

GRAND OLD MEMORIES

The character of post-election debates in the US allows a paraphrase of one of Mark Twain's often celebrated quotes. Reviews suggest that the death of the Grand Old Party may be greatly exaggerated.

There is little doubt that the US presidential race was a global phenomenon in which a variety of publics at home and abroad participated. Europeans, however, remain

preoccupied with a US president's personal powers. Because of this focus, they not only expect change, but also anticipate that a substantial rerouting of the political course will occur rather seamlessly, and rapidly as well. According to one analyst, eagerly awaited after a clear anti-incumbency mood at the American ballot box is the start of meaningful dialogues with Russia that will yield peaceful solutions to complex foreign policy problems, strenuous limitations on greenhouse gas emissions, the advent of an essential quietude in Iraq and Afghanistan, a corralling of leading religious-based terrorists on land and at sea, and an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, all within the space of a year if not within the first few weeks following the US presidential inauguration in January, 2008. (1)

In contrast, a decidedly realistic view prevails closer to home where presentist themes abound. These concentrate interest on prospective cabinet appointments, economic policy perspectives and, in many quarters, on a reevaluation of the Republican Party's prospects given its leading candidates' ability to garner a huge amount of enthusiastic support at the polls without, however, scoring an amount sufficient to ensure victory. A viable two-party system has long been enshrined in American political life. Though this review of the past election is ongoing, preliminary results have already signaled that the majority of US voters still cling to a Reagan Republican agenda, namely, the lowering of a broad swath of taxes along with a corresponding belief that the best government is the most limited possible. These values hold true across a wide public spectrum despite the visible effects of comprehensive federal intervention in shoring up the devolving mortgage sector. They also prevail even in the face of the cascading problems associated with investment banking institutions, one of whose collapse in mid-September may have engendered a significant pre-election shift towards Democratic candidates at all political levels. (2)

Attachment to the public's customary Republican beliefs seems to have reached its peak in Oklahoma where John McCain, the party's presidential nominee, captured over 65% of the vote all the while Democrats lost resoundingly in the state legislature. Though they declined elsewhere, elements of the Republican social agenda, pro-life values and protection from any significant whittling away of Second Amendment right to own firearms, held strong sway among voters in the evangelical Christian community on the rugged Great Plains. Reasons for the consistent Republican strength in all of Oklahoma's 77 counties, as well as the local defeat of now President-Elect Barack Obama, are many and various. However, there is agreement that what appears to provoke significant, repeated GOP pluralities is the state's vital prosperity that combines contemporary advanced technological production in the communications and bioscientific industries with thriving primary and secondary businesses intimately associated with the production of oil and natural gas. (3)

This is not the first or only instance that the GOP has had to think seriously about revitalizing its support base, or about clarifying its relationship with entrepreneurial activities. For example, 1892 was the year of Grover Cleveland's much vaunted presidential return to a Democratic White House, a national event that was almost immediately followed by the onset of a devastating national depression that ultimately brought unemployment levels to 20 million, or over 13% of the population. A majority sought blame anywhere they could find it: falling wages emanating from greedy corporate boards, striking union workers and the drumbeats of potential strikes to come, those who were organized in constant battles over bimetallism or the Silver or Gold standard, immigrants of all provenance, and especially, rising objections to an increased media focus on the lavish behaviors of the relative few who were members of the country's wealthiest, prime symbol of the Gilded Age's propensity to highlight the fruits of both achievement and inheritance at the top while lessening attention to the bleak social realities of the many who lived below. Even Senator Orville H. Platt, known as an arch-conservative and a vociferous opponent of anti-trust legislation, appeared to give up for a while, holding that the optimal path for the Republican Party was to keep quiet and wait. (4)

That the GOP did not do so is evident in its move towards international coordination with the now defunct Gold Standard, which pleased business enterprise mightily, and by loosing itself from the confusing sway of state and local leaders the American people then faced and replacing them with a concentration on conflict resolution and decision-making at the national level. Not exactly known as a charismatic figure, but rather as an astute congressional manipulator of tariff schedules, William McKinley, eventually emerged as a plausible presidential candidate. His was a deft political course designed to hold the faith of those in expanding business enterprise and a wilting labor force at the same time. And it caught the attention of the major newspapers in dichotomous ways.

On the one hand, cartoonists had a penchant for depicting McKinley as a type of puppet by placing a miniature of him, replete with a host of dollar bills attached to his suit, and seated squarely on the lap of a well-known political boss and business advocate. On the other hand, the contemporary media widely publicized what was at that time a most attractive slogan, "Protectionism and Prosperity," which often appeared combined with an additional phrase that underscored the Republican Party's desire to meet the immediate and daunting needs of millions of poorer immigrant or native-born households as speedily as possible, namely, "A Full Dinner Pail." Though historians have plumbed the depths of this difficult transition in much greater and copious detail, it nevertheless appears to have served as a platform for Republican Theodore Roosevelt's equally responsive blend of anti-trust, pro-competition pragmatism and the advent of a regulatory framework that promised a public inclusion into national benefit policies along with freedom from the effects of wide-spread enterprise corruption.

Both major parties now face the prospect of achieving a balance between the mounting demands of globalization and the economic and social needs of a national constituency. The legacy of those earlier GOP days might contribute to the discussion. It seems a legacy of pragmatism aimed at institutional and public welfare rather than a consistent recourse to a particular political ideology or philosophy. It is also a legacy of flexible voting patterns. These can shift from party to party in a fashion somewhat akin to those of more independent voting groups, and are themselves dependent on a particular context of perceived economic requirements and the

outstanding political personalities who can best address them. Political comebacks can be swiftly gained in a system where analysts often face problems in uncovering true party affiliates in any hard or fast sense.

Revisionist historians have also contributed a clarifying view of a phrase that is often cited as inexorably tied to a Republican stance. Folklore apparently surrounded President Calvin Coolidge's own "the business of America is business," now recognized as a misquote wrenched from a full statement that emphasized national wealth as a means to a much higher order, including peace and charity. Those who followed and who favored consistent federal intervention appear to have used only the shortest portion of Coolidge's remarks in order to set themselves politically apart from what was an essentially moderate approach. (5) Current reviews might encompass an earlier bipartisan convergence. Just how this convergence fragmented and later diverged might become part not only of a Republican renewal, but everybody else's as well.

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- (1) Baker, Peter. "Whose President Is He Anyway?" New York Times Online, 11/15/2008; Drakulic, Slavenka. Quoted in "What Europe Wants From Obama." Spiegel Online. 11/5/2008. (2) Rasmussen, Scott. "The Polls Show That Reaganism Is Not Dead." Wall Street Journal Online, 11/10/2008. (3) Jenkins, Ron. "As Much Of Nation Went Blue, Oklahoma Applied Extra Coat Of Red." Washington Post, 11/9/2008. (4) Marcus, Robert D. Grand Old Party. New York, Oxford University Press, 1971. (5) Bittinger, Cindy. "The Business Of America Is Business." Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation Online.

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