

The Politics of Inspiration and America's Reawakening

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Two Views on Change:

“Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.”
– John F. Kennedy, assassinated Dallas, TX 11/22/63

“Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.”
– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated Memphis, TN 4/4/68

Good morning, everyone, great to see you all, as usual. When I was a youngster during the 1930s and '40s, I always felt time passed far too slowly. Now that I'm in my mid-'70s, I feel time is moving too fast! There's psychological time which is personal, and there's real time which is public. Ultimately, however, time is elusive, a mystery, beyond our ability to nail down. Let's just say the best time occurs we're having “the time of our life”: when we're truly awake to the buzz of what's happening around us. To the degree we're in tune with ourselves, we can rest assured we are not languishing from want of purpose.

And purposefulness of the political sort is budding out all over the map during this expansive, if not explosive year.

By almost any measure, 2008 may well signify the most unusual, exciting, costly, contentious, at once disillusioning and hopeful, yet above all surprising approbation of belief in what has been popularly termed a “new kind of politics” for the first time in a long time. For what it's worth, genuine change is in the air. So far it's a positive sign. What's also likely is eventual electoral tedium and candidate fatigue.

Bursting out of a passionately concerned and frustrated Democratic Party in particular, serious presidential candidates like Senators Biden, Dodd, Edwards and others would eventually drop out, as the sifting nomination process had its effect, leaving a gladiatorial contest to develop and play out for the Party's presidential preference between Senators Clinton and Obama. 2008 is the most wide open contest to be held since 1928.

Unhappily, the contest between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton has become increasingly testy, has drawn unprecedentedly large crowds, and because both are extraordinarily gifted, energetic, well matched and determined to win their party's nomination, the face-off between a black man and a white woman becomes uniquely fraught with exceptional and unexpected possibilities and tensions, not least of all as between race and gender. Sexism and racism are now rippling afresh, to everyone's astonishment, beneath the more obvious and embarrassing, though no less fateful issues like the Iraq war, healthcare, a faltering economy, NAFTA, and so on. One can only hope this promises to be a year to remember rather than one to regret. After nearly eight years of ill disguised closed-minded near fascist amateurish rule by the Bush Administration rather than transparent, above-board sophisticated and careful democratic governance,

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

citizens of all persuasions are beginning to realize that we need to come together on common ground in order to demand and effect an ethically enhanced and politically transformed revitalization of the spirit of the Republic that the founders originally envisioned. A mere empire at this late date in human history isn't worth the trouble it brings anymore – it's old hat! I'll take a vigorous unpretentious Republic any day whatever its size. Be that as it may, a widespread reawakening of the American populace is in the offing. Nothing could be more salutary, nothing could better induce "a new kind of politics" than a new kind of honest and profound political inspiration.

It remains to be seen whether or not this uncommon exuberance and sense of liberation from years-long political constipation Washington D.C. style will last despite the negativity that our political system will inevitably generate. As the lively grand old Broadway musical, 'Ain't Misbehavin' concludes, one of the chief characters sums up life's randomness in admitting ruefully, "One never knows, do one?"

This curious front-loaded early primary season of 2008, a Rube Goldberg contraption at best, has on the one hand led to the Democratic Party's self-administered disfranchisement of Florida and Michigan voters and, on the other, has loosened the tight grip of the usual elite moneyed interests, thereby encouraging the monetary participation and first-time active turnout of millions of citizens of modest means. As a consequence, over 70% or more of the American people are regularly paying close attention to this year's simultaneously troubling, controversial and thrilling presidential race.

Voting, let's not forget, remains democracy's gold standard. More new voters keep registering every day. A morally aroused citizenry that has finally shed its 7-year-long somnolence can learn to believe again in its own capacity and power to change the nation's political calculus.

