

American Democracy after Bush :

Out with the Republican Party, in with the republican Spirit

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The now widespread call for “change” reflects a resurgence of the still-present *republican spirit* that has characterized America when it is at its best, which is, alas, not always the case. But which is the best candidate to fulfil this longing?

The Bush reign ended symbolically with hurricane *Katrina*. When the news media talked about “refugees” fleeing New Orleans; when the TV showed the terrible scenes of those unable to flee who were left to fend for themselves in a football stadium—or, when I was asked a few days later to appear on a talk radio show to explain what Hobbes meant by the state of nature as a “war of all against all” – it was clear that something finally had snapped. The failure to find the supposed WMD in Iraq, the grotesque photos from Abu Graib prison, and the manifest twisting of national and international law at Guantanamo had not hit home until that terrible storm of August 2005 and its aftermath. From that point on, as if a faultily knitted sweater began to untangle its formerly connected warp and woof, the one loose thread began to unwrap the intricate deception.

Katrina revealed first the incompetence of a government that had won re-election by its promise to protect its citizens. The agency responsible for dealing with natural disasters had lost its independence when it became part of the gigantic Department of Homeland Defense created in the wake of 9/11. Its incompetence, second, was seen to be the result of a kind of corruption that had seeped into an administration that had no tolerance for a loyal opposition even within its own ranks; it was a regime without checks and balances. This was connected, third, to a totalizing project that placed its friends everywhere within the power structure (including among the lobbyists: this was the moment of the Jack Abramoff scandal, in whose wake at least two Congressmen are now in jail); political loyalty rather than competence were rewarded. It became clear, finally, that this corruption was a threat to the

republic; it was not just private self-enrichment but an attack on the “virtue” that is the basis of any political republic.

Against this background, another consequence of the Bush political machine took on a greater importance: those “refugees” from New Orleans were mainly black, and they were poor. In one sense, this was not surprising; but in the classical republican framework that Americans were vaguely remembering, the racial and economic inequality took on a different weight: it was a source of shame. As opposed to guilt, which is internalized and individual, shame exists in the eyes of others and calls for social remedies. The political autism of Bush’s foreign policy is put into question by the rediscovery of shame; one need not be a specialist in foreign policy to know that America’s reputation has been sullied, nor an idealist to recall that it was once, and can again be guided by better hands.

In this context, the now widespread call for “change” reflects a resurgence of the still-present *republican spirit* that has characterized America *when it is at its best*, which is, alas, not always the case. At present, according to a survey by the Wall Street Journal and NBC News just prior to the beginning of the primaries 24% of Americans, whatever their partisan choice, desire “small adjustments,” 29% want “moderate correction,” while a massive 46% yearn for “major reforms” and a “brand-new” approach to politics.

But the appeal to a “republican spirit” is shot full of ambiguity; the Republican party has its own claims to the label. Classical republicanism assumed the existence of a “common good” beyond the difference of interests among the citizenry, which were to be sacrificed if necessary. And, in foreign policy, its universalism can become imperial, with unpredictable domestic consequences¹. I will return to these ambiguities and hopes at the end of these remarks.

The ambiguities of the classical republican project suggest that the Bush junior regime can be seen as the radical heir to Reagan’s *America’s Back!* After the Clinton interregnum, the neo-conservatives (who did not include Bush, or Rice) set out to realize goals that they had proposed privately at the end of the government of Bush senior², and then elaborated publicly

¹ Cf. Peter Bender’s provocative *Weltmacht Amerika. Das neue Rom* (Klett-Cotta, 2003), whose French translation *L’Amérique nouvelle Rome. L’engrenage de la puissance* (Buchet-Chastel, 2005), adds a clarifying subtitle.

