



—THEODORE ROETHKE

REINVENTING DEMOCRACY

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"If democracy is going to survive in this country, tens of millions of poor and working people are going to have to see the connection between their economic condition and the political process. They must vote not for the lesser of two evils, but for jobs, health care and the dignity to which they, as human beings are entitled. Only when that occurs will American democracy become revitalized."

~U.S. SENATOR FROM VERMONT, BERNARD SANDERS*

Let us now praise famous elections. This November 7, 2006 national election is one for the history books — though a cautionary note might be James Madison's fervent declaration that July 2, 1776, the day 13 American colonies voted political independence from Mother England, would live forever in the newly denominated nation's history.

Yet what an upheaval this election is. One party rule is checked for now — and perhaps for good, which is the real spark that ignited election day. The war in Iraq might be acclaimed the major source of the upset in Republican plans to rule the USA in perpetuity; so also might be the pervasive political and corporate corruption and incompetence; the pathological secrecy and deception that underlies this decrepit and pathetically avaricious administration, with the lies told by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Rice to push the nation into war, and to "stay the course" when everything about the war started falling apart, deserve a special category in the people's resolve to change things before it was too late.

But most especially the premise that one political party be allowed absolute power in the claim that a single ideology is right and every other political option regarded as "unpatriotic" or "treachery," is the most pervasively dangerous aspect of contemporary politics in the United States. Fortunately voters sensed the threat and beat it back, at least temporarily.

Now that a majority of the American people have slapped down, however briefly, the sinister schoolyard bullies who cloaked themselves as Caesars (even so, they are Neros and Caligulas rather than Augustans), it is necessary to set an agenda for Congress that repairs our nearly decimated democracy and extends it beyond the harm it has endured.

First, of course, is necessary housecleaning. That would start by seeking an end to the war in Iraq, a civil war our invasion has instigated, as much among Americans as among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. Simultaneously, investigations must be opened into how the President and his avaricious cabal of nouveau empiricists managed to batter the Constitution as if it were a prisoner at Guantanamo. And if any crimes were committed, such as deceiving the nation into war, fraudulent elections, or illegally abolishing such libertarian fundamentals as *habeas corpus* and *posse comatatus*, then federal law demands the impeachment of any and all accused of perpetrating them.

After purging the government of evil and evildoers, the new majority Congress can begin to fix it as well as expand liberty and justice for all. Overruling the Patriot Act by Congressional mandate would be a very good start.

Early on, Congress must deal with the poisonous contradictions of immigration and decide to let in anybody who wants into the United States. The nation's doors should be as open as they were for our ancestors, yet we literally build walls to keep most of the rest of the world out (such as the thousands of Iraqis fleeing the horrible slaughter in their country). We pilfer most of the planet's resources yet deny its populations access. Our policies are ambiguous at best, restrictive yet treating the world as a single economy and exporting jobs overseas to underpaid workers — perhaps the real issue of the immigration debate: as a smokescreen to shroud the fact that more jobs are lost by corporate offshoring than to incoming immigrants, legal or illegal.

Next on the agenda might be education, a major priority despite other pressing needs. We are a nation face-forward to the future; yet conversely plunder the future of our heirs by scrimping on their education, making it too expensive and simultaneously more mediocre. Public education should be upgraded at all levels so that, literally and truthfully, no child is left behind. In particular, the former system of California state universities should be reinstated nationally and make college tuition-free yet scholastically competitive rather than financially onerous as at present: to paraphrase Karl Marx, education ought to be 'for each according to his/her ability, from all according to common need.' That applies to the arguments about private and/or home education — these forms of education must not promote racial or gender supremacy, nor should they be regarded as training schools for a "leadership elite." The prospect of deteriorating public schools for the poor and minorities, and private schools/home tutoring for the rich, raises a specter of the ultimate eradication of democracy.

It is more than ever necessary for Congress to ensure the separation of church from state, which the current President has recklessly eroded. By its own law the government cannot and should not impose any manner of worship or religion upon its citizens or any others who live in this country. It cannot attempt to regulate or interfere with religion or anyone's choice of worship or choice not to. The current debate about church and state is less about religion than it is a dichotomy of political



values between those who would impose a narrow doctrine of absolutes that are not to be questioned or resisted, only obeyed, and those who believe that everyone has the right and obligation to choose their own beliefs about what is right and wrong.

Separation of church and state is not only consistently blurred but actually annulled in the course of manipulating religiosity to serve the corruption of state power. The moral values that seemed to trump the 2004 election were bitterly narrow

EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

The pretense that half the human race is unequal and subordinate to the other half is a persistent malignancy. It has been chronic through history, especially in periods when muscle and force held sensitivity and intelligence in thrall. Yet the need to be equal and free is the most stubborn human hunger. It has taken centuries for women to emerge from the dominance of their male counterparts — it took more than a century after the inception of the United States for American women to gain the vote. So it should be no surprise that the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution will not stay dead.

The ERA was last defeated on July 2, 1982, the date the nation's forefathers declared themselves free from England's tyranny and promised equality to "all men" in 1776. The ERA failed even though it had the support of 80% of the electorate because of a handful of men in three state legislatures; five other states that had initially approved the measure, rescinded their votes. Those who regard women as chattel celebrated and pronounced the ERA dead.

