

The Spirit of '76

Welcome back, Carter

By Philip Jenkins

HISTORICAL ANALOGIES have been much in vogue since this election. Are we living at the end of 1932, preparing to face the glories and disasters of a revived New Deal? Or are we in a mirror-image 1980, the beginning of an era of liberal dominance, with a massive party realignment that might not even reach full fruition for another decade or so? These questions matter, not just because such debates give employment to academic historians. Deciding which year offers the closest parallel to the present forces conservatives to think how they will adjust to the new order. Just how radically have public attitudes shifted?

Actually, the year that offers the closest historical parallels to the present might be neither 1932 nor 1980 but 1976, and that analogy helps us understand the directions in which the country will be moving. Both in government and opposition, people might want to hold off on planning for the next New Deal, still less for a coming generation of liberal hegemony. In three or four years, the main political fact in this country could well be a ruinous crisis of Democratic liberalism.

Why 1976? That was the year Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford for the presidency by a slim but convincing margin: Ford won 48 percent of the popular vote, a little more than John McCain's 46 percent. Democrats did significantly better in the House in 1976 than they did last month. They held a two-to-one majority of seats, and they retained a supermajority of 61 in the Senate. Broadly, however, the 1976 results look similar to 2008.

The mood of the country in 1976 also parallels our present situation, with a pervasive sense of disgust at politics as usual and widespread fears of national decline. As if the end of the Vietnam War and the Watergate fiasco were not catastrophic enough, foreign-policy disasters in Africa and Asia suggested that the U.S. was losing its hegemony. The oil crisis pointed to a vast transfer of wealth and power to the Middle East, while many pundits predicted environmental catastrophe. The sharp economic downturn resulted in heavy unemployment and rising inflation. A concatenation of scandals tarnished once-trusted institutions: corporations, the military, intelligence agencies, police, and, of course, the politicians.

So disaffected was bicentennial America that it sought leaders unconnected to the establishment. In Jimmy Carter, voters found a candidate whose main qualifications were his lack of experience and connections within the Beltway or corporate worlds. Like Barack Obama, Carter claimed to rise above failed partisanship, while his New South background allowed him to symbolize racial healing. Carter, like Obama, sold himself mainly on the virtues of his character. He presented himself as a man of simple honesty, faith, and decency, and his lack of a track record allowed voters to see in him what they wanted, however far-fetched those hopes might be. If they hadn't believed it, they wouldn't have seen it with their own eyes. Above all, Carter promised change, a message that carried weight as long as its details remained non-

specific. The problem with messiahs from nowhere is that when they do exercise power, people discover to their horror what their leader's actual views and talents are. The disillusion can be dreadful.

The rhetoric and psychology of the Democratic Party in 1976 also foreshadows the present day. And as they did in 1976, Democrats now show every sign of repeating the blunders that led to a generation-long discrediting of liberalism. As the phrase goes, they have learned nothing in the intervening years, and they have forgotten nothing. And they will soon face a barrage of issues that they have neither the will nor competence to understand. Liberal triumph in 1976 led inexorably to evisceration in 1980. The same trajectory is likely to recur in the Obama years.

The key mistake Democrats made in 1976 was failing to realize what brought them to power. Democrats won because of public dissatisfaction with the previous regime, which had overseen the economic crisis, and also because of a wider fear that America would have to live with diminished expectations. But although they won on largely economic grounds, Democrats acted as if they had a sweeping mandate for cultural transformation—for social libertarianism, affirmative action and egalitarianism, dovish internationalism, and idealistic notions of human rights. These ideas dominated a radical Congress and were enthusiastically adopted by the cohort of Carter appointments to the judiciary. They all ignored a basic principle: just because people are unhappy where they

are does not mean they are willing to go anywhere you try to lead them.

