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The defeat of the Democratic Party candidate in the recent presidential election stimulates an interesting mix of questions concerning the fate of the Democratic Party, the future of liberalism as a governing philosophy, and inevitably, what the first two questions mean for the future of the national Black agenda.

Interestingly, the greater emphasis on the future of the Democratic Party suggests a continuing expectation that the Democrats should have won the White House and that the now triple Republican wins have been largely by Democratic default. Thus there is considerably less discussion of the future of the Republican Party, certainly not at a level commensurate with the rather impressive win of the presidency in the last three elections. This may be due to the fact that the real meaning of the Republican victories is not yet clear.

The Republican victories appear somewhat anomalous, given the persistence of Democratic dominance in both houses of the Congress, in state governorships, and in state legislatures across the country. The impressive win by the Republican nominee, George Bush, over Michael Dukakis, the Democratic nominee, seems to be yet a continuation of a limited electoral ascendancy rather than a profound philosophical or permanent partisan shift at the mass level of the electorate. In short, there is no apparent partisan realignment and no clear policy mandate. The American electorate doth speak with a decidedly forked tongue.

Whatever the specific meanings of the recent Republican wins, they will inevitably come to constitute a transition, if not in specific policy transformations, most certainly in prevailing political perspectives. The latter may well prove to be more significant than the former. This analysis focuses on explaining some of the dynamics of this transition, seeking to exploit the fact that past and present are more amenable to explanation than the future is to prediction.

Because of the rather impressive electoral victories of 1980 and 1984 (50.7 and 59 percent respectively) by Ronald Reagan, the presidential elections were hailed by some as constituting a mandate for change. This view prevailed despite analyses to the contrary citing enormous public discontent with the Jimmy Carter presidency as the reason for the 1980 Republican win, and the continuing public support for Democratic-backed social programs even during the second Reagan term.

The Reagan years are not to be characterized by major public policy initiatives as might ensue from a true mandate but rather embodied an emphasis on altering the implementation of existing public policies. But the hallmark of the Reagan years was the crystallization of a discernible transition in political perspectives, particularly in regard to domestic policies.

The Reagan years were singularly characterized by a questioning of the appropriate role for government in the lives of individuals, accompanied by a shift in governmental activities towards a more distinct role in national defense and efforts to boost the economy. For example, questions which were significantly settled in regard to the government's role in support of the welfare state as represented by a network of policies and programs were offered up by the Reagan administration for debate and reconsideration, and not insignificantly, these programs were subjected to considerably reduced funding. The less successful policy notion of privatization of traditional government functions was similarly an effort to restructure the role of the national government.

Moreover, the Reagan challenge to the philosophical underpinnings of the policy legacies of the New Deal and Great Society programs were buttressed by a host of studies seeking to give scientific and intellectual support to this philosophical and policy shift. The result was that what might have been a mere Republican electoral victory was transformed into a regime of like-minded cohorts inside and outside of government espousing a relatively consistent philosophy of governance which held the promise at least of an enduring reorientation in American national politics.

The Republican ascendancy converged with an ongoing disintegration of the traditional Democratic electoral and policy coalition and has resulted in a kind of role reversal for the two major parties. Considerably more so than the Republican Party in recent times, the Democratic Party has traditionally been the party with a relatively coherent philosophy of governance. And the central foci of that philosophy of governance, in its most recent manifestations, came with the New Deal and included a decidedly central and active role of government

in bettering the lives of the common citizen. The Republican Party had largely carried the burden of being reactionary, opposing many of the policy initiatives of the extended New Deal epoch but, prior to the Reagan era, was unable to articulate a persuasive and countervailing philosophy of governance.

Several factors account for the newly defensive status of the Democratic Party. One element of critical importance has been the fact that the Democratic Party has borne the brunt of leadership for the major social and political changes, and the resulting backlash which have unfolded in America over the past five decades.

The era of Democratic leadership since the New Deal, with the exception of the Dwight Eisenhower presidency of 1952-1960 and the Richard Nixon-Gerald Ford years of 1968-1976, has paralleled the period of greatest social change in recent American history: the development of the welfare state resulting from the New Deal initiatives; the desegregation of the armed forces; the civil rights movement of the mid-1950s to mid-1960s; the period of violent urban unrest of the 1960s; the desegregation of public schools through the busing campaign; the anti-war movement; the expansion of the welfare state through the Great Society programs; the attempted revitalization of the cities; the environmental movement; the women's movement and the gay rights movement.

The Democratic Party essentially provided a political framework within which these major social changes wee nurtured, and both the symbolic and practical manifestations of these changes were carried over into the party's procedural apparatus and philosophical perspectives as reflected in changes in delegate selection and convention rules, the messages of its major presidential candidates, and the policies supported by its liberal-moderate contingent in Congress. The burdens of being in the vanguard of such major social change have resulted in a weakening of the traditional Democratic coalition, and at the leadership level, a profound equivocation about the "rightness" of the party's philosophy of governance, especially in the wake of the Republican victories.

