

WHO CARES ABOUT APATHY?

By Michael Barone

The urge comes on political journalists, some time after one presidential campaign is over and before the next has begun, to explain in greater depth the things they have been reporting on in snippets and dispatches hurriedly filed from paper-strewn desks or portable computer modems clumsily plugged into pay phones. The result is the appearance

Minority Party: Why Democrats Face Defeat in 1992 and Beyond, by Peter Brown, Washington: Regnery Gateway, 350 pages, \$21.95
Why Americans Hate Politics, by E. J. Dionne Jr., New York: Simon & Schuster, 430 pages, \$22.95



after the (in most reporters' view) dismal campaign of 1988 of an unusually good crop of political analyses in 1990 and 1991, including Peter Brown's *Minority Party* and E.J. Dionne Jr.'s *Why Americans Hate Politics*. Both books are written with passion as well as with thorough knowledge of the facts and admirable fairmindedness.

It's not hard to see whose side Brown, chief political writer for Scripps Howard, is on: He thinks the Democrats are not only doomed to lose, but they deserve to lose presidential elections as long as they keep behaving as they have. He has a fine feel for the grittiness of everyday life and, much more than most reporters, has a sense of what life looks like to ordinary voters. Unlike many political reporters, he keeps referring to reality: to the white middle class of Macomb County, Michigan; to the phenomenally high crime rates among blacks; to the horrors of commuting; to the rise of Hispanics and other immigrants.

The picture he paints is not pretty. The Democrats are doomed, he suggests, because to "the forgotten middle class" they seem—and are—too sympathetic to the black underclass, excusing criminals and subsidizing the inert. It is as if the Democrats were stuck in a time warp, somewhere between 1965 and 1974, where every domestic issue is civil rights and every foreign issue is Vietnam, where the United States of 1991 is the Mississippi of 1964 and the oppressor of a rising and virtuous Third World. Their constant urges toward redistribution, centralization, and celebration of victimization persistently lead them in the wrong direction.

There is quite enough truth in Brown's utterly persuasive book to explain why the Democrats have lost before and to explain why they're about to lose again. What is unclear is why they persist in such error. In their refusal to confront reality, and notably the successes of their rivals, they resemble the Republicans of around 1945, who were temperamentally unable to concede that anything Franklin Roosevelt did had helped end the depression or win the war. The Democrats have lost the capacity, necessary to winning

any political campaign, of understanding things as they are.

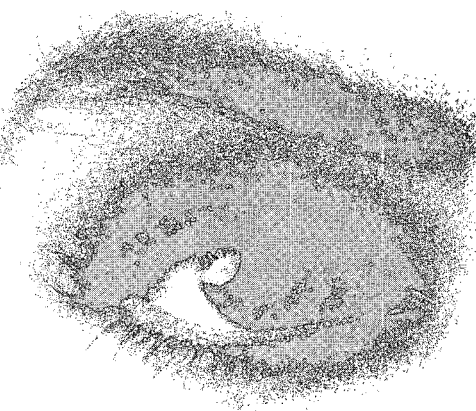
They seize on unworkable nostrums, like Kevin Phillips's populist politics—which Brown definitively shows to be nonsense. They imagine that championing the minimum wage, universal health insurance, and extended unemployment benefits will win them votes, without realizing that the economy has changed and that the beneficiaries of these measures are not breadwinners, as they were up through the 1960s, but mostly second and third earners in households who are not likely to be voters. They fail to realize that the Democratic core constituency is, literally, dying out, and that young voters may well be turning out to be the most Republican age cohort in history.

Brown's insights enabled him to predict, even when Michael Dukakis was leading George Bush by 17 points in the opinion polls, that the Democrats wouldn't win, and to explain why.

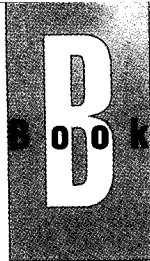
Dionne, in contrast, seems to think that the Democrats were actually on the road to victory at that point and that the Republicans ended up winning only by waging what he, like most members of the Washington press corps, describes as an ugly campaign. In this he is clearly wrong. Voters in July 1988 didn't have, and knew they didn't have, as much information as they would have before they made their final decision, and the campaign itself was no uglier than one might expect in an adversarial process.

Dionne indulges in the ritual decrying of the Bush campaign's Willie Horton ads, without noting that they were entirely accurate and that the position Dukakis articulately backed for 11 years—weekend furloughs for prisoners sentenced to life without parole—is one for which no rational argument can be made. There's nothing unfair in attacking an opponent for taking a lunatic position. Indeed, one could argue that you have a moral obligation to bring such idiocy to the attention of the voters. Certainly the number of Americans today who think things would be better if Dukakis had won is very small.

Fortunately, Dionne's capitulation to the liberal bias of most of the press corps



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is peripheral to his main argument and uncharacteristic of the rich substance of his book. He argues that both parties are stuck in the past—the Democrats some time in the late 1960s, the Republicans in 1981—both in their electoral and in their governing politics. He shows how idea-driven amateurs, conservative and liberal, changed the Republican and Democratic parties from the 1960s on.

