

New Alliance Parties

By Virginia I. Postrel

Strange bedfellows in a "post-ideological" age?

THE REPORTERS AND THE WHITE House were shocked. On a seemingly routine procedural vote, the Clinton crime bill had gone down to defeat in the House. The vote, news stories and pundits agreed, was "stunning," "devastating," "somewhere between crushing and catastrophic," "a startling defeat." It was, said David Brinkley, "a bad week for Clinton, very bad."

And so it was. But the crime bill vote was not primarily a referendum on the president. It was a referendum on government power. And for one rare moment in a city obsessed with the extension and manipulation of that power, the skeptics won.

They were, said all reports, an unusual coalition: liberal black Democrats opposed to the death penalty, conservative Republicans opposed to lavish social spending, and moderate-to-conservative members of both parties opposed to gun control. They had in common one conviction—that increasing the power and scope of the federal government would not make life better for their constituents. For this moment at least, they were skeptics, questioners of conventional solutions.

So the crime bill vote was not just a defeat for Clinton. It was an in-your-face declaration that the tyranny of the power-worshipping center is not inevitable. And it was a suggestion of alliances to come.

In the last several years, it has become a cliché among political analysts that the old ideological categories don't mean much in the post-Cold War world. With right and left in disarray, we have supposedly entered a "post-ideological age" in which "pragmatism" will dominate, giving us rule by a "vital center" with no

guiding principles. That way lies the cynical campaigning of the California governor's race, in which Pete Wilson and Kathleen Brown sling insults at one another in a desperate attempt to disguise the fact that they differ hardly at all.

The post-ideological age is a myth, however. The current period of ideological flux has in fact exposed *deeper* divisions than the ones to which we have long been accustomed. Rather than a post-ideological age, we are now in a radically ideological age, in which ideas are taken to their roots, to their fundamentals, in which the categories are broader and deeper, and the divisions more sharply defined, than the old left and right.

WE SAW ONE SUCH DIVISION—A STARK, old-fashioned one—in the crime bill debate. Over the past several months, others have cropped up, creating "odd alliances": a coalition of anti-growth liberals and blood-and-soil conservatives to stop Disney from building an American history theme park in Northern Virginia (the free-market objection that the park is getting state subsidies isn't part of the main debate); an alliance of environmentalists and farmers to block development by using water policy to favor the status quo in California; and, most important, a coalition of environmentalists, left-wing activists, and conservative nationalists, to defeat the new world trade treaty.

Those examples capture an increasingly common pattern. On issue after issue, partisans of stasis are appealing to state power to block the dynamic processes of markets and individual choice. And, in more and more instances, they are allied across traditional ideological categories. To credit them with spanning a broad spectrum of opinion—with representing some sort of consensus—is to fall into a trap. In a radically ideological age,

they are the friendliest of fellow travelers.

A few days before the crime bill vote, Ralph Nader issued a press release titled, "Broadest Range of American Political Spectrum Ever to Jointly Petition a President Call for GATT Vote Postponement." The title is not merely ungrammatical. It is a lie.

It disregards the profound agreement among "Jerry Brown and Pat Buchanan; Tom Hayden and Lyn Nofzinger; Richard Viguerie and Kurt Vonnegut; Ralph Nader and Paul Weyrich; the editor of the right-wing American Spectator and the editor and publisher of the Progressive." They use different words—*democracy* on the left, *sovereignty* on the right—but the signatories have the same concerns and the same agenda. They are afraid that the new trade treaty will weaken the U.S. government's ability to control the economic choices of its citizens.

Sir James Goldsmith, not an American and therefore not on Nader's list, warns that free trade "threatens to shatter the social consensus in the West on how to divide wealth between capital and labor." In other words, it threatens the welfare state.

