

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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Friday, January 30, 2004

A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED JANUARY 31, 1996

POLLS AND POLS

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Despite the fleeting attention paid in the press to Bill Clinton's "State of the Union" speech and to Bob Dole's Republican response, I believe there is a strong possibility that history will eventually come to recognize that the two speeches taken together marked a turning point of sorts in American political history.

It is probable, I believe, that that blustery Tuesday evening last week was the start of America's first truly post-modern presidential campaign; a campaign in which the positions of the candidates are formed almost completely and exclusively around polling data; one in which the candidates have become so immersed in the electronic positioning process that neither could separate his personal beliefs from those that he is told by his handlers to espouse, and wouldn't understand what was meant if he were asked to try.

For several hours prior to Clinton's speech, the media was filled with "color" stories about how much time and effort Bill and his political advisers had spent pouring over polling data and "focus group" findings in order to construct this "important address" so that it would "touch all bases." I heard not one "commentator" who seemed to think that there was anything wrong or unusual in this.

Then, as promised, Clinton did indeed show, in a stunning display of rhetorical legerdemain, that, with the benefit of good polling and a sincere visage, it is possible today to endorse positions that are diametrically opposed both to prior campaign promises and to actions taken just a few months earlier, and still be complimented in the media for having given an excellent address.

Following the speech, for example, the *Washington Post's* Steven Pearlstein praised how adroitly Clinton had portrayed himself as both a "Goldman Sachs Democrat," declaring that the "era of big government is over," and a "Bowling League Democrat," fighting for strong government action to assure "higher incomes and more job security for those who worked hard, played by the rules and now find themselves on the short end of the economic stick."

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Republicans, of course, blew their stacks like a family of migrating sperm whales, and many declared confidently that the public is too smart to fall for such hypocrisy. But there was little conviction behind their protests of faith in the public's ability to identify and object to political humbug. In fact, most Republicans are acutely aware that there is a huge and growing segment of the public that is just as stupid as Bill Clinton's speechwriters think they are.

Some Republicans were, of course, quick to argue that their guy, Bob Dole, was speaking from the heart. But this, I believe they knew, was tommyrot. Dole's presentation had all the earmarks of being just as poll-driven as Clinton's. I personally thought the content of Dole's presentation was fine. I agreed with virtually all of it. But, of course, I was suppose to agree with it. I am a conservative. I was the target audience.

Indeed, according to *Washington Times* political writer Ralph Z. Hallow, "Mr. Dole's campaign advisors privately admitted that their candidate's challenge was to satisfy GOP primary and caucus voters . . . that he is a conservative 'true believer' . . . that he knows what conservatives want and that he too is disappointed at not having achieved them [sic] because Mr. Clinton stood in the way . . . and that he won't ignore the conservative agenda as many of them feel President Bush did."

What we saw, in other words, was a "new" Bob Dole, whose "core beliefs" we are assured are quite different from those held by the "old" Bob Dole. Wonderful, says I. I will vote for Dole rather than Clinton. I am happy that Dole now endorses these views. Yet, in my heart I knew that Bob Dole, the champion of "let's make a deal" politics, would never have given that particular speech had he been left to his own designs.

For his sake, I found myself yearning for him to tear off the straps of his "handicap harness" like the "under-handicapped" Harrison Bergeron did in Kurt Vonnegut's wonderful short story by the same name. I wanted to see Dole dance to his own tune just one time; to reel, whirl, swivel, flounce, caper, gambol and spin, as Bergeron did before he was gunned down by the Handicapper General, Diana Moon Glampers.

Bob, I thought, you're 72 years old, you've worked in Washington since 1961. You know and have seen a great deal. Tell us what you think, what you believe, what you have learned. Like Bergeron, just once, leap "like deer on the moon!" I may not like the message as well, I thought, but I would like you better. You might lose because of it. You might fall politically as Bergeron did physically. But, like Bergeron's dance, it would have been a magic moment. An old politician who has paid his dues as you have surely has earned the right to say what he believes rather than what his "handlers" say he needs to believe in order to be "popular" with people who don't particularly like him anyway.

There are those who would argue, of course, that there is nothing new in politicians pandering to voters and voting blocks. And, of course, there is truth in this. But it is a question of degree. A careful reading of history shows, I believe, that the majority of American presidents, the good as well as the bad, came to the office with strong personal beliefs and great confidence that these beliefs were correct. Each represented various interest groups, of course, but their ties to these

groups were intimate, up close, personal; they didn't need polls to tell them what the people who sent them to Washington believed and wanted to hear.

In fact, I believe history shows that most American presidents were driven to seek office by the belief that they, and they alone, knew what was right for the nation. For the most part, past American presidents, I would argue, used polls not to help them to adjust their own views to fit those of the public, but to gain some insight into just how difficult it was likely going to be to "bring the public around" to their "way of thinking."

Presidents and presidential candidates who are like the great poet George Herbert's "empty vessels under sail," who are waiting to be filled by the beliefs of the rabble, are, I believe, something relatively new in American politics.

I don't have current statistics, but in 1993, the first year of the Clinton presidency, the White House spent just short of \$2 million for public relations polls compared with \$216,000 that Bush spent on similar polls in two years, 1989 and 1990. These figures came from a *Wall Street Journal* article, which noted at the time that "more than any other president, Mr. Clinton, the first baby boomer president, relies on polls and focus groups in helping to determine what he needs to be saying and how he should be saying it."

