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RUNNING ALONE—AND TOGETHER

**PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP
IN A DIVIDED SYSTEM**

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On the morning of November 5, 1956, Democrats across America were in despair. Dwight Eisenhower had done it again. His first victory, in 1952, had been understandable—memories of his military leadership in World War II were still fresh. But after four years of his bumbling presidency, as the Democrats saw it, Americans should have been turning back to the party of Roosevelt and Truman. But they didn't. Even worse, Ike had improved his 1952 margin over Adlai Stevenson, this time beating him by almost ten million votes. How could this happen?

One answer of course was Stevenson himself. With their proclivity for turning angrily on failed spear-carriers, Democrats blamed the ex-governor of Illinois and the “madly for Adlai” crowd that backed him. I could not forget a little incident from the campaign. As a prospective candidate for Congress I had been asked to introduce Stevenson to a railroad station audience as he campaigned through the (then) Republican Berkshires of Massachusetts. He gave his usual fine speech, but I learned later that on his way to the rostrum he had cold-shouldered a mother who wanted to present him with her baby.

Jack Kennedy had that personal touch, even if he too balked at kissing babies. Lyndon Johnson hugged babies and anyone else within reach of his long arms. JFK and LBJ won two terms in the White House, beating Barry Goldwater in 1964 by 16 million votes. But this was the high water mark for the Democrats. For the next four decades they served mainly as the opposition. Their three presidential victories—Carter's one and Clinton's two—were hardly testaments to the party's fighting power; Carter probably would not have won without Watergate and Clinton never gained a majority of the votes cast. During those four decades, the Grand Old Party would thrice win the grandest prize in American politics—the re-election of a sitting president.

And so passed the most splendid era of American political leadership since the Founding. From 1932, it was the era of four great Democratic presidents, each superbly attuned to the needs of the American people. It was the era of brilliant collective leadership, generations of committed, creative reformers that reached from the West Wing of the White House through the departments and agencies down to the grass roots, to the well of that great leadership, among the citizens who put them into office and kept them there.

NEEDED: MORE POLARIZATION

Five decades after Eisenhower's re-election triumph, Democrats once again were in despair. The Bush II Republicans had this time beaten them decisively in the Electoral College, without recourse to the Supreme Court. Even worse, they had strengthened their hold on Congress. For the first time since the 1950s, Nicole Mellow wrote, “a majority of Americans chose Republicans to control both the legislative and executive branches of the government” (Mellow, 2005, 69-70). And with a cooperative Senate, Bush could use his appointment power to tighten rightwing domination of the third branch, the federal courts.

Desperately, gloomily, Democrats searched for explanations and scapegoats. The answer was simple, said some—Bush's naked exploitation of 9/11 and its aftermath. No, others said, John Kerry ran a weak campaign—he took too long to focus or he was too leftist or too rightist or too elitist. Still others blamed the Democrats for failing to appeal to low-income voters, or to suburbanites or farmers, or to those opposing Bush's war in Iraq or to those who supported it. Explanations unsurprisingly reflected the complainers' ideological or factional positions held long before Election Day.

Scholars found more nuanced reasons for the Democratic decline, noting trends and movements that stretched back to the days of Robert Taft and Barry Goldwater and even earlier. Fundamental, according to Mellow, was the long decline of the class-based—essentially economic—politics that had welded the New Deal coalition together for decades, and the rise of both national security anxieties—from Cold War to the “war on terror”—and socio-cultural consciousness. Even as income inequality had risen, race, gender, and religious conflict had sharpened. Overall the shifting conflict lines had favored the Republicans (Mellow, 2005).