In 1976, liberals were wrong on multiple counts, and all the signs point to them repeating the same mistakes. Even if Obama plays Mr. Moderate, the congressional party contains more than enough take-no-prisoners far leftists to torpedo any chance of bipartisanship or restraint. Specifically, liberals believe that the public will support radical change in three highly sensitive areas, and in each area they will overreach to the point of self-destruction. In domestic affairs, they believe the culture wars are over and that revolutionary social changes like gay marriage can now advance unchecked. They think that popular concern over environmental problems will translate into a blank check for limitless government spending and the decisive transfer of U.S. sovereignty to international agencies. And liberals are now sure that all that foolishness with international dangers and crises is firmly behind us so that we no longer need the military or intelligence capabilities developed to respond to them. As the coming three or four years will show, they are dreadfully wrong on all counts.

In the 1970s, liberal hubris manifested itself especially in domestic politics. Democrats focused obsessively on race and class, to the exclusion of culture, morals, and religion. Reading the situation in those terms allowed liberals an easy framework for explaining opposition to their policies, which must be based on overt or disguised forms of racism (and that was before they had a President Obama). If every social problem boiled down to matters of economic and racial justice, then there could be no legitimate grounds for concerns that presented themselves as cultural or religious.

That severely blinkered view goes a very long way to explaining the collapse of liberalism in 1979-80. America in the

1970s was undergoing traumatic social and moral changes, which caused widespread unhappiness and fear. Many social conservatives were alarmed that governments were using children as tools in social experimentation, an issue made most explicit in school busing. Popular opposition focused on the defense of community and local autonomy but above all on child safety. Once again, though, liberals had no valid answer to these fears, as any questioning of public education must of necessity be a disguised form of vulgar prejudice. Their response was predictable: Damn the racists, full speed ahead.

Across the board, the critical pressure points in the social politics of the 1970s involved children and young people. For the '60s generation, progress demanded removing restraints on the actions of consenting adults, whether this involved sexual experimentation, gay rights, drug use, or participation in weird and wonderful fringe religions. Who was to say that individuals should not be allowed to go to hell in their chosen way? That principle worked splendidly, unless and until people began to reflect on the effects on children. Yes, an adult could consent to engage in bizarre or self-destructive behavior, but that libertarian approach did not and could not extend to the young. Time and again, Americans have shown themselves liberal on social issues that are framed in terms of "live and let live." They draw the line when the behavior in question appears to threaten youth. Hence the most successful conservative campaigns on domestic issues of the late 1970s focused strictly on child protection, and those movements coalesced into a general concern about defending and restoring American culture.

From 1977—the pivotal year of the social-conservative revival—liberals suffered reversal after reversal, on issues of drug abuse, pornography, and gay rights. In every case, child protection gave the

key to victory. Carter administration plans to decriminalize drugs foundered on the opposition of a burgeoning parents' movement. Popular fears of threats to children defeated referenda on gay rights. Near universal nausea about the availability of child porn provoked the first serious questioning of ever expanding sexual frankness. Fears about threats against children merged easily with concerns about threats by children. The astonishing rise of violent youth crime, which reached its Himalayan peak between 1979 and 1981, was read as a symptom of a feral generation that had not been subject to appropriate family restraints or care. By the end of the 1970s, these various child-related themes drove a triumphant social conservative coalition, which included those newly galvanized religious voters mobilized in the Moral Majority.

America today has changed enormously since 1978, but many of those older issues survive in latent form and should resurface shortly. Questions of youth protection will transform the gay-marriage debate, which for most media observers has been framed in terms of social justice and equality. Presumably by judicial fiat, the practice will extend to many more states in the coming years and quite conceivably to all 50 states. This in itself will not be a popular move: recall the recent California referendum, which was decided by the blacks and Latinos who turned out to support Obama but who favored traditional family models.

How will attitudes to gay marriage evolve when people contemplate the proper age of consent in such unions? Assuming the age is to be the same as in heterosexual marriages, then adolescents of 18 will marry freely, and in many states parental consent will grant that right to boys of 16 or so. Are Americans ready to see blushing teenage male brides? And if boys of that age can marry, demands to

reduce the age of sexual consent for all youngsters will certainly follow.

