

Changing Primary Colors

The recent news that two of the Senate's most progressive voices are reintroducing a "Clean Money, Clean Elections" bill came as a refreshing springtime breeze. It seems Sens. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) and John Kerry (D-Mass.) are claiming campaign finance reform as a progressive issue rather than a nonpartisan, "good government" reform. The glaring shortcoming of the bill is that it's such a long-shot to win.

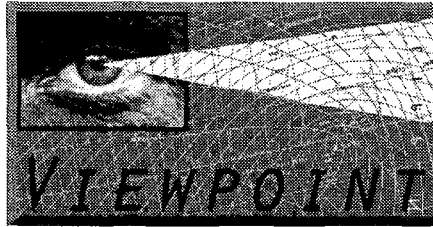
Past congressional campaign finance reform efforts—including the McCain-Feingold bill that appears eternally stopped in its tracks—offered moderate positions to attract Republican cosponsors. Movement-based efforts to pass campaign finance reform through state ballot initiatives (including victories in Maine, Massachusetts and Arizona) have taken a stronger stand on the issues, but still give equal billing to those few conservatives who join the cause—downplaying the fact that the large majority of core activists are progressives.

But campaign reform is not a conservative principle. It is a solidly progressive value to favor full-throated democracy and political rights for all. Wielding campaign reform as a partisan tool could help define a new, energetic progressive agenda. If the Democrats are serious about campaign reform, one way the party could walk its talk—and create an impressive change overnight without needing to co-opt a single Republican vote—is by reforming the Democratic primaries.

After all, it is in the primaries that the most interesting progressives—and all candidates without a connection to money or fame or party machinery—get filtered out of the system. According to a recent report by Rob Richie of the Center for Voting and Democracy, a little more than half of all congressional seats are in districts overwhelmingly dominated by one party. In one-third of state Senate elections during the '90s, one party was so assured of victory that no major party even bothered to field an opposing candidate. In districts like these, the party primary is the election.

Imagine a Democratic primary in which all candidates were guaranteed a

minimum level of access to media and a serious opportunity to be heard on the issues; a primary in which the party sponsored public debates and sent out a voter pamphlet outlining each candidate's positions; or an electoral system such as "instant-run-off voting" (where



if no candidate wins an outright majority, voters' second- and third-choice votes are counted) that would give people a chance to vote for the candidate they like best without "wasting a vote."

Public financing of elections—the "clean-money" option—is one key reform the Democrats cannot institute on their own, since it involves taxpayer funds. But the Democrats could get control of the escalating price of running for office by setting spending limits on each primary race—while putting enough resources into debates, pamphlets and media time to allow for decent exposure of candidates. While spending limits are not an ideal solution, they could make an enormous difference by substantially lowering the ante of running for office. If spending limits were set at, say, 80 percent of the average cost of winning a given election, candidates would know the cost of running for office, and avoid the last-minute escalation of fundraising and spending in a close race. Since this would not be law, just state party rules, the formula could be adjusted based on experience.

Polls consistently have shown that spending limits enjoy broad public support. The public knows the cost of running a campaign is too high and rising fast, and that much of the money is spent on attack ads. In 1976, the Supreme Court ruled that in general elections

spending limits are not permissible because they infringe upon free speech. But Richie and John Anderson have argued that the decision would not apply to party primaries—a view supported by constitutional scholars. "The courts give parties very substantial autonomy in how they choose their candidates," says Burt Neuborne, legal director of the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University. "It doesn't become a question of free speech, since a candidate who doesn't like the rule can always run as an independent or join another party."

Would any of these reforms in the primaries hurt Democrats' chances in the general election? In some cases, perhaps—where fundraising needs to get in high gear early, or where media-intensive primaries establish an electoral identity for a candidate. But in many more cases, primaries with costly attack ads leave all candidates tarnished, and the winner staggers into the general election. Under a reformed system, a Democrat who won a fair and issue-oriented primary could

If Democrats are serious about campaign reform, the party should start with its own primaries.

have an added edge of legitimacy against a Republican emerging from a politics-as-usual primary race.

Firmly establishing campaign reform as a progressive rather than a nonpartisan issue is a trade-off. It would focus less on winning the issue and more on winning a constituency. In the process, it could become a cornerstone of a new progressive political agenda and attract new supporters—such as Perot and Buchanan sympathizers—by exposing the corporate distortions of society.

