

American party system faces a political crisis

By Jim Livingston

The political analysts who last year were celebrating the "new conservatism" of the American people are quieter now. They may only be taking a breather. But more likely they are recognizing the mood of the American electorate as anything but conservative in the traditional sense.

Most of the evidence shows that the party system is in a profound state of crisis because the two major parties are not presenting the voters with satisfactory political choices. As political scientist Walter Dean Burnham puts it, the "top elites of both major parties" have failed to offer American voters an adequate perceived choice on issues "at a time when they very much want to make one." This is contributing to the "onward march of party decomposition."

Research on the development of the American party system indicates a turning point in an electoral cycle that began about 1948-1950. The "politics of consensus," the days of modest polarization within the electorate are gone, but they have not been replaced by a new political agenda or new social-ideological alignments.

Similar phases of the electoral cycle were followed by "critical realignment," in which national policy agendas were broadly redefined and party identities and alignments reconstructed. Such realignments took place prior to the Civil War (1854-1860), during the crisis that ended America's first industrialized epoch (1892-1900), and as the U.S. entered its greatest depression (1928-1936).

The present political crisis will not inevitably lead to the emergence of an avowedly revolutionary party. The only certainty is that if socialists do not seize the opportunity offered by the erosion of postwar political and ideological alignments, the party system will simply continue to disintegrate, and social questions will continue to be privately "managed" by corporate technicians.

Political scientists generally agree that party loyalties have been weakened to the point where the U.S. has become a "nation of electoral transients." And voters identifying themselves as independents now comprise over one-third of

the electorate: they outnumber the "strong" Democrats and all Republicans.

The rapid growth of split-ticket voting since 1948 is another indication of the decline in partisan identification. That year only 38 percent of voters split their ballots; by 1972 62 percent of the electorate did so.

In recent years a larger division among electoral coalitions in the U.S. has emerged. The once real correlation between voting coalitions in presidential elections and in congressional elections has all but disappeared. The result is a kind of "four party system," composed of presidential Republicans and Democrats and congressional Republicans and Democrats. For example, in 1972 Nixon carried a total of 377 congressional districts, but the same districts elected 189 Democrats and 188 Republicans to Congress. In 1976, two regions that Carter lost—the Midwest and the West—returned solid Democratic majorities to Congress; and, according to Harris surveys, a two-to-one majority of suburban residents, a segment of the electorate that Ford won handily, is "highly optimistic" about the probable performance of the Democratic Congress.

Meanwhile, over the last two decades, turnover rates in the House reached new lows just as the presidency began to change parties frequently. This has made for destabilization of domestic policy making—in the parlance of the Trilateral Commission, a "crisis of Governability."

Voter disaffection and turnout.

A large majority of the public has come to feel profound discontent with government, and has lost confidence in the capacity of the existing social system to deliver on its promises of mobility and affluence developed between 1966 and 1973, according to a Harris survey commissioned by Congress. This discontent is mirrored in the steady decline in voter turnout over the last 16 years.

A significant dimension of the pattern of voter turnout and partisan identification has not yet been fully analyzed. However, Burnham and others have suggested that a behavioral linkage connects non-

voting and high levels of issue awareness among independents. Large numbers of independents who score high on issue awareness and ideological consistency are a new phenomenon in modern American electoral history.

Independents in the past were comparatively confused about the political choices available to them, and often abstained from political activity for that reason. The "new independents" do not abstain from participation in the electoral process from confusion on issues, but from the perception that existing parties and programs offer inadequate choices.

Issue salience and activism.

The ideological maturity of the new independents is undoubtedly part of a larger shift toward increasing "issue salience" and "activism" in American politics. New research has shown that the events and campaigns of the 1960s made politics more relevant and dramatic to the mass electorate and that the political lessons learned during the '60s continue to shape voting behavior and issue awareness in the '70s. Clearly, all age groups, races, religions, and classes are more aware of the differences (or lack of differences) between parties and are more attuned to their own issue preferences than they were prior to 1964.

Indeed, one motivation of the new research is the concern that the mass electorate has become so "ideological" that political stability in the U.S. could be completely undermined in the near future.