The more strenuously liberals press for gay equality in matters involving youth, in marriage and adoption, the more they will generate a child-protection reaction, even among people who consider themselves socially liberal, and the more likely this reaction is to take religious forms. Following the recent California referendum, Mormons bore the brunt of liberal fury, and Catholics and other religious groups will face legal challenges for refusing to participate in gay adoptions and marriages. Other areas like abortion, contraception, and transgender surgery promise to generate many confrontations between religious believers and the current sexual revolution, and religious sensibilities can expect no sympathy from government, courts, or media. The resulting battles should re-energize a religious constituency that is currently disoriented and disillusioned. Anyone for Moral Majority II: The Sequel?

As in the 1970s, the problem of out-of-control youth could very soon be back on the political agenda. Although youth crime hasn't been on the national radar since the crack boom of the early 1990s, demographic trends confidently predict a rising storm that should break within two years or so. The crime surge of the 1970s was in large part the consequence of the baby boom reaching its most crime-prone years, as the huge cohort of those born around 1960 hit their late teens. Something very similar is about to happen again. The number of babies born in the U.S. in 1990 was only slightly smaller than the 1960 generation, and by 2010 we could be entering an alarming era of violent crime, manifested in soaring rates for homicide and robbery. Factor in the economic crisis, and American cities could look as frightening and dangerous as they did at the time of New York City's 1977 blackout, with its rioting and looting.

Making the situation still worse, the massive expansion of union membership for which many Democrats clamor will add mightily to the plethora of urban problems. Imagine cities devastated by youth crime and gang wars, while emergency workers, hospitals, buses, and garbage services are regularly on strike. If you think Americans were alienated from government in 2008, come back in two years. Liberals will try to interpret the coming crisis in terms of race and class, a problem to be solved by unlimited social spending. Conservatives had better be ready to respond with ideas of individual and family responsibility and the defense of social order.

In other ways, too, liberals utterly misread public sentiment and will build their policy upon those delusions. Americans have shown themselves open to green rhetoric and feel that policies to protect the environment are generally a good thing. Few conservatives would criticize any move in the direction of energy independence, which would be a wonderful first step toward extracting the nation from Middle Eastern quagmires. But of course, that is not what we are going to get. We will instead be facing a determined and fanatical campaign to eliminate the vastly exaggerated menace of global warming, which will mean a wholesale assault on America's energy supplies. This will translate into striking at coal- and oil-based energy while refusing to make progress toward reliance on nuclear resources, all the while seeking to curb carbon usage through onerous taxes and surcharges. Remember those Americans infuriated by strikes and intimidated by crime? They are also going to be freezing, living with rationed energy and brownouts. A grossly underpowered economy will find it all but impossible to reconstruct and revive when the coming depression ends.

As if all this isn't bad enough, expect global-warming rhetoric to be used as a

wedge to undermine national sovereignty. Under Obama, we face the virtual certainty of American accession to new treaties that go far beyond Kyoto in demanding radical cutbacks in carbon usage. The U.S. will presumably stand out as the only power attempting to enforce these standards, which would institutionalize the nation's relative decline in the face of Chinese and Indian growth. The moral and political issue of sovereignty will thus be linked to the practical daily realities of the energy crisis at home.

And then there is national security. Democrats observe, quite rightly, that Americans are uncomfortable with images of Guantanamo and waterboarding, and they are profoundly unhappy with open-ended military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. But here, too, liberals will overreach when they interpret these moral qualms as a basis for winding up American military and intelligence capabilities.

However dreadful the Carter administration may have been, however widespread the domestic discontent, what actually finished off the Democrats and opened the door for Ronald Reagan was the Iran hostage crisis. And that was a direct and predictable consequence of overreach by the administration and Congress. Since 1976, congressional liberals had led a series of campaigns against the intelligence services, exposing supposed abuses and atrocities, and in the process discrediting the whole work of intelligence. By 1977, massive purges had removed many of the CIA's best agents, while congressional restrictions made it all but impossible for the agency to pursue its work. In the Middle East and elsewhere, America was flying blind.

