

Civility

Editorial

President George W. Bush said in his inaugural address that he wants a return to a more civil society. Civility, he said, is not a political tactic, or a sentimental affectation, but a determined choice of trust over cynicism, community over chaos, careful thought over dogmatism. President Bush is a likable, decent, principled man who is respected by friend and foe but he will not preside over politicians given to polite discourse. When I read historically or the newspapers it is clear man is a fighting animal who has rarely known peace. Life is warlike save in our families. The hope of politics is that the never-ending war of man against man will be without bloodshed.

If we were a civil society we would not have a two-party system of government, or multiple-party systems, but no parties. We would elect wise men to our legislatures without party labels who would consider problems and arrive at a resolution all could accept. This was the hope of George Washington who despised factions and hoped men would put the national good first, allowing differences of opinion to be resolved within the legislative body and with the passage of time.

This hope, probably the same as that of President Bush, was an impossibility and foundered. Hamilton and Jefferson were the great antagonists, Hamilton believing in a strong executive and Jefferson pinning his hopes on the virtue of the common man. Each position could be defended. The problem was that the differences were sharpened, dogmatized, presented in extremes, and taken to the hustings. The age-old division of classes began, a division that ran through the politics of Rome and Greece and every society since.

Class warfare always revolves around money and power. From the classic times and for many centuries after, society was divided between those who had land and those who did not. The former ruled the latter with kindness or cruelty, depending on the character of the overlord. Sometimes the underclass seized power and slaughtered their masters; the masters would gather their forces and kill those who displaced them.

Within the world of those with and those without land arose independent artisans both in the ancient world and medieval Europe, those who made shoes, clothes, clocks, tools, furniture. With the development of trade, large factories were born, as early as the sixteenth century, and their needs were met not only by independent citizens who left the land but by sail-makers, carpenters, banks, and insurers. Men became independent of landlords, but their independence remained within a class or was dependent on the owners of new corporations. Classes multiplied, but the classes never mingled. Each guild pursued its own interest.

The modern world of manufactures based on the creation of energy by water, then coal, now oil, created a technology that has given us lives of comfort and

leisure that are unique in the history of the world, and this leisure and comfort are for the majority. The poorest of today are wealthier than anyone of the eighteenth century. In spite of all this, we have the same class warfare that was present in Rome and Greece.

Class warfare today is the same as it has always been, between those with power and those who want power, or of those with wealth and those who want wealth or more wealth than they presently possess. The Republican Party represents the aristocratic tradition of stability, and they are champions of effort, freedom, responsibility; the Democratic Party looks to help those who cannot function as well as others. They focus on uplift. Good men are in each party. There are times when a member of one party crosses over to vote for the opposition, but, by and large, each represents the class to which he attaches himself. In Rome, Cicero argued for the continuance of the old republic; Caesar attached himself to the masses and brought down the old republic. Both were men of genius, and each epitomized the classic distinctions.

The stability of the Republican Party is shown in their attachment to the U.S. Constitution. They want it upheld and they want judges to make decisions that conform to that constitution. Democrats do not believe in the Constitution as written and think it must be "living" or interpreted to reflect the changed circumstances of the present generation. While all office-holders swear to uphold the constitution, they do not mean what they say and have secret reservations. These reservations are understood by all.

The changed attitude to the Constitution began with Franklin D. Roosevelt. Coming to the presidency in the midst of the depression, he believed that the country could recover only by extensive political intrusion into the market-place. The Supreme Court ruled his proposed actions were illegal and forbade them. Roosevelt tried in vain to pack the court but he got his way by new appointments. The reinterpretation of the Constitution that was effected did not solve the problems of the depression and hindered their resolution, but socialism was the dream of the future and the motivating force of the time. I do not doubt the lure of socialism was the inspiration of Roosevelt and his supporters. Political activism by a restructuring of the Constitution is with us yet both in legislative and judicial decisions. Even the Supreme Court is divided by those who believe in the constitution and those who believe it must always be interpreted into what it is not.