² The project was drafted by under-secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz under the direction of secretary Cheney. It envisioned a world in which America would tolerate no competitors to its world dominance; its unilateralism would be reinforced by the use of military pre-emption when necessary. After the 46 page document was leaked to the *New York Times*, which published an article about it on March 7, 1992, the document was toned down and

in the 1997 “Project for a New American Century.” Their goals dove-tailed nicely with the outsized dreams and underhanded methods of Republican party leaders captivated by Karl Rove’s ambitious plan laying the grounds for a long-term domestic hegemony modeled on Mark Hanna’s creation of the McKinley presidency in 1896, during which Spain was driven from the New World and the Philippines conquered (at the cost of a long and costly guerrilla war). Financial support was assured by hitherto unheard of tax cuts to the wealthiest segments of society, creating a wealth-gap that recalled the rapacious rule of the Robber Barons of McKinley’s day.

The creation of a new political oligarchy was to be based on the complete conquest of all available levers of power *and* its ruthless use against any source of resistance. The Republican leaders of both Houses of Congress brooked no dissent. In the House, the rule of Tom DeLay was absolute, the Democrats were excluded from participation at every possible occasion, and dissenters within Republican ranks were penalized (while the venial sins, financial or sexual, of those who remained faithful were overlooked). “Earmarking” of projects for the favored meant that the supposedly frugal, small-government Republicans increased vastly the deficit, but this contradiction was overlooked by the power-driven party loyalists. The Republican-led Senate gave the President a blank check for appointees, forgetting its constitutional duty to “advise and consent.” When the Democrats dared object, the Republicans threatened what they themselves called a “nuclear option” that would destroy the rights of the minority. As a result, the judiciary is now overloaded with life-tenured ideological Republicans whose rulings have begun to roll back the gains of the civil rights era while confirming the exorbitant claims of executive power which is the capstone of the Bush edifice.

More important than the Republican smothering of Congress and the judiciary has been the expanded power of the presidency. This had been the dream of Dick Cheney since his days as White House chief of staff under Gerald Ford when, in the wake of Nixon’s abuses, the “Watergate Reforms” re-established the constitutional equilibrium among the branches of government, particularly in the form of Congressional and judicial oversight over the presidency. Presidential power did not grow simply in response to 9/11; Cheney had already refused to release the names of those whom he was consulting with regard to the reform of US energy policy. That was the first claim of “executive privilege” with regard to the release of documents or the testimony of administration personnel before Congressional

committee hearings. It has not been the last, despite the Democrats' retaking of Congress in 2006.

Another manifestation of this omnivorous new executive branch can be seen in the scandalous over-reaching of the Department of Justice, most baldly in the nomination (and removal) of federal prosecutors and their clearly political decisions as to whom to prosecute and whom to ignore (for example, the former Democratic governor of Alabama, Don Seligman, received a five year jail term on charges of corruption for activities that, had he been a Republican, would certainly have been ignored).

But enough. As Machiavelli might say, *if* it is necessary to take power in such a way, one might indeed imitate the deeds of this Prince, as one should imitate those of Borgia, Sforza, even the lowly Agathocles, described in the chapter titled "Of Those who Have Attained the Position of Prince by Villainy." But was it necessary to follow this path in an America whose republican spirit did not suddenly disappear on September 11 2001? And was it wise? Could it work? After all, it should be recalled, Machiavelli was a republican who understood the limits as well as the need for power.

The Bush overreaching could not be maintained; the edifice began to crack, like the dams that broke in New Orleans. The public that was rendered skeptical by the aftermath of *Katrina* was long weary of a military quagmire; many still remembered May 1, 2003, when the president-hero landed on the flight-deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln under a sign "Mission Accomplished." But the mission was not just military; as in domestic affairs, the Bush gang identified force with politics. Total victory leaves you with no resources when the tide turns.

But the now nearly ubiquitous desire for "change" that has been adopted by all of the candidates, from both parties represents no alternative project. What kind of change? By which participants (or actors)? With what goals? Even the Republicans, especially the Republicans who are worried about their future and have no loyalty to a lame-duck president, want "change."

American political parties have traditionally been coalitions of interest groups. The “Reagan coalition” that George W. Bush inherited is composed of three distinct groups: the “values voters,” offended by secular relativism and united by their religious evangelism; the libertarians who want to cut taxes and keep government small; and the former anti-communists allied with the neo-conservatives who want to conserve American hegemony. This coalition formed at a particular time (the 1980s) in particular circumstances (a fossilized progressive Democratic party that was prisoner to its own coalition members), and around a particular leader (Reagan, and then George Bush as the “anti-Clinton” in 2000, re-elected in 2004 on a platform of fear).

