

# Electoral Aftermath: What Price Victory?

Sunday Address, November 7, 2004, Dr. Khoren Arisian

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## Introduction

“Go out into the highways and byways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men (and women). Give them, not hell, but hope and courage.” (Rev. John Murray [1741-1815], founder of Universalism in America)

... We must remember that the basis of democratic leadership is ordinary citizens' desire to take their country back from the hands of corrupted plutocratic and imperial elites. This desire is predicated on an awakening among the populace from the seductive lies and comforting illusions that sedate them and a moral channeling of new political energy that constitutes a formidable threat to the status quo. This is what happened in the 1860s, 1890s, 1930s and 1960s in American history. Just as it looked as if we were about to lose the American democratic experiment—in the face of civil war, imperial greed, economic depression, and racial upheaval—in each of these periods a democratic awakening and activist energy emerged to keep our democratic project afloat. We must work and hope for such an awakening once again. (Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*.)

I can hardly imagine that most of you were happy with the overall electoral results this past Tuesday! On Channel 13 Charlie Rose conducted a discussion with a half dozen or so media-savvy individuals, and among them was TV journalist and commentator Bill Moyers who concluded that the 2004 elections proved beyond a doubt to be the most ideologically divisive and polarizing that he could remember. Probably most of us have come to the same assessment.

## The Republican Victory Came From A Direct Message To A Specific Audience, Not To The American People As A Whole

Republicans won a majority of the closest races, while President Bush's less than stellar performance in his three debates with Senator John Kerry had little if any negative effect on his political "base". He stayed dutifully on message throughout his oral encounters with his "opponent"—as he persistently called John Kerry—whether the "message" was relevant or not at every juncture. For example, during the second debate, as Katha Pollitt comments in *The Nation* magazine, Mr. Bush, in an aside, announced his intention to appoint Supreme Court Justices who would be strongly inclined to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. He went on to cite the Court's infamous *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 that slaves were the property of their owners, not citizens. Like the unborn fetus, the life of a slave, Bush

implied in his sometimes disingenuously garbled manner, was valueless. Doubtless many of us missed such a coded message to the religious right: that is to say, how many of us are aware that anti-abortion activists have long, but quietly, compared themselves to 19th century abolitionists, likening *Roe v. Wade* to *Dred Scott*. Bush's cleverly framed argument was that both decisions, separated by nearly 115 years, denied legal protection to a whole class of human beings and therefore should be overturned. Sounds ethically noble on its face until you start to examine it. That a fetus of undetermined provenance and an adult human being are somehow equivalent is an unstated premise – quickly passed over! What, then, was the President's essential point? That abortion should be criminalized. Whether he really meant to be that extreme is uncertain. What's important is that messages like that get through and comfort members of "the base." Keep playing to that end, Karl Rove incessantly instructs his protégé, let the party worry about how to ensure that at least one to two million of the four million evangelical believers who didn't bother to vote in 2000 will get to the polls this year for sure, which in large measure they apparently did.

### **The Democratic Party Appears To Be Floundering And Lacks Clout**

In contrast to the disciplined Republicans, the Democrats do not appear to have a solid definable core of believers who share identical values and objectives and with sufficient clout and focus to mobilize the party's several political segments. A coalition of diverse interest groups each with its preferred projects and goals tends to be less than the sum of its parts and therefore weaker than it otherwise would be. Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor under Clinton, went so far as to describe his party as without a centrally animating philosophic center; so far as he was concerned, it was, in a remarkably critical Op-Ed piece in *The Times*, "a dead center." Author Thomas Frank dismisses that same lack as "soft centrism." I myself have been of a similar opinion for a long time; one should not be terrified of having to respond to one's far-right critics as Democrats have tended to be. The Democratic Party reminds me of nothing so much as the Unitarian Universalist movement in which I grew up, with its various, often theologically incompatible groupings of both laity and clergy. Everyone nowadays does their own thing; anything that works goes.

### **The Ethical Movement Has A Coherent Outlook And We Need To Build Up Our Institutions**

I'm fast becoming both a political and spiritual independent. Actually, our tiny Ethical Movement is far more philosophically coherent. What we must do is to become much more organizationally astute, membership-oriented, a task I consciously assigned myself in my first year as Senior Leader, September, 2000 to September, 2001, only to be programmatically diverted to some extent as of September 11. Nonetheless, I want to return to expending as much energy, time, and devotion as I can to this parochially significant purpose. I've never seen myself as an establishmentarian, but I do see myself as a professional institution-builder. That shall be an enduring emphasis and concern of

mine, in concert with the Society's membership office, from January through June of 2005.

