



A Conversation on the American Two-Party System

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1. The Other Peculiar Institution from the Origins through the Civil War

Media, the schools, and the other great institutions of American civilization used to tell us that the American two-party system was the envy of the world. They did so with such repetition that they do not dwell too much on our actual experience with it. It's a much harder sell nowadays, but they still agree that the system works and that only naïve ideologues challenge it. But they're still as uninterested as ever in discussing the evidence. This is not surprising since all big and powerful institutions remain big and powerful by not picking fights with other big and powerful institutions.

This brief review of the American experience with the two-party system is the story of power and how wealthy white gentlemen chose to structure it. Initially accorded no role in the process, native peoples, African-Americans, Latinos, laboring people of European descent and women tended to have their impact on events through other means. The most successful of these, though, required understanding the structures of power that dominated their society.

This brief review will provide some general concerns that such a realistic assessment must address in our own day. Starting with the foundations, the American political system, like its social order and economic structure began as a New World variation of that in Britain. The United States constituted a republic of sorts, though the representative features of its government remained inherently weak, allowing coequal status to deliberately unrepresentative and unelected branches of government. Almost immediately, a party system appeared, promising to deepen these representative features by offering voters input into the decision-making processes by giving them options at the polls. These parties did accomplish much of what they

hoped until the people cast ballots for serious and radical change, precipitating the fatal crisis of the 1860s.

Foundations of American Politics

Despite a tumultuous seventeenth century, the British had established arrangements that permitted their rise to global prominence. With the monarchy restored but strictly limited in its function, the two chambers of the Parliament had effective rule of the country. The day-to-day functions of the government hardly concerned the average English subject on either side of the Atlantic, since the Parliament did not district itself to represent changes in the population and, more importantly, because the suffrage remained restricted to the propertied. As a result, the Parliament remained institutionally preoccupied with balancing the concerns of the landed gentry with the needs of urban commerce. Their predispositions created distinct caucuses in the Parliament and these "caucus parties"--the Whigs and Tories--represented the most important model for the American party system.

The colonists incorporated these essential features of eighteenth century British politics into their own system. They adopted a two-chambered legislative body, a distinct court system, and, almost everywhere, served alongside the Crown-appointed royal governors. There are those who also argue for embryonic caucuses emerging within the colonial assemblies, reflecting tensions between the more commercial coastal towns and the several kinds of agricultural interests. Despite periodic friction at having the ultimate governing power overseas, these general political structures worked because those who used them had no intention of representing social or economic interests any broader than those represented in the British parliamentary system. The system was of the owners and rulers, by the owners and rulers and for the owners and rulers.

The colonial resistance to British authorities necessarily mobilized the people, particularly in the cities. These frequently hinted at a political course not only independent from Britain but from their own home-grown masters and bosses. At times, they even tried to shape the political order that would come out of the revolution. In the end, though, the American Revolution remained what later Karl Marx and others would describe as a *bourgeois* revolution. The propertied elite managed to overcome

The Continental Congress always claimed the legitimacy of its authority not on the popular movements in the streets but those older colonial structures. With few exceptions, those bodies--from the Virginia House of Burgesses to the colonial assemblies of New England--pressed for independence and established what became a common government of the United States on their authority. Despite some promising movements for something more, the governments after independence remained no less committed than before to maintaining an idea of rights rooted first and foremost on ownership. They maintained upper houses of the legislative bodies expressly intended not to be representative of population, sometimes by higher property requirements and, nationally, by vesting the authority of the upper house on the state legislatures and according each state two senators, regardless of the state's population.

At its heart, the principle property these governments strove to protect were African slaves. Despite the importance of property in land or in the means of commerce, such as shipping, slaves remained essential to the plantation production of tobacco. This became the new nation's most important asset, even as half the former colonies took measures to eliminate the institution, while the other discovered the Transatlantic importance of cotton to the Industrial Revolution.

The national government reflected this imperative. For 32 of the first 36 years of the U.S., Virginia slaveholders occupied the presidency. While George Washington had clear concerns about slavery and took measures to manumit his own slaves, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe did nothing on the subject. In hindsight, we might see slavery or the extermination of the native peoples as key questions, neither had any impact on the national party system, which began to emerge.

The "First" Party System

From the earliest days of the new republic, the Founders cautioned against the formations of "factions" and parties that would constitute interests capable of short circuiting their carefully planned constitutional systems of checks and balances. Almost immediately, though, they went about the process of developing parties along British lines. That is, caucuses tended to take shape within legislatures and quickly began to function like permanent parties. Distinctive and often conflicting interests divided the sectional elites as well as different economic and social concerns within those sectional elites.

Almost immediately, though, they began grouping into a faction around Alexander Hamilton, urging the use of Federal policies to foster commerce and industry and a broad, complex opposition by those who suspected that such Federalist policies would cause even more problems. In foreign affairs, they strove for a reconciliation with Britain, and disassociated their American Revolution from the 1789 revolution that had broken out in France, America's old ally in attaining independence.

Although aloof from these tensions, George Washington, the consummate nationalist sympathized with the Federalists. His vice president and successor to the presidency, John Adams overtly embrace the new Federalist Party. And only a few years after adopting the Bill of Rights, the Federalists secured passage of legislation criminalizing dissent as "sedition," initiating a series of prosecutions against critics of the government.

Thomas Jefferson became the dominant figure in the opposition and a broad election over John Adams in "the Revolution of 1800." Although only a small portion of the population could vote, the decision is often cited as an example of how voters can have an impact and peacefully replace the administration in power. In this case, the voters picked between the more agrarian and egalitarian, if exclusively white and patriarchal, republican future envisioned by Jefferson and the Hamiltonian future of commerce, industries, and cities. Insofar as this was true, the participating voters picked Jefferson's alternative, which is why we all presently live virtuously on small farms.

The rivalry of the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans lacked many features of the two-party

system that evolved later. The government over which it contended remained largely confined to the gentlemen of the eastern seaboard and the suffrage remained everywhere confined to property owners

However, the system did represent the earliest clash between institutionalized parties in the U.S., and established many of its key features. Just as the Founders warned against parties, they embraced a constitutional order that had no provision for expanding the country. Jefferson, the “strict constructionist” is particularly remembered for the Louisiana Purchase, doubling the size of the U.S.