A reawakening, then, of America's purposefulness, if ignited by the emergence of a new kind of politics, makes more transparent than otherwise the usual machinations of the right-wing oriented ranks of the Republican Party. The type of politics that party reflexively conducts at the moment is still synonymous with continuance of the Iraq war and its expensive and careless way in which the present Administration pursues its objectives. John McCain, now his party's presumptive presidential nominee has proclaimed, "the surge is working." The surge simply consists of 30,000 more troops that General Petraeus has rendered strategically effective by means of a limited short-range military reconfiguration of forces. It can hardly be hailed as an earth-shaking achievement of large proportions. It's a very well conceived stop-gap measure, that's all it is. Furthermore, according to Nobel Prize laureate Professor Stiglitz of Columbia, who has calculated what the obvious and hidden costs for this conflict, short and long term, are likely to be, the final bill will come in at 3 trillion dollars at least, assuming the war comes to an end-point in time, minus a treaty! As Henry Kissinger has recently opined, you make treaties with your enemies, not your friends, so if we feel aloof from our enemies, no mutual accommodations will take place and war will sputter on. Such a huge amount of money, moreover, can hardly be separated from the nation's overall budget by officially declaring it to be off budget! On the contrary, every dollar is wholly integral to the budget! This contingent world is not a place for magic. Listen to what James Madison, chief architect of the Constitution, prophetically noted in 1795:

"Of all the enemies of public liberty, war is perhaps the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies. From these proceed debts and taxes. And, armies, debts and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many

Under the domination of the few.....No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.”

So why are we so naïve – playing the game of innocent – to think that the US can serially invade, decimate and occupy a predominantly Muslim country and fool itself into believing that at the same time it can establish military rule and train a shocked and numbed populous to come up with a functioning democracy.

In one of the recent issues of Vanity Fair, a letter to the editor from a subscriber, Eileen Corcoran of Vergennes, Vermont, writes: “I thought that I could not be any more depressed about the war in Iraq until I read David Rose’s article [“The People vs. the Profiteers,” in the magazine’s November, 2007 issue] on the unmitigated fraud,[gall] and profiteering being perpetrated by private contractors in Iraq and the cover-up, if not willful disregard, of these crimes by the Justice Department.” Let’s listen here to a fresh important voice that of Andrew J. Bacevich, with regard to the Iraq war, an ever enlarging conflict that has served as the centrally animating cause of much else that has bewildered and misled us all since Nine Eleven.

With a PhD from Princeton, Bacevich is currently Professor of History and International Relations at Boston University who also happens to be a West Point graduate. He’s a conservative Catholic and a veteran of the Vietnam War, that searing 10-year-old debacle that finally frosted over the American moral landscape as it roiled the peoples of Southeast Asia, consuming the lives of over nearly 55,000 of our soldiers, and, most fatefully, gradually gave birth to a cocky attitude of resurgent militarism that today holds us all in its thrall while, incidentally, it advances McCain’s newborn military popularity. Bacevich’s son, by the way, has long since become one of the 4,000-plus casualties of the Iraq war. The professor understandably has a deep personal as well as professional interest in what is at stake for the USA as well as the world at large. The central observation of his two superb books on the subject is briefly this: the United States is fast becoming not only a militarized, but a military society, as well. Armed power, he asserts, is now assumed to be the full measure of national destiny and greatness: war and the planning for it is to be sold daily to the American public as the noblest of ethical undertakings. Shades of ancient Sparta! National security has consequently become the very axis around which every jot and tittle of American life now revolve, even as much of it is cleverly disguised under the radar of cultural normalcy. Our veritable political polity, religion in its myriad expressions, the economy and the nation’s undergirding financial structure, foreign policy, the marketplace, technology, social relations, popular culture – all of it is variously affected by five years – and counting – of unrelenting warfare. And there is literally no end in sight.

Our current inflated reincarnation of militarism would appall, distress and outrage Dwight Eisenhower whom the military of his day could not deceive. Earlier, Truman’s Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, advised Truman that he needed to frighten the American people from further demobilization of the armed services following WWII by urging the citizenry vigorously to lobby Congress to start increasing greatly our peacetime military budget. We did just that. Already seeds of fear would be planted by 1950 in order to cement national greatness to overwhelming military force.