Election night conclusions are based on the exit polling of those who vote. What about the tens of millions who did not show up at the polls? Realistic analysis of nonvoting in America is inevitably depressing and baffling. Why, for example, do so many poor people typically fail to use their vote for their own self-interest, to choose the one leader who is certain to affect their fates and fortunes? The stark fact is that since 1960 voting turnout has fallen in nearly every presidential election, and the rate of turnout at the bottom of the income scale has averaged half that at the top, a differential, Thomas E. Patterson noted, that “was unheard of in Europe but found also in some less-developed democracies, including India” (Patterson, 2002, 46). Even in 2004, when both parties made massive exertions to get their voters to the polls, turnout—though the highest since 1968—still barely scratched 55 per cent of Americans of voting age. Turnout falls to even lower levels in congressional races, and lower still for state and local races (Wattenberg, 2005, 140). Do I sound preachy? I’m often one of the no-shows in town elections even when I sometimes know personally Mary or Bill or Sally, running for a seat.

Non-voting at the presidential level today produces an astonishing outcome—after a typically close contest, the winner might be the choice of barely a quarter of the American electorate. The president who speaks sonorously for the whole nation has actually been empowered by a distinct minority. In effect, recent presidents have been “running alone,” unconnected electorally with the vast majority of the people.

Why such low turnout today, when presidential campaigns spend hundreds of millions of dollars to connect with the people?

Registration processes may be difficult, sometimes intentionally so. On Election Day some voters are ill or lack transportation. Waiting lines can appear too daunting. Some would-be voters are turned off by the endless, often trivial electioneering. “If ever there was an election system designed to drive an electorate into submission,” Patterson wrote, “the year-long system of electing presidents is it” (Patterson, 2002, 22).

But the main reason for nonvoting is far more basic and portentous. People don’t vote because they don’t care. They don’t care mainly because they see no meaningful choice between parties or candidates. They did care in the 1930s and 1940s and 1950s and 1960s because FDR vs. Alf Landon and Truman vs. Tom Dewey and Johnson vs. Goldwater offered fundamentally different kinds of leadership, compared, say, to Ford vs. Carter or Clinton vs. Dole. This is true at the grassroots level as well. During the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, African American registration in the South more than doubled, because blacks had struggled for the right to vote and they knew the huge stakes involved. In response, Southern whites flocked to the polls because they too recognized the stakes (Havard, 1972, 20-21).

Scholars have found that nonvoting is part of a much broader social phenomenon. Tocqueville’s America was a nation of joiners “forever forming associations”—eager participants in every sort of civic activity, solemn or silly (Tocqueville, 1966, 485). But an epic study by Robert Putnam and colleagues,

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Bowling Alone, published in 2000, showed that this is no longer the case. They demonstrated a startling drop in participation not only in politics but in churches and charities, neighborhood associations and broad social movements—even in bowling groups (Putnam, 2000). More and more, Americans have become unlinked from one another.

The withdrawal of Americans from politics is the gravest disconnect, weakening the impact of citizens on the life and death decisions of their government. Putnam found political activity in decline across the board—people don't sign petitions or write letters to congressmen or editors, attend public meetings or rallies or join committees, as they did only two decades before. As millions of potential followers have dropped out, the well of leadership has dried up at the grass roots. Politics has become a spectacle, something to be watched, not practiced. This has bred a vicious circle: as people grow uninvolved, they feel less able to influence decision-making; with that loss of self-efficacy, their alienation, mistrust, and cynicism deepen.

Bush II Republicans witnessing the debate about offering voters a meaningful choice between the two parties could rightly swear, "Not guilty." These conservatives had offered a clear choice for decades, but as the extremist wing of a party dominated by go-along, "bipartisan" compromisers. Now they were no longer the Republican wing of the Republican Party—they were the Republican Party. They were the victorious heirs of the Tafts and Goldwaters who had fought the lonely battles against all-conquering "radical" Democrats. They could gloat too that their early promotion of college clubs, think tanks, conservative associations, rightwing magazines and books was now paying off at the polls. Once treated as outsiders, they now were the heart, the base, of *their* party.