The different attitudes to business is seen in the two parties. You can assume Republicans will favor business in the absence of unusual circumstances, and you can assume Democrats will choose for those who censure business. There are exceptions but this is the rule. At the moment we have the threat of a strike by the mechanics of Northwest Airlines. If Northwest is shut down, Minnesota will be gravely hurt. When the traffic controllers voted to strike in the presidency of Mr. Reagan, threatening the country with enormous hardship, he fired them. This must be the case in the face of extreme demands. Class warfare must have limits. In the case of the threatened strike against Northwest, news was leaked that the offer of Northwest was for \$33 dollars an hour, which comes out to \$68,640 annually, plus

\$10,000 per mechanic for retroactive pay. Nothing was said about holiday pay, overtime, or insurance benefits. In a typically Republican tradition, President Bush told the Northwest strikers to stay their hand. If they do not, a decision will be made in Congress.

That the Republican Party advocates stability and the Democratic Party advocates change is shown by those who support each party. The Republican Party is supported by those with assets and savings. Many young revolutionaries change as they become older and become disillusioned with utopian dreams. Cynics will say Republicans are all “fuddy-duddies” who are too stubborn to change with the times. I suppose that has much truth. Republicans are also among the working poor whose ambition drives them to risk some adventure for possible success.

The Democratic Party is supported by those who want change and who want it not so much by personal effort as by legislation. We can count environmentalists, feminists, racists, the less intelligent, the poor, and minorities as supporters of the Democratic Party because they hope to receive payment of some kind. All these will be helped say the Democrats by preferential treatment. Sadly, if the disadvantaged achieve success by preferential treatment, there will always be a suspicion that their expertise is suspect. They have not really proved themselves. In the meantime, everything is dumbed down so the less worthy will appear to be worthy. We have to accept the fact that some people are more talented than others, and in every calling. We must accept what we are and be content. Contentment, I suspect, is more usual in those thought less talented than in those thought superior—which is a wonderful trick of nature.

We should note that success comes from effort, not privilege. If one wants education, he will find it. He may go to an inferior school, and will overcome this handicap. He will find what he seeks if he really looks. That one seeks, persists, and is honest is the key. George Washington had no education. Neither did Lincoln, nor Churchill. By contrast, many men with Ph.D.s are fools. This is not to despise learning or to deny some learned men are sensible, but a reminder of the true nature of accomplishment. Pretense is not good enough.

Problems such as environmentalism can only be handled by legislative action where the difficulties can be resolved after careful consideration, but it remains that change will be effected by the Democrats while the Republicans will drag their heels. There is merit in these differing attitudes as they may defend us from haste on the one hand or stupidity on the other. Democrats want to save the environment. So do we all, but this does not mean we should fail to build a dam because a little fish might have to make some adjustments. Democrats do not want us to explore for oil. Everyone knows there will be an end to the oil age, now a hundred years old, and we must push for a substitute, but until that time comes we may as well continue with what we have.

Will Mr. Bush preside over a civil Congress, where dignity is the rule? Mr. Bush has given an olive branch to the Democrats which might be helpful. Rather than take the strict Republican position that the federal government should restrict

activity as much as possible, he has said that we should define what responsibilities belong to the national government and what to the state and local governments, going back to ground one with definitions. In spite of this, there is not a chance in the world civility is going to reign between the two parties. Politics is warfare, hopefully without blood, where problems eventually resolve themselves only after a lot of sparring—which may not be a bad thing. Idealists will hurl charges against their opponents, but the facts will rule in the long run and decide who was the true prophet. Aristotle said a couple of thousand years ago that the warring between parties will be resolved only by an enlargement of the middle class where the majority have a real stake in the peaceful resolution of difficulties. The United States has a large middle class which, hopefully, will be our salvation.

Poor societies need the development of middle classes, which few of them seem to realize. Poor countries seem to believe they must have a strong central government which will take care of the citizens. That is a kiss of death. Poor countries need the development and protection of the talent and property of those who energetically produce something by working for their neighbors. That in place, they will become wealthy and, in time, build a new kind of class warfare which will always threaten their success. Ω

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