As the 2008 primaries take shape, it was evident that the coalition was breaking up. Each component had its own candidate(s); the religious/values candidate, Mike Huckabee, won the Iowa primary; the tax-cutting small government forces managed a victory in Michigan by Mitt Romney; while the aggressive foreign policy faction could claim a victory with John McCain's ability to rally independent voters in New Hampshire although Rudy Giuliani, stressing his role as New York mayor during 9/11, was competing for its support in Florida. The chances that no candidate would dominate the primaries, with unseemly bargaining at the Convention (of the sort: "we'll vote for your candidate if ours becomes your Vice-President or Secretary of State.") would weaken the eventual candidate, who would be denounced as a puppet by the opposing party. However, due particularly to the fact that the Republican party gives all of the delegates from a state to the candidate who has the largest number of votes, Romney and Huckabee nullified each others chances, letting McCain triumph even though he never got close to a majority in most states. (To give a hypothetical example, McCain might get 38%, Romney 34%, Huckabee 28%, and the rest of the field picking up the remainder. In that case, McCain would win all of the state's delegates.) McCain's problem now will be to unify the party, a task whose difficulty is manifested in the fact that Huckabee has remained a candidate who draws upwards of 20% of the votes.

As for the Democrats—who, it should be noted, seem certain to enlarge their majorities in both Houses of Congress—there are two choices: transition or transformation. A third possibility would try to renew the very old coalition, whose glory days date to the New Deal that was cobbled together in the middle of the last century, trying to reawaken the old ghosts who still remember Franklin Roosevelt's famous October 31, 1936 re-election speech at Madison Square Garden, when he attacked those who “had begun to consider the Government of the United States as a mere appendage to their own affairs. We know now,” he

continued, “that Government by organized money is just as dangerous as Government by organized mob. Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me - and I welcome their hatred.” The result could be a renewed populism, personified by John Edwards. The fighting spirit is admirable; but class warfare has little resonance in a country whose history has remained colored by its republican origins and its democratic social relations.

The Democrats who are concerned above all to return to power (and to “change” losers of the Bush years into the winners of tomorrow) tend to line up with Hillary Clinton. Typical of her approach is a TV ad that ran shortly before Christmas. Mrs. Clinton talks ostensibly to herself, asking where to put the presents labeled “Universal Health Care” or “Alternative Energy,” before unveiling a surprise gift called “universal pre-K.” As *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich points out (January 13, 2008) this piecemeal approach to reform is typical of her campaign director, Mark Penn, who recently explained his theory of winning politics in a book called *Microtrends*. Penn’s thesis, according to Rich, is that “there is no one America anymore,” but rather “hundreds of Americas.” Penn, who has kept his job as chief executive of the Public Relations firm Burson-Marsteller, prides himself on “the niching of America.” This is necessary, he claims, because “Americans overwhelmingly favor small, reasonable ideas over big, grandiose themes.” This progressive inversion of the old Stalinist “sausage technique” might indeed insure the transition to a Democratic victory; and it would certainly inaugurate many piecemeal reforms, as in Mrs. Clinton’s ad. But “small ideas” and acceptance of the idea that “there is no one America anymore” are problematic recipes in a nation that remembers (at least sometimes) its republican heritage while desiring “major reforms” and a “brand-new” approach to politics.

The other option places its bets on a revival of the republican spirit. In the soaring rhetoric of Barak Obama, who first came to public attention in his 2004 Convention speech, one hears the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, the rhythmic hopes of the gospel, as well as the rhetoric of the great Shakespearean theater. His acceptance speech after his surprise victory in Iowa seemed to echo the Bard’s Henry V addressing the “happy few” on St. Crispin’s Day before the Battle of Agincourt. Appealing precisely to the one America, preaching the need to overcome the sharp-edged stalemate that has made politics into a dirty word for many citizens, Obama seems to have struck a spark. But where is the kindling? How will the fire be sustained? How can the candidate of “hope” overcome the cool headed

practical reflections of older party regulars who prefer Hillary Clinton as the candidate of “experience”?