And the Democrats? They comprised not a base but multiple bases—a liberal base, a moderate base, a labor base, and more—and where Republicans had largely resolved their differences, the clefts among Democrats had only deepened since the 1970s. Not that Democrats had ignored their internal disunity—for decades they had studied it, debated it, been almost consumed by it. But the dispute remained frustratingly stagnant, a ceaseless debate. The main question was a rational one—is progress toward the party's goals advanced through moderate, step-by-step policy changes or by advancing a comprehensive, controversial, and strongly progressive program that might, like the Kennedy-Johnson array of measures, make a breakthrough? This led to the wider political question—whether moderate or radical measures might generate support at the grass roots that would build the party over the long run.

After the 2004 defeat, the too-familiar struggle between centrists and progressives was renewed. In disarray, facing a disciplined and ideological Republican Party, Democrats seemed unlikely to resolve their differences any time soon.

Politicians and editorial writers have long deplored conflict, prating piously about the need for consensus, for "rising above party." Scholars are no different. In the *Encyclopedia of Leadership*, a sophisticated treatment of "Conflict" deals mainly with how to avoid it (Sorensen & Savage, 2004, 241-247). Historians tend to treat conflicts as aberrations from an equilibrious norm, at the same time dwelling on the great transformational moments when political leaders disagreed—when Jefferson and Madison built an opposition political party to the outrage of the Federalists, when Lincoln refused to appease Southern secessionists, when FDR denounced "economic royalists," crying out to a roaring crowd of Democrats, "They are unanimous in their hate for me—and I welcome their hatred!" (Roosevelt, 1936, 568).

If conflict and controversy are the very lifeblood of democracy, the motive force for change, if polarization offers a meaningful choice between parties, mobilizes an engaged citizenry and brings more voters to the

polls, how explain the endless calls for political harmony and consensus? How explain the appeals for a bipartisanship in foreign policy that would cut voters out from the nation's most crucial, life-and-death decisions? Brazenly partisan Bush II Republicans appear to be unbothered by such questions; they simply stake out their rightwing positions. Polarization leaves Democrats more in a quandary, perhaps because historically and philosophically liberals tend toward tolerance, reciprocity, "seeing the other side." Perhaps in politics they should lean more toward the simple proposition that people deserve a real choice between leaders and between policies that shape the future of their nation.

DIGGING FOR VOTES

For the Democratic Party today to offer Americans a real choice at the polls would call for a revitalization and transformation of the party without parallel in its history. But it would call for even more—for the party to master a political system that is both anti-democratic and anti-Democratic. Still, the party might gain hope from an example all too close at hand—the Republicans. If the Grand Old Party had the will to create strong leadership, revitalize its cadres, and deepen its base, why cannot the Democrats?

To make such changes compels the Democrats to confront their party's own failings—its divisions and disorganization. It also requires a hard look at the electoral system within which both parties operate. That system, distorting and weakening government, is one of the most backward and ineffective among the great democracies. This is not a big problem for the Republicans. Philosophically they don't believe in government to begin with, while Democrats for a century or more have pinned their hopes on a strong and effective public leadership.

American government bestrides an electoral system so much criticized from the top down that it might be more useful to reappraise it at the grass roots. Consider Minnesotan Steven Schier, voting in his local precinct on November 7, 2000. As a good citizen, Schier had read up on the local, state, and national races in the weeks before Election Day. He felt well prepared to vote. "Once I received my ballot, though," he wrote, "I discovered I was supposed to cast some twenty-six votes. I was ready to cast my vote for president, congressional offices, and the state legislature, but I was also asked to vote on local soil and water commissioners, on whether or not to retain several state judges, and on several local tax issues" (Schier, 2003, 12). He could recall nothing in the press about these lesser questions and contests. And Schier was not only a good citizen. He was a political scientist whose special field was electoral politics.

But an even greater disappointment awaited Schier and millions of other voters. That night the networks declared first Al Gore and then George Bush as the next president. Gore conceded and then withdrew his concession. Over the coming weeks, Florida became a case study in electoral chaos. The contest was no longer simply between two men but between fragments of government—the Republican governor and state legislators versus the Democratic canvassing boards and the Florida Supreme Court—all slugging it out over butterfly ballots and hanging chads. Politicians and lawyers carried the fight to the United States Supreme Court, which by a slim majority rendered one of the most nakedly partisan decisions in its long history.

