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Bird's Eye

KARL ZINSMEISTER

Three P's in a Political Pod

Politics has three elements: personalities, principles, and process. On the personalities front, America is currently in the midst of an unusually lively and healthy election season. Whatever else may be said of today's stable of presidential racers, none of them are lacking in vigor or skill. Compared to some of the snoozy, dwarfish contests of the recent past, we're witnessing strong prizefights right now. And in politics as elsewhere, stiff competition is the best way to separate the worthy from the not.

Voter turnout has rocketed up this year, and much of the public interest has centered on the personal character of candidates. This is a predictable response to Clintonism and other late warnings of moral rot. Having long been told by media smarty-pants that mature voters should look at "policies" and not "personal life," Americans seem to be discovering that, actually, personal life is pretty darn important.

As former White House speechwriter Peggy Noonan has written, "In a President, character is everything. A President doesn't have to be brilliant.... He doesn't have to be clever; you can hire clever.... But you can't buy courage and decency; you can't rent a strong moral sense. A President must bring those things with him."

It was actually Noonan's boss who re-established the primacy of character as a presidential essential. "Ronald Reagan represented the end of the rule of the planners, the eggheads, the technocrats who believed that the North Vietnamese could be beaten if we ran enough punchcards through the Pentagon computers," notes columnist James Lileks. "He didn't win because he was smarter than Carter. He won because he was manlier."

Reagan wasn't just a moral force, however. His emphasis on character and virtue was combined with dogged devotion to some big, hard, very specific ideas and principles. Reagan was certain communism was evil and unworkable and would be dangerous until wrestled to the ground by free men; ignoring elite mockery, he went for the pin. Reagan wanted a beefed up navy and a missile defense shield; he refused to take no for an answer. Reagan viewed government regulations as frequently counterproductive; the page count of new rules shrank dramatically on his watch. Reagan believed top tax rates shouldn't exceed 30 percent; he dragged them down.

None of the current frontrunners have aspirations as concrete and focused as these. One can tell McCain, Bush, Gore, and company badly want to be President; but they give little evidence of specific things they're aching to *do* once in office.

If you're devoted to ideas and principles, it's hard not to be disappointed in contemporary politicians, with their reflexive preference for soft platitudes over hard proposals. John DiIulio, Michael Barone, and Christopher Hitchens (who occupy rather different parts of the political rainforest) all agree later in these pages that "there are no substantive issues in this year's election." This illustrates a kind of 3D consensus of dismay with modern, focus-group, forget-principle-just-feel-their-pain campaigning.

On the one hand, conservatives shouldn't be overly perturbed to see a politics grow up that is more supervisory and tinkering than boldly activist. In keeping with our general interest in seeing the state wither away, leaving societal problem-solving to other, less Jurassic institutions instead, the disappearance of 12-point political crusades shouldn't be a matter of wrenching sadness.

On the other hand, we do have serious problems—like dreadful urban public schools, and a Social Security system headed for bankruptcy in half a generation—that can't be fixed without government action (even if the ideal action is simply to back the state out of the picture). So it can be painful to watch today's pusillanimity and paralysis on the Potomac. Particularly frustrating is the slavishly poll-based style of "leadership" that Bill Clinton has developed to a high art.

Keep in mind, most Americans neither know nor care much about politics. Having never lived under a truly dysfunctional system of government, they take politics for granted, focusing instead on other things like children, faith, jobs, and "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" In the January 2000 Gallup poll, only one out of 20 Americans could identify the Speaker of the House. (Eleven times as many knew game show host Regis Philbin.) In this environment, it's crazy to cower before public opinion. Leaders have to *create* support on tough political questions, not wait on it.

Through his stubborn (to critics, stupid) devotion to a handful of bedrock political ideas, Reagan pulled the country into new agreement on topics that many people previously didn't even know mattered. Reagan's broken-record tutorings on small government, individual freedom, and moral virtue—made possible by his inner confidence, and his lack of care for the disapproval of fashionable elites—allowed him to manufacture a consensus rather than just follow it.