The ERA has been sent to the grave more than once in the 83 years since Alice Paul wrote the amendment in 1923. On July 14, 1982, the same month as ERA's failure to be ratified on deadline, and the same day celebrated as the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789, fifty-three U.S. Senators and 201 Representatives co-sponsored the ERA in both houses of Congress. That attempt also failed.

A national referendum would probably make the ERA law within months. Instead, when revived again — and it will be; the newly elected Congress should resurrect the ERA as one of its first measures — it must once again travel the tortuously long trail through the states: 38 states must ratify it, and even the most optimistic believe it will take years.

One possibility to encourage the process of making the ERA a part of the Constitution is for women to vote out of office all who oppose it and support only candidates who endorse it, which unfortunately was not an issue in this past election.

In the words of Susan B. Anthony:
There shall never be another season of silence until women have the same rights men have on this green earth.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER.

concerns, certainly not about the morality of waging preemptive war, but about abortion and homosexuality, which missed the larger point — a cash economy that has no other purpose than enrichment of a special class corrupts not only the moral compass of a society, but also devalues our treasured civil rights and liberties.

And Congress should abolish all attempts to nail the biblical ten commandments to schoolhouse walls — although evoking the real ten commandments of democracy, the Bill of Rights, might give hope and inspiration to alienated youth who might otherwise remain ignorant of their Constitutional rights and obligations.

Another priority of the new Congress is reforming the American tax system in favor of ordinary taxpayers rather than the wealthy, whom the current system reward beyond reason or merit. The first reform guarantee should be an accounting for every taxpayer as to how their money is being used at every level of government, and that basic returns for that money be automatic priorities available to every citizen, such as food, shelter and health/medical care. The current system of required payment of taxes (generally withheld from wages) without any accountability for their use by government must be reversed, which is possible with computerization of all public agencies. It will eventually be possible with such basic reforms that taxpayers will have legal power to determine where their taxes are spent. At present the American tax system, simply defined, is capitalism for the poor, socialism for the rich.

And now: Labor. It is not nearly enough for Congress to raise the national minimum wage. The legal framework of the labor movement needs radical change. Political solutions in which workers' rights and union democracy in its broadest sense are guaranteed is crucial to right the imbalance between wealth and equity.

The power of American labor unions to represent and protect the rights and persons (as well as jobs) of workers in corporate America has drastically eroded over the past decades. Union busting by corporations and politicians has decimated some of the country's largest and formerly strongest unions. Labor law has failed to protect workers and government acts as a tool for the company. The bitter assault upon labor by government and industry has crippled union power to such an extent that unions are unable to gain significant wage raises or protect the jobs or labor rights of hundreds of thousands who are sacrificed to corporate arrogance, greed and mismanagement by the downsizing or divestiture of jobs by exporting them offshore.

Rebirth of a robust labor movement requires the enfranchisement of women and minorities (plus physically and mentally handicapped workers) and should focus on a social crusade framed as an extension of American democracy, in a sense recreating a social justice movement like civil rights in the 1960s. Reestablishment of a genuine union culture in the United States and radical reforms of labor laws should be a primary goal of Congress for the good reason that labor and production are at the heart of economic and political health and survival.

Congress has a marvelous opportunity to immediately put into effect rigorous environmental regulations to stop the poisoning and ravaging of Earth. Subsidizing and protecting major polluters and devastators must be stopped. Instead these moneys might be used to pay the wages of those who will have to work at rectifying the damage. Hundreds of thousands will probably lose their jobs and it will be necessary to retrain them for other work — perhaps cleaning up what they were paid to pollute or despoil regardless of how modest their contributions to the national/global junkyard. Jobs will mean nothing if the air is unfit to breathe and the planet is baked like a pie.

In conjunction with what most likely seems draconian environmental/ecological measures, Congress should directly fund research and development of alternative sources of energy that have long been abandoned but are more necessary than ever — such as solar, geothermal, water and wind power to replace the fossil fuels that have built and maintained modern civilization but have as their cost imperiled life on the planet.

The possibility of obliteration is ironically accelerated by our dependence on oil which has caused the government to set up and sustain repressive regimes in the Middle East, the backlash of which compels American oilgarchs to force a series of oil wars upon our armed forces that use up maximum amounts of stressed petroleum products in our immense war machine.

The nuclear power industry, despite its claims to be the solution to energy shortage and atmospheric pollution, should not be restarted. On the contrary, the nuclear lobby, partnered with the oil industry, squelched alternative energy development that has set back its application for years — and Congress still needs to find a suitable and safe solution to the long-standing problem of safekeeping existing nuclear waste generated by nuclear power plants.

This new Congress can begin the politically explosive task of decriminalizing illegal drugs which will most likely dry up the huge profits made by drug lords and significantly curb the massive corruption and violent crime terrorizing the nation. Their precedent is the repeal of Prohibition ('The Volstead Act'), which criminalized the use of alcohol as a beverage and lasted from 1920 to 1933 until overwhelming public antipathy inspired incoming President Franklin D. Roosevelt to rescind the ban after 13 years of bootlegging, corruption, murder and gangland wars that were waged for the immense profits from supplying illegal liquor to otherwise upright citizens.

Hypocrisy is the word is the word for the 'War on Drugs' which selectively prohibits the use of some substances and tolerates the use of others that are as much or more dangerous to public health — such as alcohol and tobacco that have killed

*Bernard Sanders is the lone socialist in Congress. He is the newly elected Senator from Vermont after serving several terms in the House of Representative.