Analyzing electoral contests in other democracies, Steven Schier concluded that American campaigns were the longest and most expensive in the world, and when they finally ended, turnout at the polls was among the lowest in the world. He called the American electoral system "baroquely" complicated. Other analysts were less kind. They saw America politically as a banana republic writ large.

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Today the Democratic Party is stranded. It is deadlocked between centrists and progressives. It needs to mobilize millions of potential voters but cannot do so for lack of a powerful appeal to them. More than the Republicans it suffers from an electoral system that dampens rank-and-file mobilization and blocks the revitalization of the party.

This is not a new predicament for Democrats. During most of the 19th century, the party was divided between its northern and southern wings, then later between Roosevelt progressives and anti-New Deal conservatives. The struggle for the “heart and soul” of the party came to a head in the early 1990s after Ronald Reagan had won twice and his less glamorous successor, George H. W. Bush, seemed headed to a second term. In 1992 a group of political scientists issued a manifesto, *The Democrats Must*

Lead, calling for a party that would take strong stands, respond to the needs of women and blacks, push for more economic and social equality, and “dump Dixie” (Burns, et al., 1992). Instead Bill Clinton of Arkansas and of the Democratic Leadership Council took over, and rather than revitalize the party, his centrist presidency in the liberals’ view helped precipitate the two terms of Bush II.

Democrats faced a perplexing historical question and a burning current one. In the last quarter of the 19th century, when the parties were at their most competitive, around 80% of eligible voters had regularly gone to the polls in presidential elections. Those earlier parties had such astonishing turnout power in part because they effectively ran the elections—they printed up the party-ticket ballots, staffed the polling places, and gave poor people free picnics and parades as inducements to vote. But city bosses gave parties a bad aroma. Reformers attacked their control of elections. Primaries weakened the power of party leaders. All this posed the current question: can political parties regain their old central role in American politics?

Not without a huge concerted effort. The waning of the parties has drained them of the very leadership needed for their rejuvenation. As politics has become more centered on candidates and campaigns, the great party leaders of the past have yielded power to entrepreneurial politicians waging individual battles and leveraging issues as they chase votes from independents. Candidates have followed John Kennedy, building campaign organizations separate from the parties, in the process “running alone.” Bewildered voters, confronting long ballots, are left without the strong party cues that simplified choices. The weakened linkage within parties would resurface in fragmented and weakened government.

The absence of strong party identity, of clear-cut conflict—“us” versus “them”—is the key to depressed voter turnout. The problem still is lack of choice, even when the two major parties appear to offer it. For decades Democrats have been backing measures such as Social Security designed to narrow the income gap and ensure “fairness.” And for decades low-income Americans in general and the direly poor in particular have failed to respond strongly to the Democrats’ “class politics.” Why?

Listen to the analysts of voting. In his *Vanishing Voter*, political scientist Thomas Patterson offers the results of a recent survey that compared beliefs about politics to voting intentions. The leading discouragement to voting was the belief that “Parties are alike.” Others included, “Politics is complicated” and “Candidates say anything to get elected.” And, Patterson noted, such beliefs stopped people not only from voting but from paying any attention at all to politics (Patterson, 2002, 59).

For the Democrats the implications of “no choice” are clear and drastic. The party must un-complicate politics, it must say something, take a clear progressive direction, connect elections with people’s lives so

that the middle-class and the working-class poor vote for their true self-interest. This in turn will call for the party to make up its own mind and reject the centrist program and strategy. On the overriding questions facing the electorate, from social reform and economic equality at home to war and peace and trade abroad, centrists want to compromise at the start, in the very way they pitch their policies. But concessions should come at the end game, not before the battle is even joined. Democrats must rise above positioning and tactics to a clear and dramatic choice between conservative and liberal action based on explicit values. Political commentator E. J. Dionne, Jr., has presented Democrats with a liberal's marching orders—*Stand Up, Fight Back* (Dionne, 2004).