Many political scientists believe that the origin of this increasingly ideological bent of American politics lies in the emergence of new cadres of "activists" in both parties. These activists see their respective parties as means, not ends. They are more interested in programs and principles than in immediate electoral successes or the institutional life of their parties. The reforms of delegate selection ratified by both parties in 1972, the Democrats' programmatic convention in Kansas City in 1974, and the growth of Reagan's influence in the Republican party are indications of activist strength.

But some activist influence may be overrated. For example, the Reaganites' purity on questions of government spending and interference in the "free market" is not shared by the electorate at large, whether Democrat, Republican or Independent. Harris survey data show unmistakably that an overwhelming majority of the American public assume the need for an active federal government because they recognize that American social problems cannot be solved by private means.

The mass electorate may well be more or less "conservative" in its stance on many of the cultural issues raised over the last 15 years. But according to the new research, that conservatism is "clearly not of the pro-business sort" when it comes to questions of political economic policy. This reading of the voting public's mood is confirmed by the fact that Republican losses in 1974 were concentrated on the far right wing of the party.

So what?

The evidence assembled by political scientists over the last few years makes it clear that the American party system is being subjected to pressures that have seriously eroded its capacity to shape political discourse according to traditionally liberal or conservative notions. The mass electorate has shown that it is capable of taking up consistent ideological positions, including those still excluded by the two major parties from the mainstream. Moreover, it is apparent that the American electorate is now willing to make political choices that have not been offered to it as such by the two major parties.

Socialists are obliged by the needs of their potential constituencies to enter the mainstream of American politics, the better to widen the span. Great segments of the American people are ready for new choices on issues—they do not want merely to register their protest against the lack of choices. They are accessible, in short, to a socialist electoral politics that takes seriously their capacities as responsible citizens. ■

Gau-che-rie *n.* 1. awkwardness; clumsiness; tactlessness. 2. an awkward or tactless movement, act, etc. (tr. F., der. *gauch*, awkward, lit., left [hand]).

The Gaucherie column is open to dialogue and debate among socialists and leftists over principles, strategy and tactics. It will serve to promote the democratic exchange of views among socialists and leftists in a public forum.

The Trumpet & the Ladder

I. The Trumpet.

One of the standard trumpets of despair on the left wails the small prospects for publicly propagating socialism in the U.S. in the face of supreme difficulties: American workers are "so backward," they are afraid of the word "socialism," their indoctrination against "communism" blinds them to their own better well-being; capitalism delivers "too much affluence" to too many workers; there hasn't been a decent depression in decades (except for the one we're in now); the mass media is all-powerful and closed to socialist ideas; cynicism and apathy ride the land; the FBI and the CIA are on the case. The explanations are endless.

The underlying reasoning is a species of that old vicious circle. Its central syllogism goes like this:

- A socialist movement requires a strong party with a mass base among the workers and other social strata;
- but such a strong party is impossible because of the "ideological backwardness" of the people;
- a socialist mass movement is therefore

impossible until the masses become more receptive to the socialist left.

How are the people to become more receptive to the socialist left if socialists are not publicly propagating socialism to dispel the people's "backwardness"? What is the saving loop-hole out of the vicious circle? Not a socialist left, so the trumpet blows, that propagates socialism popularly—because the people would not be receptive; they are not "ready"—at least not for the real thing in its glowing purity. Then what? The age-old answer for the past 40 years has been: The natural evolution of "objective conditions" which, at their "crisis" point, will drive an opening wedge of receptivity. Predetermination is alive and well in Sodom.

The old social-democrats looked to the gradual evolution of capitalism into socialism via protest and piecemeal reform. The "new" social-democrats dropped the socialist goal altogether. The sectarians await the evolution of capitalism into a breakdown as the prelude to revolution. Meantime they cheer along and groove upon a "Third World" as the harbinger of the second coming while in public protesting along reformist lines in the First.

In whatever key the trumpet blows, it mutes the role of socialists as participating in the public propagation of socialist consciousness among the people.

In both variations socialism remains a far-away look in their respective eyes. When the people, in the face of "objec-

tive conditions," and in view of reforms that strengthen the power of capital, follow Roosevelts or Huey Longs in the 1930s, and Humphreys or Carters, Wallaces or Reagans, today, and not socialists—since socialists had not been previously propagating a working-class socialist identity nor building an explicit socialist political power in society—the Trumpeters reprise with the contrapuntal exchange between those among them who blame "objective conditions" for not being "worse" enough, and those who blame the people for not being good enough. A battle of the brass above the people below.