Dual Identity

More than the Republican Party, the Democratic Party has always had a dual identity, one manifested in its national policies and national leadership, and another manifested in state and local political races. The two arenas differ primarily in that the former is the locus of major policy making activities for the entire nation while the latter focuses more on the routines of service delivery and the dispensation of subnational governmental largesse.

Not surprisingly, it is the national identity of the Democratic Party which has been recently rejected. However, this rejection spells neither the demise of the party nor of viable two-party politics in America. Rather, one can forcefully argue that the post-New Deal successes of the national Democratic Party were buoyed by what may be characterized as an extended era of creedal passion in which diverse groups in American society struggled to close the gap between American ideals of social equality, broad-based economic equity and full fledged participatory democracy and the realities of American life.

The Democratic Party championed these diverse causes in the era of creedal passion. And in the absence of a viable leftist-oriented political movement with broad-based electoral appeal, the party became the single conduit for channeling reformist political activities into mainstream American political processes. Because this role for the national Democratic Party was not founded on a systematic and enduring philosophical foundation, but rather on a more pragmatic politics of garnering electoral gains and dispensing policy and programmatic rewards to constituent interests, the loss of the presidency as the centerpiece for dispensations became simultaneously a serious threat to the cohesion of the party as an electoral organization and to its role as a surrogate political movement. Moreover, with the demise of this periodic phase of creedal passion, the Democratic Party is significantly without a compelling function vis-a-vis the Republican Party in a traditional two-party system.

The Republican ascendancy has been helped by the caliber of leaders the Democrats have chosen as their standard bearers in the past three elections. If one then asks the question of what the electorate chose in selecting the Republican candidate in 1988, certainly one answer is that they sought to choose a kind of stasis of leadership in a time of great uncertainty about the future in regard to economic prosperity and international standing.

In regard to Reagan's legacy to his party, he can be credited with having tilted the country towards a perceived return to better days of less social and politically tumultous change domestically, and to a restored position of stable leadership abroad. Some may argue that it was indeed a tilting and not the actual setting of a course. Yet the extent to which he was successful in this effort, the Reagan presidency harkened back to collective national memories of strong presidential leadership as an exercise in creating and sustaining a kind of higher national consciousness which became the secular equivalent of religious faith; an abstraction upon which to fix hope for the future, by which to be reassured of the stability of the present, and by which to strive for a collective betterment. Ronald Reagan possessed and projected the patina of this quality of leadership.

Because Americans were longing for stability and reassurance in a period of unsettling adjustments domestically and abroad, the even less than convincing Reagan theme of "Morning in America" was sufficient to assure Republican vanquishing of Democratic opponents who, by contrast, articulated a message of lamentations and woe.

The Republican vision, although somewhat illusionary, prevailed in large part precisely because the Democrats no longer articulated a vision which touched the pulse of preponderant American concerns.

The End of Liberalism?

American liberalism is an interesting mix of philosophy and interest group politics generally held to embrace an activist and protective role of government in the domestic sphere. The core philosophy of liberalism is not in jeopardy of losing its legitimacy in that few Americans would freely acquiesce in giving up its benefits as manifested in public policies such as social security, medicaid, medicare, unemployment insurance, and subsidized home mortgages for a strikingly overhoused middle and upper-middle class.

However, because liberalism and the Democratic Party have embraced movements for social change such as civil rights, the new feminism, income support and redistribution programs, and a strong oversight regulatory function among other things, liberalism has become susceptible to pejorative labelling within the context of the political dynamics of major social change wrought by this collective legacy. It is the social change and interest group foci of liberalism which is fundamentally under attack, although "lightning-rod" issues such as crime and punishment become very effective cues for inciting broad-based umbrage with the concept generally.

Because the Democratic Party has been the main conduit for change for Black Americans, negotiating access for them to the American political and economic mainstream, any major loss of position for the Democratic Party and its liberal philosophy constitutes a considerable strategic crisis for Black America and the Black agenda as traditionally defined.

In ways unlike other movements for social change, the legacy of the civil rights movement persists with a unique kind of resonance, not unrelated to the fact that Black Americans continue to internalize and therefore define their struggle disproportionately as one for civil rights. This is to be expected, given the awesome human degradation of the rigid segregation which gripped America a mere three decades ago. This is also no doubt attributable to the fact that the civil rights movement was tremendously successful in transforming the collective status of Black people in this country.

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The strategy of the new Black politics, emphasizing electoral gains, has been comparatively much less successful in its transforming power. There has been a backing away from issues of civil rights and social programs by the Democratic Party in recent years, which has become a matter of strategic concern for Blacks. Thus the Black political strategy has focused on this backing away, and analagous to the tactics of a once ardously pursued lover who is later neglected, Blacks have focused on forcefully restoring the relationship to its earlier strength and restructuring the balance of power within the alliance.