Jefferson’s successor, James Madison presided over the first, ill-considered attempt of the government directly subjugate not just native peoples but others of European background by seizing Canada while Britain remained preoccupied with the Napoleonic Wars. However, the invasion backfired and the winding down of the European Wars freed thousands of British veterans to handle America. The U.S. barely survived, but the Federalists who had opposed the war virtually disappeared outside of New England, while the party that took the country into the maelstrom rode a tide of patriotism to become not only the dominant party but really the only national party.

Jefferson, for his part, declared in his inaugural address, “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.” By 1813, the triumphant advocate of an agrarian future for the U.S. declared that America could only secure its independence through Hamilton’s course and foster manufacturing capitalism. And, while the Democratic-Republicans tended to differ from the Federalists on aspects of the French Revolution, both agreed about the slave revolt it helped to trigger on Santo Domingo.

Early on, then, there seemed to be enough reason to question the whole idea that citizens can express their interests by choosing between two alternatives preselected for them.

The “Second Party System”

A new party system emerged in the wake of the War of 1812. In those years, the U.S. reestablished its vital economic ties with Britain and began to exploit more thoroughly the potential of the cotton gin, particularly in the lower Mississippi valley. The new industries in Britain needed cotton, giving rise to the first great American fortunes, based upon a system of even

larger plantations systems that imposed a more rigorous and brutal kind of African slavery. The end of the legal Transatlantic slave trade radically increased the value of these owned workers and created closer ties between the Deep South that produced cotton on a massive scale and the Upper South and Border slave states in the lucrative business of supplying new slaves. Although entrepreneurial and exploitive in the most modern sense, the plantation economy clothed itself in the guise of traditional paternalism.

Alongside this, the states began revisiting the property requirement for voting during these years. Starting with Connecticut and New York, the states began lifting these, though usually revising their constitution to impose specify white males only, eliminating the rare instances of voting by propertied women or men of color. The process came easily in places, though it sparked a brief civil war in Rhode Island and certainly proceeded much slower in the slave South. The involvement of more Americans in the electoral process provided the owners and rulers of the nation a government they could still master easily enough while generally assuring that it would not become dangerously unpopular. This arrangement required reaching beyond the limited electorates of the East Coast and by property to masses of ordinary white voters across much of the country.

The new challenge required governing and stabilizing a national political order for the elites while creating ongoing mechanism to win popular mandate. Newspapers expanded and proliferated, and the steam presses got the “penny press” into the hands of voters. Older popular political associations evolved into societies capable of building and sustaining modern city political machines.

In the 1820s, a new Democratic Party rose against the remnants of the older party of Jefferson, the National Republicans, who adopted the name Whigs in the 1830s. The Democrats rose from a variety of local oppositional currents, with the growing interests of the cotton plantations increasingly dominant. After losing the 1824 election, Democratic leader Andrew Jackson gained two terms in the White House and set the tone for what remained the dominant national party for the next thirty years.

The first president from west of the Appalachians, Jackson embodied the Democratic convergence of the interests of the South and the West. Personally involved

in the schemes of Aaron Burr, had also had a heavy hand in the acquisition of West Florida and Florida for the U.S., laying the foundations for the Anglo colonization of Texas, then belonging to Spain and, then, an independent Mexico. In part, the plantations' rapid depletion of the soil provided a particular imperative for western expansion.

Democrats also spoke in Northern accents, thanks to proponents of expansion in the newly settled Midwest with various immigrant-based new political machines in the northeastern cities. Indeed, three of the other four Democratic presidents elected in this period—Martin Van Buren, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan—came from the North. However, they owed their national prominence to the South. The course of the first, Van Buren demonstrated what would happen if they did not march lock step with the desire of the Southern states.

Democrats appealed to dominant cultural concerns and ideological assumptions of most white voters. Democratic hostility to chartered monopolies--rhetorical and rarely real--appealed to faith that the mythical "free market" provided the best way to ensure individual opportunity, fair play and mobility among the economic players. Newly expanded newspapers, educational institutions, and the dominant currents of revived Christianity embraced the innate virtue of wealth, business success and hard work.

During this period, the Whigs offered the respectable opposition to the Democrats. It advocated energetic government action to foster "internal improvement" through the vigorous imposition of tariffs on imports. Their principle proponent, Henry Clay described this as "the American system." In the end, though, what the parties nationally presented as deep differences often boiled down to fighting over specific measures. That is, the differences largely revolved around the extent to which the government would impose tariffs or foster internal improvements.

The Whigs won national elections twice, only when Democratic unity faltered, and the Southern Democrats managed to triumph even then. In 1840, William Henry Harrison won election but died almost immediately, leaving the office to John Tyler, a Virginia Democrat added to the ticket to lure enough Democratic voters. In 1848, Zachary Taylor, the hero of the Mexican War also died in office, leaving Millard Fillmore to concede to Southern demands in the last series of compromises before the crisis of the war.

This two-party rivalry defined a focus of national politics on the means by which government could aid capitalist development--and which capitalists would have the greatest benefit of it. It kept the focus off issues like slavery, on which the prosperity of the country rested, and, to a large extent, expansion. In fact, it did whatever it could, wherever it could to keep slavery quiet. It nationally bared abolitionist literature from the mail, and Northern Democrats invented the color bar at the local and, as early as the mid-1830s, actually instigated race riots to keep Northern whites hostile to people of color.

The other Democratic president elected in these years, James Knox Polk--another Tennessee slaveholder--consciously followed in the footsteps of Jackson as an expansionist proponent of what came to be called "Manifest Destiny." He engineered the 1846 War with Mexico, the first time that the U.S. as a government pushed for more land. The explicit war of conquest acquired roughly as much land as had the Louisiana Purchase 43 years earlier, attaining the entire of the Southwest and West as far as the Pacific. The original goal of the administration had been the conquest of the entire of Mexico as far as the Isthmus of Panama, but the outbreak of a Mayan revolt in the Yucatan made the cotton South reluctant to annex a raging race war in which they would be in a clear minority.