Democrats, though, must do even more than offer clear alternatives to the Bush Republicans. That alone will not deepen their base. They must dig down in the electorate to reach the millions of Americans turned off by politics and re-engage them, mobilize them to vote their own interests. Republicans, to pull out their vote, have relied mainly on money and rightwing interest groups. The Democrats must exploit their own most potent tool, a “people” weapon—face-to-face appeals to families in their homes, followed by a get-out-the-vote effort beyond any that the party has conducted in the past century. It will require establishing or revitalizing tens of thousands of town and precinct committees to empower campaign efforts. It will mean keeping party activists active—involved in planning strategy, holding rallies, setting up storefronts, passing out leaflets, registering voters—between campaigns.

All this can be hard work but also fun. I remember riding in an open campaign car on Election Day in Boston, at the end of John Kennedy's 1952 Senate race. As we approached the triple-deckers someone in the car would call up to Mary or Agnes on the porch, “Have ye voted?” Sure. “What about Susan?” She already had. “And brother Bill?” He was at work. “We'll send over a car to get him to the polls on time.” At the end of the day I think we in the car felt happier to be active at the grass roots than in the corridors of power.

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

To explain American politics to my children I would use a term they understood well—*team*. A liberal Democratic Party team competed with a conservative Republican team to win the top prize, the presidency. This meant that teamwork within each party was crucial. You had to work together to beat the other guy whether on the football field or on the battlefield.

Later on my children found this analogy more confusing than helpful. The big parties appeared more like arenas of every-man-for-himself conflict than unified attackers of the party enemy. Often factions within the party warred with one another more than with the opposition party. Executives—presidents and governors—jostled with legislators—members of Congress and state legislatures—fighting institutional battles regardless of party. These conflicts were obviously built into our constitutional checks and balances but they certainly did not encourage teamwork. Also, and annoyingly, the inter-party conflict—indeed, all conflict—would suddenly come to a stop when a big threat burst on people, like a war. Well, I explained lamely to my children, that was like a baseball or soccer game being called because of an approaching storm.

Of all the metaphors for American politics, I still consider sports the most useful. The reason is simple—conflict is as essential to politics as competition is to athletics. It is conflict between opposing parties, not concord, that lies at the heart of democracy—that vitalizes issues, excites people, mobilizes them at the ballot booth, accustoms them to the agony of losing as well as the thrill of victory. The lack of such

direct party combat lowers the incentive of parties to broaden their platforms and programs—and that lack is significant when politicians build their own campaign organizations separate from the party effort. This personalism is in stark contrast with the party teamwork and campaign discipline early in the Bush II presidency.

That presidency, like several Democratic presidencies of the past, seemed to wield “naked majority rule,” and many Americans shrink from this. But they need only look across the Atlantic to see that majority rule can be a strong but tame beast. Consider Britain. The present Labor majority regularly wins in the House of Commons because it won the last election. It won the election because a majority of voters endorsed the party and its leadership, though of course with misgivings. The government—the prime minister and his cabinet—leads the party and the country, but falls if it loses a vote of confidence in Parliament. The leadership shifts between a leftish and a moderate course as events dictate. Accountability to the party in the Commons and in the country is nearly total.

Once upon a time—actually twice upon a time—American leaders took a long hard look at the existing governmental system and proposed major institutional changes. This happened in 1787 when the Framers of the Constitution, viewing the existing Articles of Confederation as weak and ineffective, revolutionized that system by establishing strong national institutions at the top. It happened again in the 1980s, when some American leaders prepared to celebrate the Constitution’s bicentennial by proposing major changes to bring it up to date, in the face of dire economic and social needs. They created the CCS—the Committee on the Constitutional System (Robinson, 1985; Sundquist, 1992).