We Ethical Culturists are hardly bereft of a shared powerful philosophic point of view: namely, humanism, born of the modern period of the European and American Enlightenment. Humanism has been barraged by ignorant criticism in favor of unapologetic religious atavism, an ultraconservative form of Christianity as today's alleged mainstream solvent for all of our nation's problems, alleged owes and moral disintegration, as the religious right sees it, not to mention the rest of the world which, the right gratuitously insists, could benefit from renewed missionary attention! Moral mandates are the order of the day.

### **The Republican Party Claims Moral Values, But It Practices Cynical Cupidity**

As a consequence of the past week's elections, evangelicals got a firmer grip on so-called "moral values"—which can signify everything and nothing—whereby they mean to "legislate morals so that those who disagree with us must [still] live by *our* values." Hence the prospect of spiritual, rather than ecclesiastical, coercion with the neoconservatives' continuing war on Iraq serving as the catastrophic prelude to bringing democracy by force to benighted backward countries in need of salvation and freedom, thus paving the way to an American empire not in a colonial but political and economic sense.

Mr. Bush's margin of victory was considerably less than his *political* father's—Ronald Reagan's victory over Fritz Mondale in 1984—nonetheless Bush II's win has been reported as uncontestable. George W. actually has three fathers: his posthumously adopted dad, Ronald Reagan; his biological father, G. H. W. Bush; and above all, his "higher father," God. What a deal! Two presidents, one overarching deity, and for extra measure, his chief savior, Billy Graham, America's greatest living evangelist who decisively put George W. on the road to successful recovery from his alcoholism. Shortly thereafter strategist Karl Rove took him in hand; the rest is history. I'd also suggest that our president has been born three times: first naturally, in 1946; "born again" as a Christian in 1986; reborn for the third and final time to salvific destiny on September 11, 2001. He's been through a lot, and so have we!

### **The Price of Bush's Victory**

What price Bush's victory this past Tuesday? In a short coded, not altogether sincere but surely defiant and politically conceived speech after he won, he revealed the price we'd all soon might be paying: simplification of the tax code tilted toward workers' wages and more tax cuts for the wealthy; privatization of Social Security; constant waging of war against terrorism for an indefinite number of years; further repressive legislation regarding civil liberties; utter antipathy toward open government and obsessive classifying of more and more public documents; a constitutional amendment to ban same-

sex marriage: something I suspect Bush would prefer not to press, but his “base” passionately wants to pass; and furtherance of faith-based initiatives using taxpayers’ dollars for sectarian ends put in place by the federal government. So far about a billion dollars has been doled out; twenty billion dollars is envisioned as available for the succeeding four years. Whatever happened to separation of church and state?

Twenty-two percent of all voters on November 2 ranked the aforementioned “moral values” aspect of the election as more important than concerns about the economy or the war in Iraq, which the President has paradoxically characterized as a “catastrophic success,” no doubt another linguistic concoction thought up by Republican psycholinguistics experts. The phrase “moral values” often seems to serve as a catchall expression that reverberates with religious-right overtones.

On November 3 the President crowed that he finally could be seen as representing the will of the people who had voted for him, and that he intended to spend the resulting “political capital” to advance and complete his agenda. He didn’t quite intone the old Roman mantra *vox populi; vox dei*, “the voice of the people is the voice of god,” which in Bushworld could be interpreted to mean that if God speaks/inspires/moves the people to vote in effect for what I’m proposing, then God has singled me out to be his current viceroy on earth, in this case, President of the United States. Therefore those who disagree with me are to be treated with disdain and impatience and painted as dangerously unpatriotic.

The Reverend Jim Wallis of Sojourners has dubbed George W. Bush, a Methodist, as “a messianic American Calvinist.” Wallis is right on target. Methodism has been aggressively evangelistic for most of its history. Converts to the Christian Gospel of John and Charles Wesley were by definition twice-born, rendered “new creatures in Christ” via salvation by faith: individuals who in a spirit of absolute obedience are to surrender their will entirely to God. All Methodist churches have been, and are, Evangelical Protestant. In the main, Methodist theology has held that humans are capable of a modicum of moral judgment, since strict Calvinistic predestinationism would make God an occasional author of sin: logically that won’t do! Nonetheless there has always been a small diehard Calvinistic cohort within the Methodist enclave in which the Bible is literally accepted as the convert’s supreme guide to faith and practice, with considerable stress laid upon personal experience (conversion) of the forgiveness of sins by Christ and the necessity to be part of the Christian fellowship with all believers. Most prized of all is the truly reformed sinner, which the New Testament parable of the prodigal son rejoices in. This is the sphere of spiritual absolutism where George W. Bush abides in those photos which show him bowing his head and praying with eyes closed and intensity of concentration before he opens Cabinet gatherings. The chief problem with this type of faith is that it can go to one’s head, as it nearly has already with Bush II, which explains why he can never make a mistake!