Nevertheless, nearly a dozen serious entrepreneurial expeditions sought to revisit the question, with the backhanded support of the most militant "Southern Rights" faction of the Democrats. Over a thousand U.S. veterans went into the Yucatan, some half dozen private campaigns sought to acquire still more Mexican territory, several groups tried to "free" Cuba, and William Walker--once a neighbor and admirer of Jackson and Polk--led his famous forays into Nicaragua and Central America. By 1853, American mercenaries fought as far away as Ecuador. All this produced cadres that would see some use later in Kansas.

What the Party System Could Not Do

Too, the prospect of allowing the propertyless majority a voice in government had always raised fears in the Anglo-American world that they might somehow find their own voice, their own leaders, and actually take the government. Indeed, starting in the late 1820s, a wave of local "workingmen's parties" appeared. While often no more than a fanciful vote-catching label, those

at Philadelphia, New York and Boston did represent the political efforts of locally important labor organizations. These early efforts imploded, as their veterans turned to organizing local trade unions.

Former Workies in New York City, tried to reshape the Democratic Party, the top of which was much closer to the ordinary voter in those days. They formulated the practice of non-partisan politics, by which any and all candidates would be questioned and those giving written pledges to support desired measures would win an endorsement. Democratic legislative candidates readily gave their pledges not to charter any more monopolies, and, once they were in office, did exactly what they pledged not to do. The workingclass land reform movement revived the idea in the 1840s with much the same result.

After 1846, the land reformers and the abolitionist Liberty Party began running independent "Free Soil" tickets in New York and Massachusetts. By the early 1850s, they participated in the Free Democratic Party and later the Republicans. Measured by its actual results non-partisan politics tends to lead to independent political action.

More importantly, generations of ordinary Americans had begun to address slavery in a practical sense, by assisting the escape of runaways. By defying the Federal law mandating the return of runaway slaves, those citizens forced their neighbors generally to make decisions whether to turn them in to the authorities, and, by the 1850s, public resistance to this law became widespread across the non-slaveholding states. At the insistence of the Southern politicians--who later chose to advocate "states rights"--the central government passed ever more stringent laws on the question, but citizens had already begun to make and implement their own choices.

Northern Democrats had to find a solution that both satisfied the cotton South and left them with enough voters at home to hold office. Their 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, permitted the organization of Kansas as a new state permitting slavery, they faced open revolts in that frontier region. The responses of the government collapsed the Democratic Party north of the Mason-Dixon Line and the Whigs had already fractured along sectional lines. At the former socialist community of Ceresco, land reformers, abolitionists and others held a series of meetings calling for a new third party, the Republicans--which would advocate free soil, free

speech, and free labor.

The idea swept across the region and, in six years, the Democrats split along sectional lines, the remnants of the Whigs ran their own candidate, and the third party elected Abraham Lincoln president. This remarkable victory happened even though voting for him had not been an option in ten Southern states.

In 1860, the sovereign free-born "voting kings" of America expressed their concerns by using their ballots to pick preselected items from an electoral menu. They elected Abraham Lincoln president of the United States, bypassing the traditional two-party rivalry of Democrats and Whigs in favor of a new third party, the Republicans. The new party raised issues such as slavery previously undiscussed by the two-parties. The largest number of participating citizens expressed what they wanted and the ruling class subsequently decided to destroy the U.S. rather than cede power.

In response, those who had dominated national government for a generation refused to accept the outcome of the election and began to declare their states "seceded" from the United States. The Civil War and Reconstruction that followed ended human slavery and began to restructure much about American life. These represented the most extensive political changes since the American Revolution itself.

Yet, getting to choose between two parties had nothing to do with it. As far as that goes, voting in the ritual electoral sense achieved nothing in and of itself.

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What freedom the American people generally enjoyed they demonstrably attained through their own actions. They did not achieve these gains through the two-party system but demonstrably in spite it. Would anything in our subsequent experience with the two-party system require its reevaluation?

The historical structuring of the two-party system--particularly the Democratic Party--make it as much an artifact of slavery as the shackles and chains. While, as with other artifacts, they might be used for other things, they would rarely be as good at it as for the purposes for which it was formed.

And it would all depend on who actually controlled the key.

2. A Republic Without Representation

from the Reconstruction to the Crash of 1929

The Reconstruction of the two-party system became essential to the general Reconstruction after the Civil War, establishing some features that remain clear today. As such, the arrangement of the parties became an essential aspect of the betrayals of associated with the Reconstruction of the post-war South. Over the 67 years from the murder of Abraham Lincoln to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, most participating voters cast Republican ballots. In fact, over this long expanse, only two Democrats won the presidency, Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson, both victories the result of splits among the Republicans. Despite the dominance of a Republican Party, very little happened over these years to extend the idea of representative government beyond the limitations it had for generations.

While the Republicans prevailed throughout, Americans experienced two distinct phases in the evolution of the party system. Prior to the turn of the century, the reunited national government established a great deal more power over almost everything, and used it to foster industry and business almost relentlessly. Later, the social turmoil caused by this--crime and disease as well as popular discontent--required a different, more intense government regulation to keep capitalism sustainable. This regulatory authority gave the two-party system an opportunity to expand popular participation in electoral politics while slowly making the Democrats the only respectable alternative to the dominant Republicans.

Reconstructing the Party System

Reconstruction dashed hopes that a Federal Union might emerge from the war grounded in freedom and equality. This did not simply betray the promise of freedom and equality to the freed people coming out of slavery, who were constitutionally guaranteed rights never secured. The process began with the Native peoples, and it ended with the turning over of the poor whites to the leadership of the old secessionists. More accurately, the denial of citizenship to any part of the population fundamentally denies the entire people a representative government. The outcome severely constrained the extent to which the government would take on a general reconstruction of how it did things in the past.

