



## UP, OR DOWN, FROM LIBERALISM? A Post-Election Sermon © 2004 John Burciaga

All of you know I am liberal both in religion and politics. But I speak always and only for myself, not for this congregation or any other Unitarian Universalist. I also respect your intelligence, whatever your opinions or convictions, and I believe that good people can have reasonable disagreements.

It must be said: *I know* that so many of you are disappointed with last week's election. Some may be philosophical about it—but no few may be between mournful and grief-stricken. “Politics,” to me, sometimes is *depressing* but I do not tend to *get depressed*. I am as politically passionate as anyone, but I try to keep my ego away from electoral outcomes, and have a great faith in democracy, which itself is a “free-market” of politics that is constantly self-correcting.

I have little regard for the conventional wisdom that says losers always must engage in soul-searching. After a landslide, that may be in order, but not in close outcomes, as this year and in 2001, when the differences were the electoral votes of one state. This time the loser also got a record number of votes, and the outcome was not clear till 9 p.m. on election night. Nor do I pay attention to those who say political liberalism is dead; mistakes aplenty are yet to be made, and unless Iraq is not dealt with more effectively; we have more success than window-dressing with international terrorism; and knowledgeable attention to domestic spending and the national debt, political fortunes can and will change drastically.

### “DEFENSE OF MARRIAGE”?

When last in the pulpit I referred to the “culture war” and that there now are two kinds of people in America who simply don't like each other. For either one to assume they are the vast majority is to be foolish. Tuesday's winner entered Iraq without international consensus or direct provocation, and found no weapons of mass destruction; has not produced bin Laden; lost three debates, and squirmed through a month of bad news for his international policy—all after four years of growing fiscal debt. If people want to vote for that, political liberalism need not blame itself.

When one who fought in Vietnam is called a coward and the liar, and the one who stayed out of it is called a hero, and people want to believe that, there is no need for liberals to feel it is they who have done something wrong.

I regret that among those who were abused of this electoral season, were our gay and lesbian friends and neighbors. To give society's blessing to their unions simply is to be *for* people; refusal to do so is to be *against* such persons—and be not fooled by those who say they aren't against gays as people, merely *for* the institution of marriage. Since the late 1950s the failures of traditional marriage, long before “easy” divorces were possible, have gone from one-third to one-half. It began to happen before the push for gay rights, so our houses already were in disorder and only straight people have themselves to blame. When and if we finally push gay

people out of their rightful place in society, the problem with traditional marriage will remain, and whose fault will that be? The most recent figures show that over a third of born-again Christians have been divorced, and nearly a quarter of them have had multiple divorces, and I don't want people like that lecturing me on marital morality. What often is called a "defense of marriage" is but a smokescreen for society's dislike, even hatred, of other people; and that is as hard to smoke out and bring to justice as bin Laden.

### **"MORAL VALUES"**

We hear that "moral values" were a big factor in this race. Well, *define moral values*. That's another smokescreen: what was meant was abortion and same-sex marriage, not health care for all, or equal housing or protection of the environment—or ending social and religious bigotry.

In the state of Arizona, people with medieval ideas have replaced some fine leaders and prospective candidates, and some initiatives again were loaded against people, e.g., migrants. And let me add that whatever side I'm on in an issue, a sobering rule of thumb is to notice who is voting the same way. I don't know why one party feels so good about enjoying the full support of the religious right-wing with its insular social policies and its belief that it knows what God is, what God is thinking and whose side God is on, and I'm *happy* to say they don't vote the way I do. That will be the other obnoxious outcome of this year's election, to face more of the smug self-righteousness of benighted religion and its growing grip on the nation's institutions—politics being only one.