If the reformers in 1987 hardly measured up to the geniuses of 1787, the CCS was still an impressive group. The three co-chairpersons of the committee were Establishment people—Lloyd Cutler, a distinguished lawyer and advisor to presidents; Nancy Landon Kassebaum, Republican senator from Kansas and daughter of FDR’s 1936 presidential opponent; and Douglas Dillon, JFK’s secretary of the treasury. The committee they chaired included seven former members of the Senate or House, two ex-governors, and a bevy of lawyers, academics, and other experts. After much deliberation, committee members proposed a variety of institutional changes, especially for ways of bridging the gap between Congress and the presidency in order to undergird governmental teamwork and collective leadership. They even discussed the holding of a new convention to amend the Constitution, as authorized by its Article Five.

The impact of the 1787 convention? A transformation of government. The result of the 1987 committee? Practically zero. The media provided some coverage; good government groups like the League of Women Voters held discussions; the public as a whole ignored the question. Congress of course took no action—why should beneficiaries of the existing system opt to change it? One proposal, abolition of the Electoral College, did win the support of 51 senators, but well short of the two-thirds required for submission to the states.

Even so, that and another constitutional change deserve to remain on the must-consider list. After the 2000 election debacle, concern over the Electoral College is no longer academic. In some future election a party that wins by hundreds of thousands—even millions—of votes but loses the election may not be as amenable to defeat as the Democrats were in 2000. Short of disaster, the Electoral College, by encouraging campaigns to pour resources into a handful of the most competitive “battleground” states and ignore the rest of the country, allows a candidate to win—and hence to govern—with a very narrow base. The people, at least, believe in simple majority rule—for decades, polls have shown strong support—margins as high as four to one—in favor of direct popular election of the president.

The other needed constitutional change is more fundamental, and more controversial—the “team ticket.” Candidates for the presidency, Senate, and House would run together on party slates, just as the president and vice-president presently do. Voters would cast their ballots for these slates, not individual candidates. Such an amendment, political scientist Donald Robinson wrote, would “reduce the risk of governmental deadlocks by strengthening party cohesion and by increasing the chances of a single party controlling both the White House and Capitol Hill. The amendment could also foster party cohesion by requiring candidates for executive and legislative offices to work together in formulating a common campaign strategy and platform” (Robinson, 1985, 178). This proposal probably is too radical for Americans brought up loving their checks and balances.

A more modest proposal would simply align presidential and congressional elections. Both senators and congressmen would have four-year terms concurrent with the president. The midterm election, which historically has almost always caused the president to lose support in Congress, would be abolished. This challenge to the separation of powers has also won little backing, so the present two-year term for House members has survived. This is a pity because such short terms have become anachronistic, “too brief for the public good,” said one who knew, Lyndon Johnson, in 1966. And unfair. A young woman who has managed to raise a few hundreds of thousands of dollars to win a House seat finds on entering office that she must start all over again, to raise even more hundreds of thousands to keep her seat the next year.

Under the aligning proposal the president would still have a four-year term but he would be eligible to run repeatedly, like congressional candidates. The 1787 convention first voted for no second term but delegates argued that “he who has proved himself to be most fit for Office, ought not to be excluded by the constitution from holding it” (King, 1937, 55). The postwar Republican Congress disagreed, retroactively defeating the four-term FDR by initiating the amendment that barred third terms. This was probably the most stupid amendment passed in modern times—handing a newly reelected president, who has just received from voters the finest stamp of approval in America, formal notification of the walking papers he will receive at the end of his second term, no matter how successful.

Why, with all its failings—misrepresentation of the people, pulverized leadership, shameful voter turnout, failure to come to grips with long festering problems—why has the American political system survived virtually intact? Why have the people not junked it, as the American and French revolutionaries abolished their old regimes? (Of course, the Southern Confederates did try.) The answer in part lies in people’s ingenuity in making the most fragmented government work, at least for a time. Americans are horse traders, fixers, adjusters, dealers—they are superb transactional leaders. Presidential power is “the power to persuade,” wrote Peter Sperlich, echoing Neustadt, “and the power to persuade is the power to bargain” (Sperlich, 1969, 182). That is also the power of senators, governors, mayors and, for that matter, lawyers, teachers, parents.