What the *Journal* didn't foresee at the time is that this reliance on the polls was not a phenomenon unique to Bill Clinton, but was in fact a harbinger of the future of American presidential politics, a sign that the polling technocrats were taking control, a sign that the world of American politics would never be the same. It all brings to mind a refrain from G. K. Chesterton's haunting poem "The Secret People."

They have given us into the hands of the new unhappy lords,
Lords without anger and honour, who dare not carry their swords.
They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright dead alien eyes;
They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies.
And the load of their loveless pity is worse than the ancient wrongs,
Their doors are shut in the evening; and they know no songs.

One of the reasons that George Grant, the great Canadian philosopher has never become widely read in the United States is that he makes statements that force thinking people to question the truth about certain things that they consider to be unquestionably true.

In his marvelous short book of essays, *Technology and Justice*, Grant questions the commonly held belief that just because something can be done technologically, it should be done; or as Robert Oppenheimer, the inventor of the atomic bomb put it: "when you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it." Grant believes there is truth to the Latin adage: *a posse ad esse non valet consequentia*, which he translates as "just because something can be, it does not follow that it should be."

Grant is, of course, a realist, and he is resigned to the fact that the march of technology is certain to continue unchecked by his warnings that some paths might be better left

unexplored. He knows that the modern day Oppenheimers of the world will view all avenues of exploration as "technically sweet" even if the fruit to which they lead is very bitter.

Like Grant, I realize that there is no hope of halting, or of even slowing, the remarkable gains being made in the ability of politicians to determine what various voter groups and subgroups want to hear them say on an almost instant-time basis, and to fine tune their messages accordingly. I also realize that no politician in the future is likely to refuse to use such marvelous tools as these, tools that hold out the promise, like some form of magic elixir, of providing eternal popularity, even if the bargain involves sacrificing his or her political soul.

Thus, as I said earlier, it would appear that the 21st century will witness a new form of American democracy, a high-tech form in which "the people" will have a much greater say in the workings of government.

This new political chrysalis has been breaking out of its cocoon for quite some time now, of course, and it is thus possible to gain some glimpses as to what it will look like when it takes wing. For starters, it seems clear, to me at least, that real political power will shift dramatically not to "the people," but to a very small group of individuals who are highly skilled in the use of modern techniques of mass communication to twist and shape public opinion, and package the result as "polls."

As we are seeing today in the budget standoff, this will almost certainly lead to a government that is much more beholden to the collective demands of so-called "special interests," and therefore much less able to decide upon and implement decisions that require some sacrifice from "the people;" or to put it another way, decisions that demand real political leadership.

In closing, it is worth noting that one of the greatest concerns of the nation's founding fathers when they designed America's government was to prevent just such an eventuality. Their confidence in the good judgment of "the masses" was low. They believed in the importance of real political leadership.

My friend Claus Ryn states the position of the founding fathers quite succinctly in his excellent book, *The New Jacobinism, Can Democracy Survive?* According to Ryn, a professor of politics at The Catholic University, "the original American Constitution provides many examples of an effort to counteract such dangers of plebiscitarianism as demagoguery and rabble-rousing."

Ryn notes that "to increase the odds of well-informed, responsible decisions, the Framers deliberately shielded many office holders from the pressures of popular opinion. Senators and Presidents would be elected only indirectly by the people. They would also have fairly substantial terms of office, making it easier for them to follow their own best judgment. Members of the Supreme Court would be even further removed from popular pressures. The task of selecting a president was placed in the hands of the Electoral College. This body was intended to consist of experienced individuals capable of distinguishing between presidential contenders of integrity and ability and ones of questionable character and ambition."

To sum it up, according to Ryn, "the Framers of America's political institutions were thus uninterested in plebiscitary rule. To the extent that they considered it at all, it was to warn against its dangers."

Fisher Ames, a congressman from Massachusetts for all eight years of Washington's presidency, the drafter of the first amendment to the Constitution, who was described by one of my favorite historians, Daniel Boorstin, as "the most eloquent member of the First Congress," put the specific concerns of founders this way in an essay written in 1803 entitled "The Dangers of American Liberty," published after his death in 1808.

A multitude can be moved only by their passions. . . The great spring of action with the people in a democracy, is their fondness for one set of men, the men who flatter and deceive, and their outrageous aversion to another, most probably those who prefer their true interest to their favour . . . A government by the passions of the multitude, or, no less correctly, according to the vices and ambition of their leaders, is a democracy . . . When it is said, there may be a tyranny of the many as well as of the few, every democrat will yield at least a cold and speculative assent; but he will at all times act as if it were a thing incomprehensible, that there should be any evil to be apprehended in the uncontrolled power of the people . . . The people as a body, cannot deliberate. Nevertheless, they will feel an irresistible impulse to act, and their resolutions will be dictated to them by their demagogues. The consciousness, or the opinion, that they possess the supreme power, will inspire inordinate passions; and the violent men, who are the most forward to gratify those passions, will be their favourites. What is called the government of the people is in fact too often the arbitrary power of such men . . . What avails the boasted power of individual citizens? or of what value is the will of the majority, if that will is dictated by a committee of demagogues, and law and right are in fact at the mercy of a victorious faction? To make a nation free, the crafty must be kept in awe and the violent in restraint. The weak and the simple find their liberty arise not from their own individual sovereignty, but from the power of law and justice over all.

One wonders what the redoubtable Mr. Ames would have thought had he been able to watch Bill and Bob last week abdicate their responsibility to lead, and in doing so transfer their political power to "the people," who, Ames understood, cannot lead, but who will find new leaders when their old ones fail them.

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