An essential, if often neglected feature of this would be the Reconstruction of the Two-Party System. After an all-too-brief clash with its Radical caucus, the Republicans quickly took the course not just of reconciliation with the old Confederacy but its emulation. The antebellum cotton factors used all sorts of rhetoric and rationalizations to justify the use of government to promote their own interests, and the post-war "Robber Barons" did the same on behalf of their own railroad and industrial concerns.

The bipartisan abandonment of Reconstruction and the assumption that what was good for privately owned industry was good for the nation. In the aftermath of the Civil War, government concerns focused on the development of industry, particularly the railroads. By 1883, the national and state governments gave land equivalent to the size of Texas to the railroads.

The dominant ideology became what has been called "Social Darwinism." Both parties used the army to crush rebelliousness among native peoples and against strikes. Rise of news syndicates and services with rising costs beginning to restrict diversity of perspective.

Through the first decades of this period, the machine leadership of Marcus Hanna, in Ohio dominated the Midwestern and national Republican Party. After Lincoln's vice president, Andrew Johnson faded from the scene, the Grand Old Party elected Ulysses S. Grant, Hayes, James Garfield, and William McKinley--all Midwestern Civil War heroes. Chester A. Arthur, who became president after Garfield's assassination came from New York.

Democratic leaders appealed to the tried and true agrarian values, coupled to the concerns of small scale industry and those larger economic enterprises disadvantaged by government politics provided the base for the Democratic efforts to formulate an alternative. Insofar as the Democrats held some alternative ideology, it centered on an old-fashioned agrarianism, tinged at times with some pro-regulatory reformism. Interestingly, though, the only Democrat elected president in this period, Grover Cleveland had been a "gold bug" Democrat from western New York capable of appealing to the same constituencies as the Republicans.

Major party identification had far less to do with platforms or ideas than demographics. Rural and small town white Protestants supported the Republicans in the

North and the Democrats in the South. African Americans overwhelmingly voted Republicans where they could, immigrant and Catholic voters cast Democratic ballots, as did many under the influence of big city political machines. In short, each of the parties won elections not based on what they had delivered or promised to deliver to voters but out of fear of the alternative. Democrats continued to use explicit appeals to white supremacy. Republicans “waved the bloody shirt,” reminding voters of the legacy of the war, and denounced Democrats as the party of “Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion.”

Candidates themselves formulated the differences in often arcane rhetoric. The Republicans promised high protective tariffs that would encourage national industry, ensuring business prosperity that would trickle down to the workers as higher wages. The Democrats insisted that they, too, favored tariffs, though only to bring more revenue into the treasury. Either way, you were going to have a tariff.

What the parties did offer voters were their claims to favor honest, clean government. In the critical election of 1876, both parties essentially ignored the issues of Reconstruction to campaign as reformers, Rutherford B. Hayes running as an advocate of civil service reform against a Democratic opponent who had gained national prominence taking on the notorious Tweed Ring in New York City.

The attempt of each party to charge the other with corruption and fraud had merit on both sides. As the many critics of the political system of the day pointed out, it suited Republicans to permit a grotesque level of Democratic vote fraud in the South because they had abandoned any hope of carrying those states and the fraud--and its largely racial character--gave Republican orators something to discuss in the North. At the same time, Democrats used overt Republican vote in Northern factory towns where the bosses simply voted their workers didn't damage the Democrats appreciably and gave them a counterargument to the fraud in the South.

Pressures for Change

This striving for stability by the elite inspired insurgent concerns rooted in an abiding fear of unaccountable authority exercised in support of wealth and power. Massive numbers joined the local granges of the Patrons of Husbandry, which admitted women and had female officers. While it deferred to white

Southerners by excluding African-Americans, some local groups simply admitted them anyway and a number launched their own Industrial Brotherhood. This merged into the regionally important Sovereigns of Industry and the Knights of Labor. More radical organizations such as the International Workingmen's Association and kindred associations also became prominent if remaining quite small by comparison. Organizations of African-Americans and women also appeared, their concerns focused increasingly on their civic exclusion.

These efforts engaged hundreds of thousands of Americans who learned how to organize meetings, make collective decisions, organize mass demonstrations, conduct strikes, and confront employers and the government with their demands. Their efforts to form cooperatives that would gradually displace capitalism and the insistence of these workers to their rights to govern their own affairs in the workplace caused no end of trouble. Mass strikes occurred regularly after the insurrectionary 1877 railroad walkout.

Many of these active citizens repeatedly tried to follow the example of the Republican Party in constructing a new, responsive third party. They hoped that the Greenbackers, Populists or other party movement could grow strong enough to change the two-party system, if only by replacing one of the major parties with something that would better represent them. While many of these tended to be based on farmers and small town dissenters, local labor parties rose and fell with regularity in many large cities, most spectacularly when Henry George ran for mayor of New York. Although the Democrats won--they counted the ballots--the United Labor candidate outpolled the Republican, a police commissioner named Theodore Roosevelt. This same process gave rise to the first socialist party in the U.S., though it generally folded into the broader third party movement.

All of these movements remained weakened by the fact that Reconstruction had imploded, which excluded legions of working people and farmers from politics, but even more fundamental problems plagued them. All third party efforts entered a game, the rules of which virtually assured their marginalization. Part of nationalizing the two-party rivalry established the national faith that the system had evolved to represent the will of the voters. As we have seen, it never actually did, but all politicians and virtually all pundits implicitly and explicitly turn every election into a well-practiced

celebration of that faith.

In fact, of course, the academic, educational, and journalistic industries ritually convey the litanies of this faith as part of their daily functions. As with all faiths, those unwilling to step outside of it, even temporarily, will not be able to examine the mechanics of this process critically. However, those who do risk finding themselves heretics excluded from the self-defined “serious” “mainstream.”

The “journalistic” component of Big Business provided an allegedly independent adjudicator for defining what would be acceptable in aftermath of the Republican ascendancy. In his 1880 Greenback-Labor campaign, James B. Weaver got considerable coverage in the early weeks. However, when he tried to make an issue of the ballot and black exclusion in the South, Democratic sources broke an entirely fictional story that he was in the pay of the Republicans. The Democratic press across the country replicated the story, announcing that there was no need to cover more than one Republican contender. And the Republican papers saw no further need to discuss the third party campaign if the Democrats were not doing so.