But the main reason for the survival of our decrepit system lies in the very kind of power the Framers of the Constitution most feared—presidential might and authority. Repeatedly in American history, and especially in times of crisis or deadlock, people turned to the White House for decision, to the only leaders elected by the whole nation, who operated from the widest political base that gave their actions legitimacy and continuity.

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In recent times, though, that base has narrowed sharply as presidents have been elected by a small minority of eligible voters and, three times in one decade—Clinton twice and Bush in 2000—without a majority even of those who cast ballots. Of course politicians have the right and duty to govern even if they win by a hair’s breadth or by order of the Supreme Court. But to take strong leadership without the mandate of a meaningful majority vote is to risk lack of legitimacy and the kind of continuing followership necessary to put through big changes.

The most telling example of a president operating on a razor-thin majority still is John Kennedy, who lacked a party base or leverage with Congress and could never gain the backing he needed for his major proposals. But the case of George Bush II is no less revealing. The precariousness of his early presidency has been obscured by the “mandate” he received after 9/11 and his success in exploiting it. Bush had even less claim to a mandate in January 2001 than JFK had had forty years earlier. But he came in as though he didn’t know that, insisting, on his first visit to Washington after the Supreme Court voted, “I believe I’m standing here because I campaigned on issues that people heard” (Reinert, 2000). Unlike Kennedy, Bush had the fervent support of congressional Republicans for his top priority—a massive tax cut that would give 40% of the benefits to the richest one per cent of Americans. When the plan came to a vote in May, not one Republican in the House opposed it and only two in the Senate. But after that triumph of collective action, Bush and his team faltered. The staggering scale of the success – taxes reduced \$1.35 trillion over ten years—boxed the president in: he now would face harsh and divisive choices in spending cuts when his game plan called for a tactical shift to “compassionate” conservatism as a way of broadening his base. Nor could he count on his Republican team in Congress—the only thing sure to re-unite them was another round of tax cuts. By early September 2001, the administration seemed becalmed, in search of direction, of the swagger that had substituted for the missing mandate.

In recent decades, scholars have called the American presidency imperial, beleaguered, gutsy, diminished, as well as paradoxical and pragmatic. If these terms reflect uncertainty over the very nature of the office among the most knowledgeable, we can only imagine the confusion at the grass roots and on the cobblestones. We do know that, however checked and balanced, the American presidency at times has been the greatest weapon for the extension of democracy, at other times the greatest potential threat. Can it be both? Do we want it to be both?

VALUES IN CONFLICT

When Howard Dean early in 2005 took over as head of the Democratic National Committee, his fellow Democrats were still agonizing over their defeat by George Bush. It was one thing to lose in 2000 – when they really won. But how could they lose in 2004—when they really did lose? Dean had his answer – the Democrats had lost the battle of ideas. Many in the liberal press agreed. So did Dean’s counterpart, Republican Party chairman Ken Mehlman. “Conservatism is the ideology of the future,” he gloated. A “GOP operative” added helpfully, “the Democrats are really brain dead” (Chait, 2005, 19).

The Democrats weren’t dead, just divided. Was intra-party agreement all that impossible? some Democrats asked. If their fellow-Democrats felt that the Declaration’s “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” was an outworn set of values, they had more recent arrays of ideas to call on. Franklin Roosevelt in 1941 had superbly re-framed Jefferson’s trinity with a declaration of Four Freedoms, adding to the liberties of speech and expression and of conscience, the freedom from fear—Jefferson’s “Life”—and freedom from want, echoing the egalitarian “pursuit of Happiness” (Roosevelt, 1941, 672). Three years later, FDR went further, charting a “second Bill of Rights”—economic rights to jobs and fair wages,

to decent housing and medical care—all to advance “new goals of human happiness and well-being” (Roosevelt, 1944, 41). A generation later, when JFK made freedom his central value, he echoed FDR in recognizing its intimate link with—even dependence on—the fulfillment of people’s wants and needs. “Unless we broaden opportunity for all of our people,” he told Latin American diplomats in 1961, “unless the great mass of Americans share in increasing prosperity” the cause of freedom could not succeed (Kennedy, 1961, 174).