The standard new left and old left trumpets harmonize essentially a passive elegy on revolution: a mournful but comforting revolution-made-easy theme for those doting on revolutions past but in reality engaging in the present in quite normal vocations or benevolent avocations or clinging to the social and psychic security of small congenial groups.

It expresses an outlook of avoidance, one that obviates the discomfort of recognizing that building a popular socialist movement is not a far-off romance of a great popular moment-of-truth when the people in distress dramatically embrace the left as their savior crying, "You were right, forgive us for we knew not what to do"—although how it is that the people would respond when socialists had previously been saying nothing *as socialists* to the people due to their supposed unreceptivity, remains unclear.

The rise of a socialist movement capable of achieving popular authority has never in history been such a romance. Rather, the growth of socialism in the U.S., as elsewhere, may be expected to require a protracted, arduous, democratic and joyous labor, however dangerous,

involving the public commitment of life, liberty, and reputation (not to mention fortunes and honor) to the explicit propagation of socialist programs and ideas suited to the American working class' political culture.

It will require ongoing political education and agitation in the American vernacular that goes beyond the recitation of "correct" words and righteous slogans.

The growth of socialism in the nation's public politics will take day in and day out socialist "machine politics" in the precincts, the wards, the districts, among the poverty-stricken and unemployed, among the middle income workers and other social strata, in places of work and community affairs, together with diligent study and cultural work, journalistic writing and broadcasting, public debate and discussion. It will take, that is, sustained electoral and non-electoral politics, in the course of disseminating and agitating publicly in the here and now socialist ideas, programs and goals; so that socialists in the United States by the hundreds, by the thousands, by the millions, may become daily engaged in changing their world.

That kind of activity, commitment and dedication has taken root across the U.S. in the past decade, and is just beginning to display itself in a multiplicity of budding political, civic, cultural and intellectual movements. Instead of greeting those movements with a hearty cultivation, the Trumpeters incline to respond to them with preemptive disdain or condescension, playing them down, cutting them to pre-conceived size or drowning them out.

The Trumpeters are wailing against the grain. They might better stop, look, and listen.

—Martin J. Sklar
Part II, *The Ladder*, next week.

LIFE IN THE U.S.

EDUCATION

Keep business out of the lunchroom

By Peter Dreier
and Stefan Ostrach

EUGENE, ORE.—Parents and cafeteria workers joined together recently and convinced the local school board here to reject a "corporate takeover" of the district's lunch program. Similar efforts around the country are beginning to blunt a corporate drive against the nation's school lunchrooms.

Feeding school children for profit is a taxpayer subsidy of the private sector granted by the Nixon White House.

Responding to widespread publicity about hunger in America, including broadcast network programs and a *New York Times* series, President Nixon convened a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health in December 1969. Chaired by Harvey T. Stephens, executive vice president of ARA Services Inc., the country's largest food service management company, and Hartley W. Howard, a Borden executive, the panel urged the President to declare a national hunger emergency and to expand federal food programs.

One of the panel's few specific recommendations was that school districts should be able to contract with food service management concerns, "without penalty of losing any financial or commodity assistance from any governmental agency." Unlike many presidential commission recommendations, this one was quickly put into effect.

In 1970 the Department of Agriculture issued new regulations for school feeding programs, providing that "Any school food authority may employ a food service management company." This opened the way for private companies to enter the school lunch market.

A profitable business.

Since 1970, ARA, Interstate United, Saga and Servomation, the four largest such companies, and a host of smaller enterprises, wooed school boards, selling themselves as a panacea to school districts' fiscal dilemmas.

The school lunch program is an attractive market for these firms. Unlike airports, factories, race tracks and other facilities that are subject to the ups and downs of the business cycle, school lunch programs provide a steady demand, as well as government subsidies. In the school lunch program food companies have an advantage enjoyed by military contractors—a large market backed by tax dollars and involving little risk. In one year—between 1970 and 1971—institutional food service sales increased from \$476 million to \$5.2 billion, more than 10 times.