## **The Secular-Religious Divide**

So it is that we now find ourselves as citizens of a democracy staring angrily at one another over a great secular-religious divide. This is what we get with a nation that has itself been twice-born, first with the Puritans in the 17th century and secondly via the deistic founders of the secular democratic ethos that was enshrined in the Constitution adopted in 1789-91. I'm far less sanguine than Senator Kerry that a predominantly liberal political party can work comfortably with today's far-right Republican machine. Bush himself is getting more bossy and cocksure by the moment as evidenced in his post-election press conference, saying he's willing to work with the other side of the Congressional aisle so long as its minions agree to go along with his agenda! There's little evidence as yet of egalitarian willingness to bridge the divide between the two Americas.

Fred Edwards, Editorial Director of the American Humanist Association, who was our spirited guest speaker on September 26, has recently said in an e-mail:

...it's long past time for us to be confident in the rightness of our ideas, to be firm in our resolve, to be creative and determined in our politics, and to be unabashedly subversive of entrenched power whenever it works against our values...

I know, of course, how much we Humanists want to be "nice." But how can we be nice to those who lied to get us into a war where we have killed over 100,000 Iraqis, aroused the world's ire against us, and spurred the recruiting of more terrorists who kill more innocent civilians? How can we be nice to people who want to send pregnant women back to the back-alley butchers? How can we be nice to people who want to deny sexual minorities their rights and take away other rights we all have enjoyed for so long? And, most importantly, how can we be nice to those who line their pockets and the pockets of their friends through policies that are destroying the fragile ecology of our only planetary home?

We aren't dealing here with mere differences of taste and opinion. These are life-and-death issues. As a result, being nice in many instances would be immoral.

In short, today's Republican Party is not your stern grandmother's party of yore that was unified in its American-style traditional fiscal conservatism and, far from feeling besieged as the Republican right avers it is, often behaved as if it were the unchanging Episcopal Church at prayer, thoroughly convinced of its surpassing rectitude, and regularly harrumphing what a traitor to his class FDR was.

As a nation we are now lurching dangerously toward a different kind of empire, one that's apparently globe-girdling with the USA at its helm. We're told by the neocons that through war alone, based on the faith that a divine purpose to do good guides our noble ends—all of which in the cynical knowing hands of the likes of Wolfowitz, Perle, Rumsfeld, Rice and Rove is little more than a crock of cupidity—will a new world order arise. According to this non-colonial but militarized schemata, we have to believe differently, set aside our customary picture of the secular world, replacing it with a quasi-mystical epistemological perception that takes unseen realities into consideration. The

trouble with people like you and me is, you see, that we are conventionally reality-based, boringly earthbound, and need to get our arms around the idea of creating an upward-looking conception of what is, in which wish, desire, intention, vision somehow ignore the empirical realm and generate instead some sort of transformed human predicament vulnerable to our molding of it. As political writer Naomi Klein has put it, “When facts threaten true believers, they simply close their eyes and pray harder.” Presto, when they open their eyes, they see a world transformed!

Since Al Qaeda represents not a single political state but represents instead a worldwide multifaceted existential military threat, the so-called great divide of the present day can better be viewed not in terms of North vs. South, rich vs. poor, but existentially, as facts vs. ideology, evidence vs. dogma, objective truth vs. a theatricalized subjectivism, and above all, reason vs. certitude. Thus do we come back to where we started. Our ethical humanist world view is at stake; it is manifestly worth defending. Existentialism is a faux humanism at best.

### **Ethical Culturists Should Display Their Own Moral Militancy In The Service Of Restoring Democracy To This Country**

Perhaps in time we can begin to move ahead again as one nation, the two Americas facing each other as acceptable equals, toward a renewed commonsense such as that evidenced in a 1958 essay by Albert Schweitzer titled “Peace or Atomic War.” His words, from another time and context, can speak to today’s conundrums, perhaps uncannily so, considering the re-emergence of the possibility of mutual annihilation:

We cannot continue in this paralyzing mistrust. If we want to work our way out of the desperate situation in which we find ourselves another spirit must enter into the people...the awareness that we are all human beings together has become lost in war and through politics. We have reached the point of regarding each other only as members of a people either allied with us or against us. Now we must rediscover the fact that we—altogether—are human beings, and we must strive to concede to each other what moral capacity we have. Only in this way can we begin to believe that in other peoples as well as in ourselves there will arise the need for a new spirit...

“Part of that new spirit” should be a moral militancy on *our* part as ethical humanists. We can avail ourselves later of a more forthcoming age of reconciliation.