While all of this assured that third parties would find success elusive, it accorded them an important role in permitting the further stability of two-party rule. At the most basic level, either of the parties could, under the right circumstances, find partisan uses for an ostensibly independent bid for power. After the implosion of Reconstruction, Republicans in the South found their condition hopeless, as did Democrats in New England. Factions of both episodically gave strong support to independent politics in hopes of breaking down the locally dominant parties, though the national leaderships remained ambivalent about such ventures.

More fundamentally, though, third parties provided the dominant parties a clear measure of how and why public sentiment might be threatening to outgrow the juvenile distractions of tariffs and “identity politics” in the original sense. The extensive third party efforts in the Reconstruction and its aftermath redirected one or both of the major parties to issues and concerns that required attention. Essential to this, the two-party system learned to translate insurgent concerns into a “public opinion” that could be safely addressed in the language of stability and order. Mere protest, then, permitted an ongoing renewal of the legitimacy of the existing power structure.

Much of this turned on the success of the two parties in using the threat allegedly posed by “the Other.” Both parties agreed on the subjugation of the native peoples in the unsettled western territories internal to the U.S. Beyond this, the more agrarian Democrats had some very traditional mile interest in Latin America, while the more commercially concerned Republicans tended to look towards Asia. The Spanish-American War at the close of the century addressed these bipartisan ambitions, waging wars to finally secure U.S. dominion over Cuba but also over the Philippines. Ruyard Kipling, the great British poet of imperialism versified his salute to the American willingness to “take up the white man’s burden.”

What Theodore Roosevelt called a “splendid little war” established all the key features of later conflicts in which the U.S. chose to engage. The American people had never gone to the polls and elected pro-war candidates to take power. Rather, the decisions to launch the conflict took place behind closed doors. Those who wanted war leaked disinformation (about the sinking of the *USS Maine*, in this case), shaping public perceptions in such a way as to where the people would permit the waging of the war, and then went to war claiming that public had insisted upon it.

On the home front, the Panic of 1893 had plunged the country into a depression. The armed resistance of native Americans came to an end and Frederick Jackson Turner, of the new historical profession, read his influential paper declaring an end to the frontier. The Midwest, which had supplied most of the presidents since the Lincoln, faded in importance before New York and the centers of financial capital in the northeast.

Progressive Reform

The Progressive reform that emerged around the turn of the century marked the greatest political shift since the Civil War, and represented the system’s response to citizen discontent and the threat of alternative parties. The 1912 presidential election illustrates how the politicians themselves acknowledged the deep desire of the American public: each and every candidate heading the parties ran as a “Progressive.”

Pro-gress--as the opposite of re-gress--meant moving forward rather than going backward, but this all depended on which way you faced. So the Niagra movement--what became the National Association for

the Advancement of Colored People--fell under the rubric of "Progressive," as did the "New South" segregationists imposing Jim Crow. One kind of "progress" not only never predominated, but would be largely repressed in this period.

That voters could choose between two parties had nothing to do with this great change. That is, one party did not take up the idea of greater government involvement in the economic and social life of the nation and triumph at the polls over a more conservative position taken by the other party. Rather, the idea gained currency in both parties, as reflected by the ascendancy of figures such as Teddy Roosevelt among the Republicans and William Jennings Bryan among the Democrats. TR's entry into the White House--and that of his successors, William H. Taft and Woodrow Wilson reshaped the role of government.

The older rules that informed how the economy and government functioned had permitted the chaotic phase of industrial expansion but that had run its course and became an obstacle to its future, fuller development. As business took up the idea of "scientific management," politicians took up "Progressive" politics.

Capitalist rule required change. Unsanitary conditions in the cities not only affected the working poor but interfered with production. Once germinated, diseases growing from the slums did not stay there. Access to cheap child labor discouraged investment in new technologies requiring more skill, experience, and strength. Nor did it fuel the kind of mass public education then permitting Germany to leap forward industrially and scientifically. Simply put, the idea of a legislated minimum wage, unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation and other reforms suited a restructuring of the American economy.

German reforms sought to undercut the threat of a mass socialist party and to bring workers into a partnership around the impression of "social imperialism." It faced a serious test in the crisis of 1914 with the outbreak of the world war, and only years of hunger, disease and death brought loyalties to a breaking point. Wilson's U.S. avoided being pulled into the industrial meat grinder, but encouraged investments in British victory, which meant that when the Russian Revolution of 1917 threatened such a victory, the U.S. had to enter the war directly.

This made Britain's "war to end all wars" into America's "war to make the world safe for democracy." As with the sinking of the *Maine* in 1898, these justifications proved less than honest. However, backed by a virtually monopoly over the media, they marked the extent to which this or any modern government could twist the truth to its own purposes and their people would accept it. Despite serious losses, the U.S. emerged from the war as the only industrial power essentially unscathed. Neither major party objected to the war nor to the treatment its waging accorded the people.

So, too, by the 1920s--under the Republican administrations of Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover--American capitalism entered the age where fortunes could be made through a consumer economy. Yet, the prosperity associated with the period always remained very restricted to certain sectors. The white middle class prospered and many skilled workers with them. Industrial workers and people of color did not fare so well. The difference turned largely on the question of creditworthiness, determining who could participate in a better life that had to be bought on an installment plan. New innovations in finance extended the kind of credit business got to private individuals. It permitted workers and citizens generally to behave as consumers. New construction of housing and automobiles fueled this new kind of prosperity.

Suffrage expanded again after the war. Women had fought for generations to get the vote, implying that mothers would never permit children to be raised in poverty or send their sons to idiotic wars. The authorities gave the privilege only after a range of local experiences and women's participation in the war effort had demonstrated that they would generally use the ballot in the same way as their fathers, brothers and husbands. Towards the close of the decade, government accorded the same privilege to the remnants of the virtually exterminated population of native peoples.