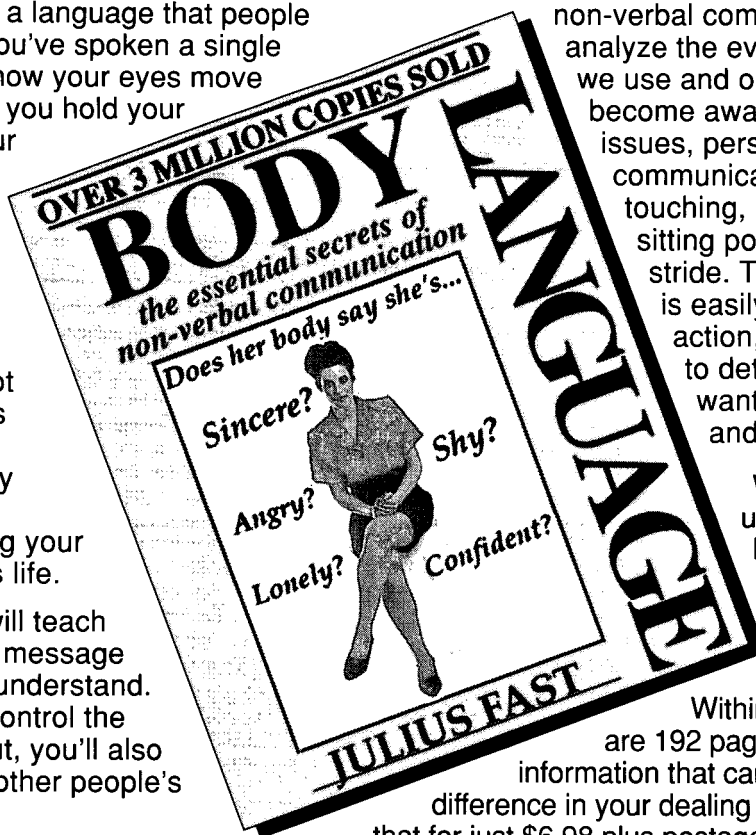
And the regulatory state. As Nader writes, GATT "subordinates other societal values to trade dictates, [which] has upset many labor, environmental, consumer and subnational (state and local) officials." Translation: It inhibits regulations that keep individuals from buying and selling as they choose.

Similarly, *The American Spectator's* R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr. worries that the new treaty will keep the United States from "answering to its citizens or to its own peculiar foreign policy needs" by raising trade barriers. (Actually, the treaty does not force the U.S. government to do or not do anything—neither GATT nor its proposed World Trade Organization has an army. It simply lets an exporting country

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impose retaliatory sanctions, thereby increasing the political cost of raising trade barriers.)

Writing in *The Nation*, historian Jeremy Brecher puts the issue this way: The danger is "*Loss of democratic control*. National governments have lost much of their power to direct their own economies. The ability of countries to apply socialist or even Keynesian techniques in pursuit of development, full employment or other national economic goals has been undermined by the power of capital to pick up and leave."

What is at stake is indeed "sover-

eignty"—the power of absolute monarchs—and "democracy"—the power of unbridled majorities. With the new treaty, and its predecessor, national governments bind themselves to respect the right of their citizens to trade. And trade itself undermines state power. That scares people whose politics is based on preserving that power—and their fear is enough to create new, apparently strange coalitions. But, as an angry President Clinton can testify, so too is skepticism about government power. In our not-at-all-post-ideological age, not all the odd alliances will be on the side of the state. ❖

Affirmative Reaction

By Brian Doherty

Interethnic turf wars and the absurdity of racial classification

RECENT COMMENTS BY TIRSO DEL Junco, vice chairman of the Postal Service Board of Governors, illuminate a looming new battle over the benefits of affirmative action. Civil rights devotees may lament this turn, yet it is an almost inevitable result of trumping individual merit with group rights.

Del Junco slashed at already fraying ties among the civil rights community by announcing there are *too many* African Americans working for the post office in certain cities—at the expense of Latinos. By the logic of the anti-discrimination maven, he is right. Blacks are highly over-represented among postal workers in Los Angeles compared to their share of the population. While they are only 9.6 percent of the labor force, they make up 63 percent of postal workers. A General Accounting Office survey showed a similar situation in Chicago: Blacks, while only 18.2 percent of the available labor pool, make up 79.7 percent of postal workers. In Los Angeles, a Latino labor market presence of 34 percent translates into only 15 percent of post office jobs.

Under civil rights law, this is a *prima facie* case of discrimination. The 1991 Civil Rights Act cemented into law the principle, already used in practice by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, that if your employee pool has a different proportion of races and ethnicities than the available labor pool, you can be liable for a discrimination suit.

Opponents of affirmative action argue that there are many reasons besides blatant discrimination to explain disproportionate ethnic or racial representation in the workplace. Affirmative action advocates tended to scoff. Now, in the face of Del Junco's fulminations, they are tendering defenses that—while valid—they have dismissed in other circumstances.

Charly Amos, the Postal Service's manager of affirmative action, points out that applicants for postal jobs go through objective written examinations. Except for military veterans, who get a slight boost, all comers are treated equally in the test grading. Amos thinks the preponderance of black postal workers in certain cities can be explained by networks of friends and community leaders who keep them informed about tests and hiring.

The actual hiring process, Amos says, leaves no play for personal bias. If postal hiring is done strictly by testable merit—