Introducing symbolic legislation is nice. But if Wellstone and Kerry are serious about improving the electoral process, they could lead the effort by pushing their own party to run fairer, more open, more democratic elections. That would be a spring cleaning the public would heartily welcome. ■

Out of His Time

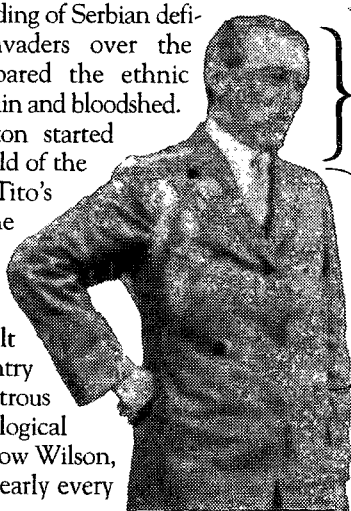
Woodrow Wilson still haunts U.S. foreign policy

By John R. MacArthur

As the weirdly self-destructive NATO bombing campaign against Serbian bridges, office buildings and presidential villas grinds toward its third month, discussions of history have become very fashionable at cocktail parties, political gatherings and television roundtables alike. This has made for some extraordinary intellectual contortions—equating the expulsion (and flight) of more than 600,000 Kosovar Albanians, and the killing of an unknown number of others, with the extermination of 6 million Jews, for example—as well as for embarrassing revelations of American ignorance. Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware recently told an alarming story about a February trip to Mexico aboard Air Force One, during which President Clinton spied him immersed in a book about Balkan history and asked whether he could have it to read. “No, get your own copy,” Biden says he jovially replied. “And I’ll lay odds that he eventually got it and read it.”

I’ll lay odds he didn’t, at least not before the bombing started, and I wish Biden had been more generous with his precious text. A minimal understanding of Serbian defiance toward foreign invaders over the centuries might have spared the ethnic Albanians a great deal of pain and bloodshed.

But even before Clinton started boning up on Kosovo’s Field of the Blackbirds in 1389, Tito’s Partisan War against the Germans and collaboration of some Albanians with the Nazis, he would have done well to consult the history of his own country and the ultimately disastrous career of his direct ideological ancestor, President Woodrow Wilson, whose ghost still haunts nearly every U.S. foreign policy debate.



It is largely forgotten that Wilson, who like Clinton sought to purify the world with violence, portrayed himself both as a progressive Democrat and as a man of peace—and that both these images were false. On social issues, Wilson was deeply conservative, at times reactionary, and it was only his enormous ambition that caused him to bow to some of the reformist demands of the day. Without the great split in the Republican Party in 1912, it’s doubtful that American high school students would still be debating Wilson’s famous “Fourteen Points” for world peace in the misguided belief that they represent the insights of a visionary and a saint.

Wilson was itching to get the United States into battle from the first days of World War I; a great role in the Great War fed his profound craving for world and historical fame. “The decisive trait of Wilson’s political character was vain-glory,” wrote political historian Walter Karp.

Karp and a minority of historians have understood Wilson’s decision to abandon traditional U.S. neutrality as an act not of noble purpose, but of sheer political selfishness. His re-election campaign slogan of 1916—“He kept us out of war”—was just one of his many half-truths. In 1914, this “liberal” president was prevented from a full-scale invasion of revolutionary Mexico only by last-minute diplomacy and domestic opposition. Five years later, by the time he had uttered the last of his many exalted and empty platitudes—the war in Europe was a “war to end war,” its final resolution “must be a peace without victory,” the allies were fighting to make the world “safe for democracy” and the “self-determination of peoples”—53,000 Americans had died in combat (and tens of thousands more from disease) and two of their most cherished freedoms, of speech and the press, had been eviscerated at home. Long before there was McCarthyism, there was Wilson’s Espionage and Sedition Acts, the most drastic crackdown on civil liberties in U.S. history. (In 1918, 30 years before anyone heard of Alger Hiss, Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs was sent to jail for his public disloyalty to the cause of Wilsonian justice, one of more than 1,500 people arrested for daring to question or criticize the war policy.)

It will always be argued that American intervention was decisive in the Allied victory and necessary to contain a bellicose and expansionist Germany. Of course, we’ll never know whether non-intervention might

have forced an earlier, negotiated end to the mindless slaughter in the trenches, a peace that could have preserved the self-respect of the German nation and snuffed the paranoia and hatred of a wounded corporal named Hitler. In foreign policy, a little restraint sometimes yields great benefits.

Having participated in the near destruction of Europe and suppressed liberty at home, Wilson presented himself as a great democrat and peacemaker at the Versailles conference in 1919, where, despite his lofty language, he was really just another war leader, no more ethical or moral than the others. It’s no wonder that all the self-righteous Wilsonian rhetoric fell flat with David Lloyd-George and Georges Clemenceau. When in January 1917 (before the United States declared war), Wilson volunteered the unwilling American people for a new role in which they would “add their power to the authority and force of other nations to guarantee peace and justice throughout the world,” he was dooming himself and future American presidents to failure. Such an arrogant, far-flung and overarching guarantee could never be backed up, much less tolerated by other powers.

Although at least he hasn’t curtailed criticism of his war policy in the name of democracy, Clinton now seeks to

Continued on page 12