Some political commentators are saying the winds have shifted against any recurrence of this triumph. "The conservative movement, which accomplished great things over the past quarter century, is finished," wrote Bill Kristol recently in the *Washington Post*.

I don't see that at all. On topics like abortion, race preferences, missile defense, taxes, and crime, there's not a dime's worth of difference between the positions taken by Ronald Reagan and the positions taken by today's Republicans George W. Bush and John McCain. And on front-and-center topics like education reform, Social Security, fixes for Medicare, and the role of religion in solving social problems, both Bush and McCain are now positioned *to the right* of the strongest positions Reagan ever took. Reagan never dared breathe a word of support for partial privatization of Social Security, education vouchers, federal funding for religious charities, or market-based cashouts of Medicare. Public receptivity to these conservative mega-reforms was simply not yet ripe. Today, the nation's thinking has evolved to the point where those sorts of proposals are Bush and McCain standbys. If having its reforms become mundanely mainstream means the conservative movement is finished, well, we're all for that.

Along with personalities and ideas, the third important element in politics is the political process itself. John McCain is just the latest candidate to make hay on the idea that our current system is broken and in need of fixing.

Certainly there are things that want correction. In his trou-

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bling article on page 42, *TAE* senior editor Scott Walter sketches one electoral corruption in drastic need of repair. (Interestingly, George W. Bush has been much braver on the problem in question than John McCain, while Al Gore is an actively harmful force.) And a rather rotten reason explains why this particular rip in our democracy has gone as far as it has: The beneficiaries of the scam are lawyers (who make up more than four out of ten members of Congress).

Shortly after it was reported a couple years ago that attorneys are something like 12 times as prevalent in Washington as in the rest of country, a joke went around about how the National Institutes of Health were starting to use lawyers instead of white rats in their lab experiments. For three reasons: Because there are more lawyers than white rats. Because there are some things even rats won't do. And because scientists sometimes grow attached to the rats.

Tapping into America's distinctly rodentish view of Washington generally, John McCain has been declaiming loudly against "money in politics." This part of his message, unfortunately, is just showboating. Total spending on *all* campaigns for federal office by *all* candidates (major and minor)—including independent expenditures by unions and trade groups, all party payouts, all convention costs, etc.—came to \$1.5 billion the last time we elected both a Congress and a President (1996). Meanwhile, that same year, Americans spent \$2.0 billion on chewing gum, \$21.5 billion on other kinds of candy, \$2.7 billion on bowling fees, \$27.8 billion on cigarettes, \$13.9 billion on movies, \$4.6 billion on potato chips, \$12.8 billion on athletic shoes, \$91.7 billion for alcoholic beverages, and \$3.5 billion on coin-operated pinball and video games. We are a high-income nation of 273 million people. Spending a third of what we shell out annually for potato chips in order to sort and select our national representatives is some kind of scandal? I don't think so.

Nor are horrible fatcats buying elections. George W. Bush collected his current war chest from 173,000 different donors giving an average of \$335 each. That sounds to me like democracy, not corruption.

In an era when Washington is increasingly dictating how Americans can use their land, educate their children, run their businesses, and so forth, it's ridiculous to complain about people giving reasonable sums to candidates who represent their interests. This is legitimate political action, and quite unavoidable unless you're going to muzzle free expression. If John McCain, Russ Feingold, and other alarmists on this subject really want to get money out of our politics, they should first get politicians out of our money. Until the feds stop interfering in so many aspects of our economy and community life, energetic defensive efforts to influence D.C. decisionmaking will be inevitable.

That's the kind of chicken-versus-egg reality that no one expects a liberal Democrat (who would be unwilling to shrink government's reach in any case) to understand. But we expect better of "conservative-to-midstream Republicans."