The Jesse Jackson candidacy of 1984 emanated from the concern for forging a more policy-favored position for Blacks within the Democratic Party. As such, Jackson's 1984 candidacy was more one of a protest action and an attempted goading of the Democratic Party back to its roots, as it were. In 1988, Jackson pursued a different tactic, at least initially, through a campaign akin to the traditional Democratic populist mode which sought to build a coalition in which race-related issues were merely parts of a larger set of concerns confronting a large segment of the American electorate. In this role, Jesse Jackson was a Black man running for president. Towards the end of the pre-convention campaign, however, Jackson reverted to the role of a Black protest leader with the caravan to Atlanta and the spirited rally in Atlanta's Chastain Park.

Jackson's own ambivalence about his role was no greater than that of the Democratic leadership. In the early days of the 1988 campaign when Jackson was winning primaries and caucuses in largely white populated states, his successes appeared to give all of America a glimpse of possible greatness on the issue of race. When it appeared that Jackson might win the Democratic nomination on the merits of the delegate selection process, it apparently became necessary for Democrats to initiate a "Stop Jackson" effort. The result was the emergence of Michael Dukakis, a nominee with no national leadership in his past, no significant constituent following, no significant appeal to the traditional Democratic electorate, and no persuasive vision of leadership for the country.

In the wake of Dukakis' defeat, the issues which arise are: whither the future of the Democratic Party; whither the future of Blacks in the Democratic Party; whither the future of liberalism; and what will Jackson do in 1992?

Interestingly, there seem to be efforts to construct a consensus

among Democrats that if Jackson would just "cool it" the Democrats could readily become less liberal in their image and thus win the presidency, and the Black agenda would move forward again. That notion is perhaps a grand delusion, and is not unrelated to the wishful musings that more Blacks should join the Republican Party. Both notions ignore the symbolic significance of Jesse Jackson the man and Jesse Jackson the candidate. For whites, Jackson symbolizes the continuing thread of the civil rights legacy and the painful adjustments its successes imposed on white Americans. In the absence of recent presidential leadership calling white America to rise above the shackles of its prejudiced socialization, whites no longer view making such adjustments as virtuous. For Blacks, Jackson invokes the memories and awareness of the incomplete conquest for freedom and equality which the civil rights movement once promised.

Quest for Civil Rights

Presently, there is a presumed permanence in the attachment of Blacks to the Democratic Party which, for many observers, defies the cold logic of strategic reasoning and positioning. However, this attachment will likely continue until such time as Blacks collectively cease to at least psychologically and emotionally define their struggle in terms of a quest for civil rights.

Pronouncements of an end to the civil rights era will not terminate for Blacks what is clearly a very deeply held mix of fear, hope, struggle, and emotions embodied in the civil rights movement. Interestingly, there has emerged a series of books which appear, perhaps unwittingly, to be efforts to facilitate a collective processing of the pain, relative successes, and historical significance of the civil rights movement. These include *Eye on the Prize*, by Juan Williams, *And We Are Not Saved*, by Derrick Bell, *Plural But Equal*, by Harold Cruse, and *Parting the Waters*, by Taylor Branch. These and other creative works such as the new movie, "Mississippi Burning," suggest that a kind of national transitioning has begun in relationship to the sociopolitical legacy of the civil rights movement.

What are the implications of such a transition for the partisan behavior of Black America? Despite strong attachments of Blacks to the Democratic Party, there are factors which will no doubt work to increase their membership in the Republican Party. One is the inevitable aging of the traditional Black Democratic constituency. Already there is emerging a generation of Blacks with no memory and, unfortunately, scant knowledge of the civil rights movement. Pivotal to Republican exploitation of this structural change in the Black population will be the extent and perceived sincerity of the party's overtures to the Black community. Not only has the Republican Party stood significantly aloof from the political and social struggles of Black America, the apparent governing ethos of the party vis-a-vis Blacks is that all people are individuals who are to be accepted on their own merits without any politically significant moorings to a distinct social grouping. Particularly to Blacks outside of the Republican Party, this appears to compel a kind of schizophrenic sociopolitical identity which they largely find untenable.

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Another pivotal development which will shortly help to structure future Black partisan attachments will be the philosophical and ideological bent of Republican nominees to the Supreme Court. Bruising battles over nominees perceived as anti-civil rights will surely not help in allaying Black concerns about the reasonableness of joining the Republican Party.

Yet another aspect of a transitioning begun within the Black community is a more diverse discourse on what ought to constitute the Black agenda and how best to formulate strategic efforts. This transition was initiated by such persons as William Junius Williams, (in *The Declining Significance of Race*); Glenn Loury, most distinguished by a vitriolic pronouncement of the end of the era of civil rights; Robert Woodson, a very pragmatic advocate of Black self-help initiatives; economist Thomas Sowell, who offers contrary explanations to much of the conventional wisdom concerning Blacks and their relative status; and to some extent former Reagan appointee Alan Keyes. (This is not to suggest an actual consensus of perspectives among those listed).

The one thing this group of Black conservatives and neoconservatives share with those who see themselves as the rightful custodians of the Black agenda is an avowed commitment to the betterment of the status of Blacks in America. Perhaps out of this shared commitment, and in spite of charges and countercharges about the wrongheadedness of their different perspectives, will emerge some newly effective strategic effort for advancing the interests of Black Americans within the arena of presidential politics. □

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