In one of the dramatic speeches of his first presidential term, 1952 – 1956, Dwight Eisenhower in 1953, just one year after Truman had heeded Acheson’s advice, was becoming alarmed by the nation’s fast growing military-industrial complex. Eisenhower was thus prompted to announce: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in that final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed,

those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending its money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, and the hopes of its children.” That sentiment would be echoed and extended in his farewell address years later on January 17, 1961 as he neared the end of his second term, when he spoke prophetically to the nation, saying: “...Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. But now we can no longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense. We have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions.....This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government.....we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought [in the councils of government] by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist....We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes,...so that security and liberty may prosper together.” They can and they should, but we’ve conveniently forgotten how to connect the two. Security and liberty are not antithetical.

In light of this commentary I’d like now to turn to the complexly nuanced struggle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination of which we have heard and seen, yet it goes on. I, like perhaps many of you, was among the estimated nine or ten million TV viewers of the face-off between these two stalwart competitors at Constitution Hall in Philadelphia earlier this month. Granted there are relatively minor substantive differences between them so far as the vast range of major domestic policies is concerned such as NAFTA, Social Security, Medicare, and so on. The stark fact nonetheless remains that these two political Senatorial adversaries envision significantly different ways of going about their shared common goals legislatively. Furthermore they are temperamentally far apart from one another, they don’t mesh easily, any remaining sense of amity finally collapsing at Constitution Hall contretemps due to their separate and distinct styles in public and mutual distrust of one another in terms of personality and the ethics of debate. So the dream ticket likelihood of the two of them in bed together, only to be suddenly awakened by a 3 a.m. phone call that prompts each to reach simultaneously for the red phone, hilariously depicted as the delightfully perceptive March 17 New Yorker cover, will hardly overcome the increased rancor between them. An unrelenting fierceness drives them both – and John McCain as well. All three have equal fire in the belly.

Both Clinton and Obama are highly educated, brilliant to a fault, energetic, almost indefatigable and truly caring about this country of ours. After their 21 debates they come out, for the most part, pretty evenly matched. But when it comes to arguing over issues, Clinton in particular does not hesitate to over-personalize them in an effort to embarrass Obama, while Obama himself appears much more interested in talking about larger matters than pseudo-patriotic flag lapel pins, or why his pastor is not a perfect man and should be censored for his incendiary language, and why Obama is “elitist”, as if Hillary were not, when in fact both have a distinctive sense of their self and their dignity.

Hillary, who has more than one persona in public, likes to pose as a fighter to the bitter end if necessary and keeps reminding us that she’s ready to tough it out with anyone, anytime, anywhere. If she wants to be the female version of Jack Dempsey, fearless brawler of the boxing ring, then Obama might be compared to Gene Tunney, the far more gentlemanly scientific boxer who defeated Dempsey for the world heavyweight championship. Where Hillary’s smile is radiant, her voice strong and confident, her

words, precise, her style physically expressive, Obama is more the slightly hesitant equivalent, say, of the quiet but steady academic who's trying to draw attention less to himself than to the topic at hand, desirous as always of educating people. With Barack, what you see is pretty much what you get. Where Hillary is a hot personality, Barack is cool.

I submit that if Obama seems perplexing for most folks to scope out at first, it's probably due to the fact he's on a whole different level from the kind of politicians most of us are used to. To a fair degree a self-made man, though with loving help from his mother during his youthful years, Obama capably directs his own ground-level political smarts in ways that long experienced typical political advisors don't comprehend, so they think he's out of touch. David Brooks, however, a learned, astute, conservative writer, author and political observer for influential publications like *The Weekly Standard*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and so on, does not hesitate to describe Obama as an amazing and unique phenomenon even when he appears exhausted, exasperated or losing debating points. I suspect Obama intuitively senses this year was not a time to step aside and humbly take his place in the presidential pecking order, humbly waiting his turn four or eight years hence at the behest of the party's poobahs. Obama's wide universal appeal to all kinds of individuals is truly striking: young and old, independents, Republicans tired of their own party's endless dogmatism, blacks and whites, and so on. Above all, Barack is unusually aware of the hitherto untapped human potential of an entirely new, smart younger generation eager to take their rightful places in the political sphere with ethical savvy and organizational astuteness.

Shakespeare pointed out long ago that all the world's a stage on which each of us has our entrance and our exit, the question being what we strive to achieve between these two linked extremes: "There is a tide in the affairs of men [and women], Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their lives Is bound in shallows and miseries." Opportunity, in other words, must be seized if a different future is to be created, invented, shaped – and sooner rather than later.