Essential to this were the new techniques of marketing, advertising and public relations, which became equally vital political tools for those who could afford access to them. These new skills allowed those "Progressives" who would actually define what mattered to redefine the concerns of the Equal Rights, Negro Republican, Greenback, Greenback--Labor, Union Labor, United Labor, Socialistic Labor, Populist, Socialist Labor, Socialist, or Progressive parties and to repackage them. The result ignored concerns about

racial segregation and inequality, women's rights, and, ultimately, the priority of capitalist interests in formulating and implementing government policies. It did, however, work after a fashion.

The World War radically intensified the government reliance on managing perceptions. Earlier versions of the system fueled mass fears against which it could offer relief and protection, with particular regional attention on African-Americans, native Americans, Latinos, Asians, and even Catholics. The advent of genuine imperialism focused these fears even more safely be focused on foreigners with whom Americans would be even more likely to remain strangers. During the war, the authorities successfully identified domestic radicalism with the designated national enemy, the Germans. They broke strikes, assassinated critics, and effectively suspended the Bill of Rights for any groups they designated to be a threat, most notably the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World. With the Russian Revolution and the war's end, the discontented of the world's peoples took many forms troubling to the ruling classes, including the unprecedented 1919 strike wave. Governments and reactionaries everywhere used the international character of this upsurge to identify radicals with the mythical "international communist conspiracy."

As we have seen, all of this changed the nature of American civic culture. Newspapers, news syndicates, and later radio made mass organizations unnecessary for the major parties. This permitted the news blackouts of third parties, whether Weaver in 1880 or 1892, or Robert La Follette in 1924, Henry Wallace in 1948, or Ralph Nader in 2000. extended the defining commercial concerns of American "journalism."

This reliance on media also provided a new, allegedly independent adjudicator that would decide what was an issue and who would be a serious candidate. The industry that gets to decide which candidates are serious enough to cover just happens to pick those who will provide them the most revenues.

However, the mass communication that allowed for this kind of politics required vastly more amounts of money.

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According to the American Presidency Project¹, the cost of the hard-fought 1860 election remained under \$200,000. By 1880—the first national election after Reconstruction—the Republicans alone spent \$1.1 million. By 1892, the two parties spent well over \$4 million, and this rose to well over \$12 million by the close of the 1920s. What had begun as a system for government of the elite, by the elite and for the elite had managed to become even more skewered against efforts of ordinary people who work for their living to use party politics for their own purposes.

As in the past, the only reason the beneficiaries at the top of this hierarchy would change it would be serious pressure from below. Yet, the regulator legacy of Progressivism also included a new Federal Bureau of Investigation, local red squads, private armies, and the Justice Department. These engaged in the active repression of the every genuinely oppositional formation, from the Socialist Party to the Universal Negro Improvement Association. As with Progressive reform generally, both parties embraced the practice of waging this kind of silent war to blunt unauthorized political input.

3. The Democracy of Consumers

from the Great Depression to the Cold War

Americans predisposed to "progressive" ideas regularly praise the merits of pragmatism and flexibility, while denouncing rigidity and dogmatism. They are almost always doing so to disparage the idea of waging isolated third party campaigns, but there's no real unitary kind of dogmatism that direction. In fact, most of these self-regarded "progressive" voters cast Democratic ballots in virtually any circumstances in the inflexible, dogmatic faith that voting Democratic is the way to foster a more just, rational, and peaceful world.

This faith came out of the period from the 1930s through the 1960s, though sustained through the next half century less through positive policies but comforting images. Integral to his has been the rise of a warfare state with its own logic. The implications of both have made a bipartisan political order unchanged by the end of either WWII or the Cold War.

¹ The project website is <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>. A chart summarizing financing is on <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/financing.php>.

The Making of a Faith: the New Deal

One of the regularly promulgated fairy tales about capitalism is that the sum total of the individual market decisions creates the best outcome. In the face of imploding demand, individual business naturally responds by slowing production and laying people off. However, in the complex economy into which capitalism had grown, the sum total of what would be rational individual decisions spelled economic collapse. Decreasing production by increasing unemployment only decreased demand further. Much of the business community understood this after the crash of 1929, but without common rules, they acted individually against their own collective self-interest. Both parties remained preoccupied with this problem.

The most immediate victims had more pressing concerns. Homeless Americans clustered in the unused margins of their cities in what they called “Hoovervilles” in honor of the president. Large numbers organized for direct action, as when desperate farmers organized holiday associations to protect their livelihoods. In the cities, the unemployed organized, regularly thwarting evictions for nonpayment of rent. Periodically, collective waves of humanity raged through the new corporate supermarkets, seizing what they and their families needed.

In reaction to President Hoover’s perceived indifference, voters turned to Franklin D. Roosevelt--Theodore’s Democratic cousin--and ultimately restructured the party system. Whatever its record on slavery, secession and segregation, the Democratic Party remade itself as a viable instrument of reform. By the 1932 election of FDR, those elements of the ruling class in the northeast concerned with finance and planning had taken charge of the nation’s affairs, and proved willing to accept a particularly more aggressive kind of “scientific management” by the government.

Recalling the government’s mobilization of the economy in the world war, FDR approached the Depression as a threat that justified a similar exercise of power, as part of an international trend. The end of the world war had created a financial crisis across the industrial world. In part, mass social discontent with the war had helped end it, but the broken economies, indebted governments, and armies of unemployed continued the strife. In response, ruling class solutions turned on the creation of new stronger states, aided by extralegal means of repression. Facing civil war that

continued the devastation and death of the world war, the new Soviet Union aped these solutions. In acutely desperate circumstances, such as Italy and Germany, right-wing gangs came to power, initially with the support of most of the world capitalist class. Having been marginal to the crisis, the U.S. adopted a less extreme version of reliance on the capitalist state to order the economy.

FDR certainly favored taking the same approach to the Depression as to the World War in that he abandoned the sanctions against deficit spending. However, he remained silent about what, beyond the repeal of prohibition, that new government role would entail. He came into power bringing with him a group of businessmen, lawyers, academics and others that came to be called his “Brain Trust,” which had no coherent approach to most questions. The “First New Deal” offered a series of pragmatic measures, including various make-work projects, attempting to cap it all with a National Recovery Administration. Bolstered by gains in the 1934 election, the Democrats launched a “Second New Deal” that included: the Works Progress Administration to make work for a wide variety of occupations; the Social Security Act; the Wagner Act, finally sanctioning the right of American workers to form unions; and, the Fair Labor Standards Act.