But liberals hold no monopoly on the definition of freedom. Conservative Republicans believe in it too. But while to liberals, government has an active role in preserving and widening freedom—ensuring economic security and genuine equality of opportunity for all, regulating private power in the public interest—for conservatives, government is the main threat to their liberty—to the freedom of the individual, to private initiative and enterprise. With these fundamentally contrasting visions of the good society, the ideological stage is set for conflict between the “free-market liberty” of conservatives, as John Schwarz labels it (Schwarz, 2005), and what I would call the collective freedom that Roosevelt and Kennedy had fought for.

In its essence, leadership is the mobilization of followers who become leaders, in an empowering process inspired and tested by transcending values. The Bush II Republicans know this. They have assumed a hard-line posture on issues and policies despite the pleas of more moderate Republicans that they are tending too far to the right and risk losing the center. Not so, the conservatives reply—with their hard-right values they dig ever deeper into their grassroots and cobblestone base, which they can then mobilize at the polls. What they lose in breadth they win in depth.

And the Democrats? Every defeat rekindled the intra-party debate that the Bush conservatives had already settled for the Republican Party. Democratic centrists argue that with moderate appeals the party can broaden its support and win elections. Carrying out Democratic platform promises might proceed gradually, bringing change in the long run. Liberals respond that such a transactional strategy cannot reach the millions of Americans in dire need, and certainly will not draw them to the polls.

But what is the liberal strategy for mobilizing those voters who would appear to have a stake in its programs? What has happened to *class* politics? Old-timers can remember Republican denunciations of FDR for his “demagogic” appeals to the “forgotten man.” But would class politics work in 21st Century America? With the decline of union labor—that old Democratic bastion—ancient class lines have blurred. At the same time, inequalities are deepening and the old promise of opportunity to ordinary Americans—“to support a family, educate their children, and achieve a dignified old age,” in Jeff Faux’s words—has crumbled (Faux, 1997, 24). Millions of middle class Americans have lost the hope of upward mobility and struggle just to stay in place. Meanwhile, the numbers of working poor—people whose jobs pay them so little that they can scarcely support their families, even as the social safety net shrinks beneath them—has grown astronomically.

With tax cuts for the rich, spending cuts for the middle class and the poor, threats to destroy programs that provide a minimum of security to the ill and the aged—by keeping faith with their values—Bush Republicans have created a new class—potentially a new majority—of forgotten men and women. Can Democrats—keeping faith with *their* values—reach them?

The Democrats cannot mobilize such majorities without modernizing and sharpening the durable economic issues of old—jobs, wages, education, women’s rights, health. But as Paul Starr has urged, the Democrats need more *party* activists, not more issue activists (Starr, 1997, 231-232). They must send a

strong, overarching message, with policy proposals set in a larger frame, a true party program that would mark a commitment by Democrats to voters. They must run together on a party platform; they must govern together on a party agenda.

A test case of this strategy will be the issue of equality, especially as it relates to poverty. Most Americans have a strong egalitarian streak, as reflected in their down-to-earth beliefs in fairness, sharing, and equal opportunity. Democrats must make clear the link between these benign feelings and the election of liberals, for much is often lost in translation. Then too, some liberals are often uneasy about the implications of equality of condition for middle-class people. They guess—and studies support this—that higher incomes do not automatically bring greater happiness. Still, inspired by Jeffersonians, Roosevelts, and Kennedys, as believers in moral values they want more equality—and anti-poverty programs that work.

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