Not surprisingly, Obama presently commands the sincere support and enthusiasm of the frequently ignored 18 to 29 age group in which, amazingly, one in four claims no religious affiliation. For a deeply religious person like Obama – a committed Christian (so is Clinton a devoted Methodist always attracted to good works), it speaks well for him to reach for a whole fresh, secular, prospective demographic cohort that might well find transforming humanistic satisfaction in sturdy political and ethical outreach. Compared to Obama, Hillary appears content to accept the Democratic Party as it is – in the confidence she can make it work for her: she sits comfortable athwart the center of her party as its establishment candidate. The Clintons, together, effectively remade the party in their own image during the 1990s. Obama, by contrast, is a recent newcomer, a friendly insurgent. The Democratic Party, founded in 1800 principally by Thomas Jefferson, has since failed to undergo radical structural change, though with FDR's ascendancy in 1932 did move decisively, if improvisationally, several successive stages toward liberal ideational change and advance. The Democrats finally ran out of original ideas, in the last few unhappy years of Lyndon Johnson's presidency, whereupon Republican vitality returned.

With Hillary Clinton as President there could be a lot of critically important repair work to attend to, keeping the Democratic Party busy for years. With Obama as President what would first take place, I believe, is convincingly inspiring millions of younger people to get and stay involved as first-time voters in the democratic process, fired by the intention to make it work fairly, brilliantly, compassionately for all. That approach is clearly universalist and uniting in spirit via a generational rather than an ideological

strategy. In essence, this is a timeless technique which could reaffirm the ideal American way of solving problems versus the outdated Bush II-Cheney resort to simply waging wars wherever profitable as their primary platform.

In short: while the Democratic party needs to modernize itself without losing its soul, the Republican party has lost its soul but is still structurally intact from its hardball top-to-bottom reconstitution from Goldwater to Bush II. The Democrats could yet implode while the Republicans are cautiously, hopefully rallying around John McCain. All three presidential candidates, I believe, are professionally and personally qualified to be president, all are sound in body and mind, each is an estimable human being, and all care deeply about the nation's future. The downside is the institutional baggage that each of the three has to come to terms with in their respective political bailiwicks. While there are lots of fine individuals in both parties, my long-considered personal opinion is that one party is fundamentally inept and the other fundamentally corrupt. You guess which is which.

I do want to mention briefly in passing that I was utterly appalled when Bill Moyers reported briefly in his weekly Journal program on a so-called Compassion Forum on MSNBC just a week or so ago featuring Obama and Clinton responding to the question, how would your religious faith affect and guide your decisions if you held high office? A classic outrageous example of how organized religion can corrupt the nation's disorganized political calculus. Each had to assure the huge audience that they believed in God and were divinely in receipt of appropriate guidance. When a basically secular person like John McCain, an Episcopalian who seldom feels comfortable in a highly conservative rabble-rousing religious space, like the late Jerry Fallwell's Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, states with certainty that we as a country must prepare to confront what McCain regularly refers to as the transcendent danger posed by Islamic extremism, inkling of a much touted, if not welcomed, prospect of a clash of civilizations is implied in some sort of stand-off between Christianity and Islam. Theoretically, such a religiously militarized engagement could go on for some time – in fact, it originally did so for over 200 years during the Crusades when Christians and Muslims slaughtered one another with abandon. A similar clash today could conceivably entail a third or more of the earth's population! Again and again, we are confronted with this kind of mindless devotion to an unquenchable militarism. The Reverend John Hagee, briefly McCain's influential ultraconservative minister of war at Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, TX, eagerly asserts Armageddon is inevitable between Iran versus Israel and the United States. Somewhere along his recent religious evolution, McCain went from being an Episcopalian to a Baptist! Indications are that while he rejects Hagee's idiotic description of the Catholic as "the whore of Babylon" McCain does not regret his affiliation with Hagee. He's trying to have it both ways.