None of this fundamentally restructured the Democratic Party. For example, the party’s power still rested on the continued hegemony of the party in the South, sustained by the segregationist wing of the party. Partly because the South had yet to have recovered from the loss of its key position as the source of cotton for the western world, these otherwise conservative politicians proved willing to participate in these New Deal experiments, so long as they did not threaten their regional power base.

Often, too, these reforms rarely aimed simply to aid those who needed it. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, for example, did not really tinker with the nature of the market, but sought to reduce farm products in order to have them provide greater revenue to farmers. Because this involved paying people for not growing crops, those with vast amounts of land became much greater beneficiaries than the proverbial Pa and Ma Kettle. Over the decades, some of the biggest right-wing ideologues denouncing welfare cheats annually walked away with checks into the millions for not growing crops on their swamplands. This approach defined a kind of

liberalism that artificially inflated the cost of social relief though a kind of self-imposed bribe to the wealthy.

Nevertheless, the old elites often resisted these innovations. The Supreme Court regularly declared them unconstitutional and the former Democratic leaders and corporate executives spearhead a new "American Liberty League," joined by more conservative Republicans joined them and corporate leaders from across a spectrum.

The Depression radicalized, among others, U.S. Marine Corps General Smedley Butler, who had fallen from grace a few years before with his support of the veterans' Bonus March. Although he publicly complained of having had a career as "a racketeer for capitalism," his prominence and popularity inspired several figures from the American Legion to approach him on behalf of a group interested in his taking charge of an attempted coup. The Congressional committee later heard his testimony, but refused to call any of those Butler named, and, without such testimony, the press dismissed it all as a great hoax.

Ultimately, Republican leaders acknowledged in 1936 that voters wanted innovation by nominating Alf Landon, who--liker Hoover before him--had earlier bolted from the GOP to support FDR's cousin on the Progressive ticket. Aside from his hostility to unions, Landon might well be described a pro-New Deal Republican, but not enough to prevent him defeat in the largest landslide in U.S. history.

Many--including the large and prominent Communist Party--sought to read a consistent direction into FDR's approach. Certainly, a lot of people got back to work and launched an unprecedented drive for industrial unionism that established the new Congress of Industrial Organizations. However, the evidence suggests these were byproducts of often contradictory policies unfolding in fits and starts. For example, FDR's attempt to cut government spending created the "Roosevelt recession" of 1937-38, to which voters responded by replacing many Democrats in Congress with Progressives or Farmer-Laborites as well as Republicans.

The Warfare State

The reforms of the New Deal never actually ended the Depression. After a series of crises through the decade, world war erupted again in September 1939.

The U.S., stayed out of the conflict but after the German conquest of France in June 1940, formulated a cash-and-carry program to create a wartime economy to fuel the British war effort. In March 1941, it adopted the Lend-Lease policy that extended Britain and its Allies the material of war on credit.

With a head start meeting British demands for the materials of war, the U.S. found itself the target of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Thereafter, the FDR asked and got a formal declaration of war, the last genuinely constitutional entry of the US into a war and it has not stopped fighting since. For 73 years now, a permanent wartime economy--and the need to maintain it--has framed everything about politics in the U.S.

As with every other major change in American politics, the two-party system did not permit voters their input into this decision. Rather, it echoed what happened with Progressive reform, the end to Reconstruction, the importance of cotton slavery and every other fundamental consideration in our political history. The two parties did not take opposite positions on the permanent wartime economy and offer voters a choice between them. Nothing gave the voters a choice.

Certainly, the rise of Italian fascism and German Nazism presented a kind of capitalism gone mad, resurrecting ancient brutalities in pursuit of some racial purism. The great US rival in the Pacific, Japan allied with them and waged total war and all that entailed. The Axis powers waged war by bombing, relocating, and destroying entire populations. The war with which the US and its Allies responded was no less total. In fact, the US became the first and only nation to use atom bombs on an enemy, both civilian targets. The US even incarcerated sections of its own population on purely ethnic grounds without a hint of illegal activities on their part or of constitutional due process on that of the government. Neither side mitigated their ruthlessness when dealing with weaker foes.

But world war changed absolutely everything about our society. The new American economy--like that of the Russians and others--had used wartime production to escape the Depression, and would not risk slipping back into it. As after World War I, the US emerged virtually unscathed as the dominant power on the planet. When FDR died and Harry Truman took charge of the nation's affairs, he extended the wartime

economy with the Truman Doctrine aimed at our former Soviet allies.

This did not change with the national victories of Eisenhower the Republican or when the Democrat Kennedy took the presidency. The parties of each subsequent president, whether the Democrats under Johnson, Carter or Clinton or Republicans under Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Bush shared these assumptions. Indeed, the two parties not only agreed on the assumptions of the Cold War, but on silencing of any questions about those assumptions.

In 1947, the National Security Act not only codified the economic and political priorities of participating in a world war, but fundamentally superseded the older commitment to constitutional procedures. It established a new Central Intelligence Agency, alleged to have been the mere extension of the wartime Office of Strategic Services, though the OSS grew out of the need to overthrow the Nazis, fascists, or Japanese militarists, goals that had become obviously irrelevant after 1945. The CIA, in contrast, needed professional spies, saboteurs and analysts focused on the Soviet Union and the rising threat of nationalist revolutions in the Third World. Nazi defectors such as Reinhardt Gehlen and his Eastern European bureau formed the core of the personnel and ideology of the state. What would constrain the militarist predispositions of the ex-generals and admirals headed the CIA would be a civilian National Security, a meaningless fig-leaf entirely abandoned in the 1980s when the Reagan administration simply began appointing the same kind of military figures to run the NSA as the CIA.

After 1947, the U.S. would never again declare a war as required by the Constitution, and never again would it be at peace.