Underlying these bizarre actions was a theory of human rights that assumed the whole world could and should operate according to Western theories of democratic liberalism. Unfortunately, it didn't. In Iran, the shah was an unsavory

dictator with a heavy-handed secret police, but he exercised his powers to pursue a pro-American policy. Under the Carter regime, the U.S. ended its support of the shah, while ceasing to pay off the truly dangerous radical Islamists who would eventually replace him. American efforts at self-immolation succeeded in 1979, with the Islamic Revolution and the hostage crisis that destroyed the Carter administration.

Surely congressional liberals are not stupid enough to do anything like that again? Don't believe it. By the end of 2009, expect a purge of U.S. intelligence agencies, as well as suffocating new constraints on intelligence-gathering capacities. These moves will probably be accompanied by a series of congressional hearings, which will provide maximum opportunities for showboating by politicians, while embarrassing the CIA. A blinded and disarmed Obama administration will then blunder anew into confrontations that will once again plumb the depths of national humiliation—if not in Iran, then in Taiwan, Ukraine, Venezuela, or Pakistan. If we're very unlucky, airliners will again be crashing into our skyscrapers and cargo ships will be exploding in our ports. And as in the late 1970s, there will be plenty of discharged and disaffected former intelligence agents wandering the corridors of power, serving as endless sources of leaks and disinformation against the Obama regime. Expect the worst age of political scandal since, well, the 1970s.

All analogies limp, and no one is suggesting a straight replay of the Carter years, still less that some kind of new Reagan era is its inevitable sequel. But if liberals seem so determined to repeat the mistakes of that era, then we have at least a plausible sketch of the coming Obama administration—of its rise and ruin. ■

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If the Status of Forces Agreement between Iraq and the United States is not further modified or rejected by referendum, it will require a pullout of U.S. forces from Iraq by 2011. For those like Sen. John McCain who have been arguing that the U.S. must continue to be in Iraq for strategic reasons and to combat terrorism, the departure of American forces would mean that the loss of thousands of U.S. lives and trillions of dollars had been completely pointless. Washington will have no say in what occurs in Baghdad and will have to rely on the Iraqis to deal with whatever terrorists remain. It will quickly become clear, if it has not already, that the chief beneficiaries of removing Saddam Hussein are the Iranians.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates might believe that he has three years to prepare for the departure of American forces, but the intelligence community, based on its own assessments, has adopted a somewhat different view. It believes that the Iraqi political support for any continued U.S. presence in the country is paper thin and that there could easily be developments that would dramatically accelerate the timetable. Possibilities include sectarian rioting and a move by the Kurdish region to declare independence, leading to something like a civil war over oil-rich Kirkuk. The United States would be caught in the middle.

Aware that the new administration in Washington will demand reliable information on Iraq even if the American presence is drastically scaled down or even eliminated, the intelligence community has given high priority to establishing special programs to insure that data continues to flow. Due to several poorly executed recruitment attempts, the Iraqis have already noted that U.S. intelligence is accelerating its efforts to establish a stable of agents, officials, and military officers in key positions who are willing to provide information even if the U.S. presence is dramatically reduced. Senior CIA officers with experience in the highly specialized intelligence operations, referred to as "stay behinds," have been transferred into the Baghdad embassy to provide their expertise.

Stay behinds are agents recruited in advance to report on developments when there is a reasonable expectation that normal embassy operations will be restricted or heavily monitored. Environments where normal intelligence activity is particularly difficult are referred to as "denied areas," an indication that the host country is essentially hostile, like the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The last major CIA denied area, stay-behind operation was in Hong Kong in preparation for the takeover by China in 1997. Such operations rely on sophisticated communications by means of satellites, dead drops, and postal-accommodation addresses in third countries to provide channels for the continued receipt of vital information. The Iraqis will attempt to frustrate the U.S. intelligence effort by providing double agents who ostensibly allow themselves to be recruited by the Americans but who will actually be controlled by Baghdad.

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