What's transpiring, to be frank and blunt, is an unending religious resurgence the size of a tsunami inundating the political realm. James Madison was always peculiarly wary of how religion and politics can demean and literally switch places with each other. It is already happening in our country: we now have, by moralistic osmosis, a faith-based national government. In fact, the Bush Administration is at once the party of God and the party of war. What now separates the twin realms of religion and politics is a permeable cultural membrane.

All of which turns us toward our last related topic at hand, however disconcerting: the emergence of a "Unitary Executive" as President. The Bush Administration has been designedly contemptuous of the legislative and judicial branches of government. The separation of powers concept is now being conceived by the extreme right as entailing the

actual political emasculation of two of the three branches of government, leaving most if not all power to the executive, in the hands, in other words, of a mere human being. In sum: a 'Unitary Executive' is a President who is the nation's CEO, Head of State, Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces in time of war, assumedly sanctioned by Yahweh and not answerable to the Congress or the judiciary or any other political entity, including the American people. John Adams perceptively put it this way:

"Power naturally grows...because human passions are insatiable. But that power alone can grow which already is too great, that which is unchecked; that which has no equal power to control it".

Ironically, so spoke the originator of the American Republic's most oppressive legislation in history, The Alien and Sedition Acts, which Jefferson would successfully undertake to make moot. As for George Bush, he lives contentedly in a protective bubble and couldn't care less what any body thinks.

In the 1950s, the American people may have loved Ike but precious few paid serious attention to his warnings. In 1917, as the US was on the verge of entering WWI in Europe to assist our allies, Senator Hiram Johnson of California famously reminded his fellow legislators, pronouncing, "The first casualty when war comes is truth." With each successive armed conflict that gets costlier and more deadly, truth-telling along its entire spectrum becomes less and less held in high regard by the many. Indeed, the pursuit of truth soon stamps one as somehow dangerously unpatriotic, a little weird, unacceptably controversial deserving to be silenced, etc. Shades of 1950s McCarthyism! Such artificially concocted fright and intimidation deserves militant response and contempt. Let me take a cue here from Teddy Roosevelt who, in a newspaper column in 1918, stated the case bluntly: "To announce that there must be no criticism of the president, or that we are to stand by the president, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American public."

Right now, as President Bush prepares to cobble together some semblance of a legacy before leaving office in January, 2009, he still keeps getting his "unitary executive" way since the Democrats lacked the will, despite their midterm electoral victory in 2006, to take him to task. They had ample cause and evidence to bring impeachment charges against both Bush and Cheney: far from protecting and defending the US Constitution, which they publicly swore to do, the Administration has done everything to subvert it through skillful misinterpretation of that peerless document. In Bushworld political calculation precedes every undertaking: every legislative proposal of any sort, every prospective government hire, etc. "Wherever the real power in a government lies," Madison reminds us, "there is the danger of oppression."

In 2006, an investigation by the Boston Globe found Bush had so far "claimed the authority to disobey 750 laws since he took office." His ever so sly top-notch White House lawyers, pre-eminently David Addington, made it legal for a so-called unitary executive to sign a law, such as specifically outlawing torture, then negating that very provision by subsequently appending a so-called "signing statement" indicating that he need not abide by the law just passed by Congress and officially signed by him. Objective truth in this postmodern Alice-in-Wonderland era is deemed out of bounds; whoever concocts the most persuasive politically charged narrative wins the case hands down. Most Americans won't be able to breathe a sigh of relief at the prospect of George Bush's departure until the very day he leaves office. A monarch in a business suit is still a monarch. As poet Edna St. Vincent Millay once wearily, philosophically, humorously

concluded: “It’s not true that life is [allegedly] one damn thing after the other; it is [the same] damn thing over and over.”

Despite all my doubts, I still believe that a refreshingly unusual politics of inspiration, if we give it half a chance at least, could someday soon spark a great awakening of the American public to what’s really going on beneath the ostensible and officially massaged surface of reported events and peremptory claims. Nothing lights up the world so much as the pursuit and illumination of truth. All the more reason to consider afresh and with gratitude Lincoln’s classic counsel not only to a young nation on the verge of tearing itself apart in an impending civil war, but to us today as citizenry bewilderingly divided at an opportune yet perilous juncture in our history. This is what Abraham Lincoln said needs to be understood: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”



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