### **LIBERTY AND RIGHTS**

Well, I hope we had a good time, two weeks ago, talking about *liberals* and *conservatives*. Maybe you found that what you've long believed ain't necessarily so? To review a bit:

"Liberal" at first did not mean what we love to say it is today, that is, "generous," "tolerant," "broad-minded" and so forth. Those are correct but they are generic adjectives. It came rather from a break with the centuries-old belief that what is good for nations is good for the individual. There arose a new assertion that individuals too have inherent worth and dignity, and the right to declare what is good for themselves. After all, fresh in the minds of social and political philosophers were certain struggles for freedom in the world, that is, for people's *liberty*—as in the French and American revolutions. Such philosophers were called, from the Spanish, "liberales," those who favored individual "liberty."

"Conservative" was what the world was up until the new belief in the individual. There wasn't a word for it, it was just *the way things were*. There were no books about it but you knew it when you read speeches and tracts of politicians. But once the new philosophers were called *liberales*—or people who believed in individual liberty, the word *conservative* was coined to refer to the *conservation* of tradition, to the way things always had been.

## LOVING AND HATING CHANGE

Thus with liberalism came the Bill of Rights and civil liberties, which assert the prerogatives of individuals that never can be compromised by the majority or by majority votes. But conservatism continued, with its suspicion of human nature, and its belief that governing is a skill that not everyone has and is best in the hands of ruling classes. As Alexander Hamilton said, over and over again, in *The Federalist*, “men are not angels;” that ours should not be a government by angels for angels, but one of humans who will restrain the human capacity for evil. And though democracy spelled the doom of ruling classes, the conservative temperament reasserts itself through the careful steps of constitutional process and thorough debate. There’s some good sense in that, if you agree with Will Rogers that “Liberty don’t work as good in practice as it does in speeches.”

Indeed, liberals often love change too much, sometimes with the misbegotten notion that all change is good; and conservatives overly dislike it, fearing it may as easily destabilize society as improve it. All of us may recognize this tension within ourselves, being lovers both of order and disorder, of tradition as well as of creativity and change.

## WHO IS A MAJORITY?

Politically, there are better times than others for change. A good example was Bill Clinton’s initiative for gays in the military; we all knew they already were there but his timing occasioned a bitter outcome, called, “don’t ask, don’t tell,” which was merely to state the obvious and to reiterate what was longstanding practice. Clinton’s good political instincts may have failed him when he advocated that change at the beginning of his first term; had he waited till his last term, following the remarkable economic recovery under him, and avoided scandal, there may have been more civil discourse, and progress, over gays in the military--and the goodwill of no few conservatives.

Some of us grew up in the days of, or shortly after, the Roosevelt era and the so-called “New Deal,” and we are used to thinking that this country, until now, has always had a liberal majority. We think that has been true especially during times of moral issues such as slavery, and of concern for older populations through Social Security and for the poor through welfare programs.

The truth is that through the first century of our republic, no party could fashion a lasting majority: the Democrats under Andrew Jackson both lost and won before the Civil War; and Republicans, for three decades after the death of Lincoln, barely could hold on to the White House. The first real majority was not created by Democrats and some pressing moral issue, but by William McKinley, a Republican, and his support for a *gold* standard. The next was Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal—but for the past 35 years there as often has been a Republican, and conservative, majority. If we had any doubt about that, it was dispelled last Tuesday.

## “NEW,” “OLD” & “HIDDEN” TAXES

Regardless how strongly many of us feel about our politics, and I am one of them, it is my observation over my lifetime that the U.S. is *moderate* at its core, and when either party in power becomes extreme, or even appears to be, those who are *independent* of the *influence* of parties, make the electoral difference by reasserting moderation and tipping an election to the opposition party. Bill Clinton responded to the appearance of extremism in social policy by declaring an “end to welfare *as we know it*,”--and many heard only the first part of that phrase and not the other. Conservatives have to be concerned about the perception of extremism regarding taxation, the national debt and class-ism.