With her back to the wall in New Hampshire, Hillary Clinton put her foot in her mouth. In what seemed to be a common sense remark, she pointed to what may prove the crucial element in the renewal of American democracy at the end of the Bush era. “Dr. King’s dream began to be realized when President Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act,” Mrs. Clinton said, “It took a president to get it done.” While this was literally the case, there had been many presidents prior to LBJ; and they did not “get it done.” One could even say that it was only because of the Civil Rights Movement that the president was able to act successfully. Whether Mrs. Clinton’s insensitivity—which occurred at the same moment that she showed exquisite sensitivity to her female public, showing finally that she, too, had emotions like the rest of us³—will cost her in electoral terms can be left aside here; our concern is the future of American democracy, not that of a candidate for its leadership, be she a woman, or he an Afro-American.

The attractiveness of the Obama candidacy lies in its *post-racial* nature. It is as if the call of the Civil Rights Movement for *integration and equality among all Americans* had been realized; the old coalition politics, in which African Americans had become merely another interest group wanting its share of the pie, could finally be transcended. While Hillary Clinton’s victory might break what she calls “the hardest glass ceiling”, it’s not clear that she would inaugurate a *post-feminist* era—which might not be a good thing! She is a first-class politician whose victory, however, would be the triumph of partisan politics over the hope of democratic renewal.

There was a revealing implication in Mrs. Clinton’s insistence on the role of the president in the realization of civil rights reform. When Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Law, he told friends, “there goes the South for a generation.” And he was right; the Republican party conquest of the South, and Washington, began at that moment. Some praise Johnson for putting the national interest above partisan concerns. But, in spite of his tone-deafness to movements of national liberation abroad, Johnson was a politician who, like

³ It should be noted that the animosity inspired by Hillary Clinton is enormous; she may be the only candidate who could successfully unite the republican party coalition!

Machiavelli's republican Prince, knew that opportunity knocks only once. In that sense, he may indeed be a kindred spirit to Barak Obama rather than Hillary Clinton.⁴

“It won't be easy... It won't be easy,” repeats Barak Obama at every recent speech. He's right. But when people try to explain to him that he'd be better off remaining in the Senate, gaining experience and reputation before leaping onto the national stage, his response is more significant than he realizes. The moment for action arises only once; the time has found its man, who can't shy away. Obama may have thought of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Act IV), which insists that “There is a tide in the affairs of men / Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; / Omitted, all the voyage of their life / Is bound in shallows and in miseries.” But he of course does not cite the author's probable source—Machiavelli—even though he is in fact applying the political teaching of the Florentine, who wagered on *virtu* to vanquish the vicissitudes of *fortuna*. It's perhaps this old political lesson—understood by the Elizabethan dramatist better than the well-intentioned reformers—that suggests the possibility for the renewal of a republic that had fallen prey to a fear manipulated by political reactionaries.

This hope is bolstered by historical experience. As opposed to the European model whose origins lie with the French revolution—which had to seize state power and then use it to remodel society in a way that would overcome the distinction between the particular interests of society and the general interest incarnated by the state—the Americans sought to protect the autonomy of their social relations by creating republican institutions whose universality would protect the plurality of an active democratic society. The European model is a democratic republic, a social democracy in which class differences are leveled as far as possible; the American is a republican democracy in which political institutions keep alive the pluralism and pragmatism that insure the dynamism of social relations. What appears to Obama's critics to be the vague, merely rhetorical character of his campaign is from this perspective its power. It is not necessary to be a poet to recognize that words have a unique power just because they create a shared world of meaning in which individuals find themselves able to act together. Was that not, in the last resort, the power of John F. Kennedy, to whom Obama is often compared?

Texte paru dans laviedesidees.fr, le 18 février 2008

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⁴ It should be noted that while Obama did win large majorities of black voters in the South, he also won the support of 30% or more of southern whites. This could signal the arrival on the political stage of that “new generation” in which Johnson placed his hope for the future.