Sidelights

The American Federation of Government Employees has 17,000 more members than it did before Vice President Al Gore began his "reinventing government" crusade, observes columnist Paul Gigot. . . . Another government employees' union, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, has recently suffered from revelations of crooked practices by 35 of its officials. The group's general counsel assured the *New York Times* it is "cleaner than most unions." . . . The Bureau of Labor Statistics says 37 percent of government workers are unionized, as opposed to 9 percent of private-sector workers. ☛ The Project for the New American Century warns that the Clinton administration has deferred weapons spending at the Pentagon to the tune of nearly \$1 trillion, compared to the final Bush administration plan. . . . In 1999 the Air Force fell short of its recruiting goals for the first time in 20 years. . . . "On the day when America Online's merger with Time Warner was announced," observes columnist David Ignatius, "the entire defense sector was worth just one-fourth the [market] value of this single media giant." ☛ Suffering from sex discrimination lawsuits, the New York City Fire Department aggressively recruited women to join, and provided a training program for the difficult physical test. Half the women who applied dropped out before the written exam. Two-thirds of the women who passed did not even attempt the physical test. Of those taking the physical exam—which included exercises such as raising ladders and feeding hose—92 percent failed. ☛ UCLA's annual survey of college freshmen found only 18 percent had checked a book or periodical out of the library in the past year. . . . Asked to explain why TV game shows have taken to asking ridiculously easy questions,

the host of "Win Ben Stein's Money" replied, "People are dumber." . . . Yale psychology professor Marianne LaFrance spent three months conducting interviews and experiments to produce a report on "The Psychological, Interpersonal, and Social Effects of Bad Hair." . . . The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that Williams College will freeze its comprehensive cost for tuition, fees, and room and board at \$31,520—the first time a "selective private" college has failed to raise prices in the past quarter-century.

In 1999, almost 19 percent of U.S. employees were eligible for stock options, up from 12 percent the year before, according to Watson Wyatt Worldwide. . . . The average price for new homes today, the Commerce Department says, is \$200,000. . . . From 1989-98, the proportion of families owning stock rose from 32 percent to 49 percent, a Federal Reserve study found. ☛ Bill Clinton appointed more millionaires to Cabinet posts than any other President. Now he and Hillary have purchased a home in Chappaqua, New York, where annual household income averages \$228,000. . . . Liberal pundit Mickey Kaus notes that

Mrs. Clinton's likely opponent for New York's senate seat, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, opposed the 1996 welfare reform bill and "whined like a congressional Democrat about the bill's 'lack of sufficient funding for day care.'" ☛ "If there were any real penalties for trying to predict New Hampshire [primaries], there'd be an awful lot of journalists living in cardboard boxes over steam vents," admits NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw. . . . The first sentence of the Vice President's online campaign biography reads, "Al Gore served in the U.S. Army in Vietnam." . . . The Reform Party is "in revolt against the politicians, who bicker and get nothing done. And what have they created? A party that bickers even more and accomplishes even less," observes pundit Ramesh Ponnuru. ☛ "We think we can be the McDonald's of sperm," a Danish sperm bank executive told the *Wall Street Journal*. He added that "the nation's high concentration of blond, blue-eyed donors could even make branding possible" in the global marketplace. . . . Sex-toy parties—a variation on the Tupperware parties of old—are catching on among American women. One marketer alone has 400 distributors in 25 states and Canada. . . . The law firm Jackson Lewis polled over 1,000 personnel executives at firms that instituted "dress down" days; 30 percent reported a rise in "flirtatious behavior." . . . Liposuction death rates are 20 to 60 times higher than rates for all operations in hospitals, reports *USA Today*. ☛ The *London Times* observes that the decline of Latin classes in Britain is being reversed, thanks to Internet teaching. New Latin terms include *connexus* for "online" and *emissio electronica* for "e-mail." ☛ Ireland's efforts to keep its greenhouse-gas emissions within Kyoto Protocol limits are being seriously threatened by the quantity of flatulence its cows are producing. —SW