No Republican president ever has advocated drastic reductions in taxes and really meant it, until now: for all his talk, Reagan raised taxes four times in his eight years, although some were “hidden”—such as payroll tax increases and, as you may remember, his charming euphemism, “revenue enhancements.” George Bush, Sr.’s qualifying word “new” as in “no *new* taxes” was a far cry from elimination of taxation. He also showed us that raising “old” taxes hurts as much as getting new ones. A huge debt resulted or continued during the last three conservative presidencies, one of which handled it by maxing out the country’s credit card—something many Americans understand only too well. I don’t think you can have three such presidents in recent memory who build huge deficits without creating a new majority in America that will oppose it.

## GOD & POLITICAL PARTIES; PRESIDENTS AND INTELLECT

I regret that political parties now represent a great divide in America, what now is called the “culture war.” Actually, “parties,” as we know them really began here in America. They aren’t the same as the Greens and the Blues in ancient Byzantium; the Guelphs and Ghibellines of medieval Italy; or the Hats and Caps of Sweden. And in England, parties really were *factions*. When they came about in the U.S. they were national, not sectional, but each drew from every region, class, religious and ethnic group. As different as were Jefferson and Hamilton, their differences were not fundamental. That is why Jefferson could say, in his Inaugural, that “We are all republicans, we are all democrats.” And he meant it, something we can’t easily say today. And I add that in his manuscript, he used a small “r” and a small “d” for republican and democrat. Today, one can imagine that Lincoln could be run out of his own party, as could Teddy Roosevelt. Will Rogers observed that party politics are the most narrow-minded occupation in the world—all you have to do to make an atheist of someone is to tell them God belongs to the other party.

## PRESIDENTS AS LIKEABLE

But it’s hard to say these days whether parties, or their ideas, or presidents, truly represent what America is. I was startled, after one of the recent presidential debates, to hear

some experts declare that when Lincoln and Douglas debated, they spoke to the intellectual level of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, respectively; and that Bush and Kerry spoke at 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade levels. This could explain, when one of Adlai Stevenson's excited supporters said to him, "Governor, every thinking person will be voting for you!" he replied, "Madam, that is not enough; I need a majority."

Apparently what we want most in a president is that he be likeable. Lord Bryce, who was British Ambassador to Washington early last century, wrote about *The American Commonwealth*, and one chapter was titled, "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents." He asserted that Americans opt for safety over brilliance; that the ordinary American voter "does not object to mediocrity" because we have "a lower conception of the qualities necessary" to govern effectively; that we want a leader to be "sensible, vigorous and above all, magnetic," and that it is "more important that he be a good candidate than that he should turn out to be a good president." Thankfully, and again in the words of Will Rogers, from every election, we get worse people but the nation keeps right on going; and times prove, he added, that "you can never ruin this country with politics."

Liberals never thought they would survive Reagan, and conservatives thought they never would survive Clinton. And we all did. And we'll somehow survive this president and the next.

And I still urge you, regardless of the depth of your politics and your passion for them, work like crazy but don't wrap your ego around what happens. You'll live longer and be better for your party, and your country, in the process.

And there are other things to do and to care about. Said Will Rogers: "I love a dog. It does nothing for political reasons."

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Note: Clearly, I re-read Edmund Burke on the subject of conservatism. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and his *Works* indeed are helpful, but though he was a darling of conservatives, formally he was a Whig. I did not intend to mean that "liberal" and "conservative" in their definitional contexts are accurate for today, but the core of their original assumptions are intact despite changing times and the rise of a formal republic and its democracy in the U.S. I should add that use of the Spanish word, "liberales," for such philosophers was an attempt to paint them as un-English and therefore suspect. Aside from other generically generous adjectives for "liberal," Shakespeare used the word more to mean gross or licentious.

Other sources were Matthew Arnold; Lord Hugh Cecil's *Conservatism*; T.H. Green; John Locke; Robert Southey; and more recent and readable: Henry Steele Commager; Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953); and Michael Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics* (1962).

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