concessions between diverse and disparate ambitions and ideologies represented by a variety of economic and political classes, despite an enshrined myth that a democracy is a classless society. The irony is that democracy is better able to tolerate class differences than any other system of government. The only possible survival for a democracy is to establish and sustain a balance between its conflicting factions and allow none of them to gain such power as to be capable of suppressing or ravaging the rest.

So long as no particular interest is powerful enough to fully and finally overwhelm its varied rivals, nor any alliance capable of singleness of purpose long enough to accomplish that end, a tacit respect for the laws and terms of constitutional democracy is maintained. At rare moments an idea that might accidentally resemble social justice is sometimes enacted as law of the land, although opposing forces waste little time in attempts to overturn whatever might be to their disadvantage.

Democracies are themselves compromises between dreamlike edens of anarchy, socialist collectives of workers' paradises in which individual liberties are usually forfeit as are most worldly possessions including food and shoes, and aristocracies of one shape or another that rule through tradition and privilege for the single purpose of their own comfort, which is historically at the expense of large masses of impoverished citizens who are obliged to toil and obey. Democratic governments are most often inspired by rising classes of bourgeoisie whose general outlook is liberal and progressive yet seldom naive about the affairs of business and government. The political suffrage of the democratic public is channeled by powerful political/economic interests to stifle possibly contagious outbreaks of populism.

Democracies face periodic crisis when ideological concerns lose patience with legislative or judicial processes. Powerful, often retrogressive and reactionary forces rise at times of rapid social transformation, which also generally

include more than usual excesses of corruption as well as strained economies. When ideologies rigidify into implacable positions that despise workable compromise the likely result is civil violence, which might erupt on a skinhead scale yet quickly escalate into savage extremes such as an earlier American experience (1861-65) or the Balkan and Rwandan butcheries a decade ago. (A distinction should be made between violent reprisals by an uncompromising government and uncompromising violence by a rapacious minority determined to undermine and overthrow government.)

Democracy evolves. Like nationalism, capitalism, socialism and communism, it is no more than part of a process of human development that is always evolving into something else. Ideas, which are usually expressions of concern people have about the welfare of others, develop into ideologies that separate them as enemies. Ideologies do not usually translate well into reality except they often make it appalling by the fervor with which they are promoted. Governments generally violate their charters, and no matter how they wish to be considered, are most often oppressive to their populations and aggressive with their neighbors. Political rights or liberties hard-won by one generation are usually eroded by successors who take them for granted without realizing how rare, necessary and fragile they are.

The history of an age is not about solutions to problems but of the struggle between several possible explications and the manner in which seekers for certain answers are deflected by others working for other rationales. Capitalism, communism, fascism, any and all *isms*, are constantly reforming, overlapping and separating, and inherent within all of them are the human factors of power, avarice, corruption, violence and asininity. No system is foolproof, and like every other organism each moves toward decay. The farther in time a form of rule or ideology moves from its founders the less recognizable its foundations. Murray Kempton once wrote that the bearers of political myth of every era seem to carry in their hands the ax and the spade to execute and inter the myth of every previous era.

Human beings cannot escape history is the Marxist idea; but human beings make their own history. Freedom and equality, like love, begin at home.

We might remember Judge Learned Hand: "Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it."

—MICHAEL McCUSKER



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