These companies are involved in a wide range of profitable but nutritionally dubious activities: vending machines and snack bars in office buildings, factories, hospitals, nursing homes, college campuses and other facilities. But public schools have become an important part of their business. ARA, for example, had 16.1 percent of its sales and 18.4 percent of its profits in schools in 1975.

Oregon.

The food service companies have won contracts at ten school districts in Oregon and Washington. They now serve 10 percent of Oregon school lunches.

Like many cities, Eugene's schools face a budget crunch. Noting that the schools were losing money on food, school board members recommended that they seek out private companies to get on a break-even basis.

Several companies jumped at the chance. They couldn't lose money, and, as one put it, "As your food service op-



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erator, we will be entitled to receive all federal, state, and local reimbursement on your behalf.... We will also be entitled to receive on your behalf USDA commodities and/or cash in lieu of commodities."

Parent and community opposition.

But a group of parents and cooks challenged the companies' promises, put together an impressive array of counter evidence and packed school board meetings to protest losing local control of their children's diets to outside, profit-making corporations.

The parents groups' research revealed that the corporations' profit orientation led to restaurant-like gimmicks like an "Alaska Purchase" menu consisting of a polar burger deluxe, gold nuggets, Klondike Krunch, and Seward's Sip, as well as rainbow stripes for the sleeves of lunchroom workers' uniforms, but not to better nutrition. Corporate-style efficiency led to "satelliting" preparation of meals in a central kitchen and subsequent distribution to individual schools. Satelliting makes food cold, soggy, and less healthful.

Experience from nearby school districts confirmed these findings. Corvallis, which hired ARA to run its school lunch program in September 1975 reversed its decision last month and will return to a public-run program. "They didn't improve things at all," said Guy Hendrix, a school board member who led the fight against ARA. "If anything it went downhill."

In nearby Bethel School District, parents complained of scanty portions, and cooks complained of speed-ups by the

efficiency-minded ARA. Meals were starchy, vegetables stale and popular cafeteria workers had been laid off.

Parents, cooks, and state officials complained that despite cost-cutting techniques, the private food companies were not saving the taxpayers' money. At Bethel, for example, ARA's contract called for six percent of net proceeds as well as an \$18,000 annual salary to an ARA food program co-ordinator who so antagonized cooks and parents that the school superintendent fired her and gave ARA 30 days to improve its service.

A counter-trend.

Richard Miller, director of the Oregon State Department of Education office that administers \$17 million in U.S. Department of Agriculture subsidies in the state was skeptical about private companies as well. "The corporations promise to save money and increase [student] participation," said Miller. "All of these promises are wrong. They haven't done any of them."

His assistant Len Isaacs added, "All educational programs lose money. I don't know why anyone should think that a lunch facility should make money or should pay its own way. Do we ask that about math or science?" Instead, Isaacs said, "we should think of lunch programs as part of the students' education—diet and nutrition."

Isaacs said that school districts could lighten the load by hiring qualified nutritionists and food managers and use the "management fee" now garnered by private firms for better equipment and improved food, thereby increasing participation in the programs. He said that statewide experience with private companies has brought about a "change in thinking," a counter-trend away from private contracting.

Bringing in "common sense."

The Eugene school lunch committee's success can be attributed to their well-organized campaign. As soon as word got out about the invitation to private firms to take over food service, a small group of parents called a public meeting; 65 people showed up. Among those attending were a number of school cooks, concerned about food quality and their jobs, as well as local hunger activists.

A number of the parent leaders had experience in Eugene's anti-war and counter-culture movements. Others were becoming politically active for the first time. They relied on common sense and advice from sympathetic experts and consumer advocates.

They organized subcommittees to do further research, to inform the local media, and to use petitions and letter-writing campaigns appealing to parents to protect their children's diets from junk food profiteers.

After voting to reject the private firms' bids, the school board appointed a task force of parents, local businessmen, cooks, and others to investigate alternative approaches to the school lunch program.

Eugeneans are pleased to have defeated the "corporate takeover" of their children's diets. In spite of fiscal constraints, the cook and parents won a victory for human needs over private profit. They brought "common sense" into the school board's deliberations.

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