Dionne seems to have read just about every book and obscure pamphlet on political philosophy, and *Why Americans Hate Politics* may very well be the best intellectual history of American political thought since World War II. Dionne is a sensitive, fair-minded reader, showing a fine appreciation of hitherto obscure (to me, at least) thinkers from the tradition-minded right to the New Left. He shows how different sets of ideas interlock with others—what libertarianism, for example, has in common with the New Left.

Dionne admires idealism and intellectual rigor. But he shows how intellectual inflexibility and intellectuals' lack of interest in what bothers voters have kept people arguing over values and ignoring the more humdrum business of government.

That development, he argues, is "why Americans hate politics." They are turned off by shrill appeals to personal values, Dionne suggests, and dismayed that peripheral matters crowd out debate on macroeconomic and major foreign-policy issues. Certainly, most people share little of the affection that political junkies like Dionne and me have for the political process.

But is that a bad or an unusual thing? The adversarial parry and thrust of partisan maneuver is seldom an uplifting sight, and sensible people seek their civic uplift, and personal fulfillment, elsewhere.

The attachment of Americans to the bedrock of basic democratic values and to guarantees of personal freedom is strong—I would argue, has never been stronger. Their response to the political choices before them has not been irrational, even if it is not exactly what you or I would have decided. Consider the much-maligned 1988 election: Americans had to choose among some 17 candidates

about whom they knew little or nothing at all, and they ended up with the man who, it seems pretty clear in retrospect, was strongest in experience and closest to most voters' views on most major issues.

Like many reporters, Dionne rhapsodizes about Jesse Jackson's apparent rapport with white working-class voters in places like Sheboygan, Wisconsin. But that rapport produced few votes—most white Jackson votes come from the graduate-student proletariat. And would America and the world be better off with a president who wants to move toward socialism, sees

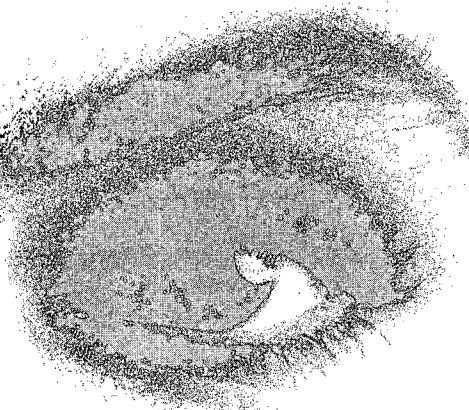
Third World dictatorships as models to be followed, and literally embraces the likes of Fidel Castro and Yasser Arafat?

The Democrats come out worse in Dionne's book than the Republicans. He recognizes that the Democrats seem caught up in an older time warp, leaving them less in touch with reality and more incapable of winning national elections. The Republicans, in his view, are grappling with the strains between traditionalism and libertarianism, between economic and cultural conservatism—the usual problems of a majority party.

Both parties, in the months since he wrote, have made faltering moves toward offering new domestic policies, but nothing as yet that greatly undermines his scorn. But is it such a bad thing if, as his title puts it, Americans hate politics? "By expecting politics to settle too many issues," Dionne himself writes, "we have diminished the possibilities of politics."

In these relatively peaceful, prosperous times, Americans may not be looking to politics or government for personal uplift or inspiration, and that isn't such a bad thing. Yes, the process could work better; yes, we have a problem with a politics run by amateurs who are so dazzled with their ideas that they can't see the world around them; yes, there are some nagging problems that government might do a better job on. But, hey, the world's going our way. Things aren't quite as bad as they appear to most of us who make our living writing about politicians. ■

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THE FIXERS

By Jacob Sullum

When Milton Friedman and William Bennett traded letters in *The Wall Street Journal* two years ago, each was ostensibly trying to convince the other that he was wrong about the war on drugs. Of course, no one expected Bennett to say, "You're right, Milton. I've been a fool. Let's legalize drugs." Nor did anyone expect Friedman to come around to the prohibitionist

Searching for Alternatives: Drug-Control Policy in the United States, edited by Melvyn B. Krauss and Edward P. Lazear, Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 454 pages, \$42.95
 Drug Prohibition and the Conscience of Nations, edited by Arnold S. Trebach and Kevin B. Zeese, Washington, D.C.: Drug Policy Foundation, 250 pages, \$9.95 paper
 Winning the Drug War: New Challenges for the 1990s, edited by Jeffrey A. Eisenach, Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 119 pages, \$10.00 paper
 The Case for Legalizing Drugs, by Richard Lawrence Miller, New York: Praeger, 247 pages, \$21.95
 The Drug Solution, by Chester Nelson Mitchell, Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 362 pages, \$21.95 paper
 The Drug Legalization Debate, edited by James A. Inciardi, Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 230 pages, \$16.95 paper
 The Truth About Addiction and Recovery, by Stanton Peele and Archie Brodsky, with Mary Arnold, New York: Simon & Schuster, 430 pages, \$22.95
 The Crisis in Drug Prohibition, edited by David Boaz, Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 148 pages, \$8.00 paper