The national security state offered various mission statements to define its purposes. Perhaps the most blood-chilling, that of the Doolittle Committee declared in 1954, that the U.S. faced “an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. If the United States is to survive, longstanding American concepts of ‘fair play’ must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those

used against us.”²

The permanent wartime state represented the most important innovation in American political history. Like emancipation or Progressive reform, the two-party system had nothing to do with it. The Democrats who had led the nation into two world wars led it into a third, “cold war,” to the cheers of the Republicans.

Over time, the ascendancy of the so-called “defense” sector—along with the rise of the petrochemical industry transformed the “Sun Belt.” In the 1960s, with the killing of John F. Kennedy, a long succession of presidents from the region assumed power. Although a resignation allowed the brief unelected presidency of Ford (MI), the list included: Johnson (TX), Nixon (CA), Carter (GA), Reagan (CA), Bush (TX), Clinton (AR), and Bush II (TX).

the Internal Cold War

Although McCarthyism came to be applied to the intolerance of the age—after the Republican US Senator Joe McCarthy who began to realize the importance of media in shaping public perceptions—Democratic President Truman actually promulgated the loyalty oaths, the purging from government and public life of Communists, suspected Communists, or people who had ever attended a meeting with Communists or read a Communist newspaper.

Part of this represented the sheer exhaustion and relief of a generation that had been through turmoil of the Great Depression and WWII, and emerged into the wealthiest consumer society the world had ever known. The automobile drove the new housing boom directly to the suburbs. The Baby Boom fueled this expanding consumer economy, and the top-down, one-way communication of television guided it. Citizen-consumers learned what was important and relevant through a corporate “news” media that never abandoned its uncritical wartime stance towards the government, its wars, and its official political decision-making system.

A deep, pervasive conformity characterized the post-war years, save for those who could afford an alternative lifestyle—or those whose conformity the society would not accept. African Americans did share

² Doolittle Committee. Panel of Consultants on Covert Activities by the Central Intelligence Agency [1954] in Leary, ed., *The Central Intelligence Agency: History and Documents*, p. 144.

in some of the postwar prosperity, but the color bar still kept them from using what wealth they had to educate their children, buy a new home and a car. Their organization for civil rights provided an unusually bright spot in a dim period, but the most intransigent advocate of segregation remained in the Democratic Party, members of which had resisted any Federal intervention to secure black equality before the law. When the issue reached the Congress in a wave of legislation from 1964 through 1968, politicians did not divide along simple party lines.

The explosive eruption of new social movements raised other questions. The brutal escalation of the U.S. war in Indochina—premised on phony stories about North Vietnamese attacks on American ships—intensified conscription and led to massive protests, particularly on the college campuses. A movement for women's liberation raised issues of equality that struck a responsive chord among gays and lesbians. Latinos—both Chicanos in the southwest and Puerto Rican in the major cities of the northeast—followed the course of African American protests, later followed by Native Americans and Asians. These did not represent traditional class movements, but offered clear challenges to capitalism, while the traditional trade union organizations continued to press the claims of the Democratic Party.

Nevertheless, none of these movements had any particularly close friendship with one party more than another. When the women's movement focused on the idea of an Equal Rights Amendment, they had Republican allies and Democratic opponents, both directly and surreptitiously. Those involved in these movements, too, tended to mirror the changing views of the voters, who tended to describe themselves increasingly as "Independent," although those actually voting increasingly tended to be conservative.

So, too, black frustration over the delays and dishonesty boiled over, particularly when Johnson turned towards funding his war in Vietnam. Bipartisan cooperation deepened in 1970 when a Democratic Senator suggested to a Republican president that they treat any further action on race with "benign neglect." Bad as this was, the 1972 reelection of Nixon represented a crushing defeat that pushed the Democratic Party on the ever rightward trajectory it has embraced hereafter.

A political party facing such a defeat could go

out, engage, register, and bring into the system the hitherto disenfranchised around an agenda that would serve them. However, success through such an approach would tend to leave the victorious party answerable to those constituencies. It might also opt for simply competing with its rival through its techniques of television ads and images. The Democrats took the later course, barring caucuses of blacks, Latinos, women, labor, gays and others from their conventions because they presented the wrong image to those who were voting Republican. They did not bar the organization of well-heeled Sun Belt Democrats who took the future of the party into its hands, and began moving it inexorably away from its "liberal" image.

It later became clear how Nixon had engineered that 1972 victory. Out of the White House, his campaign had organized "plumbers" to fix the leaks in the government, and these quickly turned to acts of sabotage against an "enemies list" of private citizens and the Democratic party. This culminated in a break-in at the Watergate hotel, a coverup and its unraveling. Nixon received the same courtesy as his first vice president when he was caught in criminal activity. Once he resigned, both parties and the media declared that "the system worked." Congress closed its investigations without ever asking many of the toughest questions. A few underlings did short sentences in white collar prisons, and the president himself left office until media eventually brought him back episodically as an "elder statesman."

This bipartisan agreement not to prosecute criminal activity had far reaching consequences a few years later. At close of the decade, revolutions in Nicaragua and Iran destabilized the Carter administration, and Reagan--surrounded by former CIA, military officials, and contractors worked around the administration to use the crisis to prevent "an October surprise" that might successfully resolve the problem in favor of the U.S. As he came into office, he also established his own distinct relationship with both Iran and the opponents of the new Sandinista government in Nicaragua. In the end, it transpired that his administration had been seizing government weapons for sale to the Iranians, and using the proceeds to finance the CIA's army against a government that the U.S. officially recognized. The unraveling of this "Iran-Contra affair" went far beyond Watergate in that the criminal activities went beyond individuals around the president to include elements of the government itself.

The consequences proved even less important. The Democrats did not even mount an investigation as serious as it had over Watergate, and permitted witnesses to lie without later calling them back. Republicans continued to trumpet their idolatry of the mythical free market and “Cowboy Capitalism,” all sanctified by a resurgent Christian Fundamentalism. Democrats increasingly tended to win election based on their alliances with new technologies, and promises of a more expert management of the same policies.

Republicans generally served the petrochemical and defense industries of the Sun Belt. Yet, for six of Reagan’s eight years, the Democrats controlled Congress. They agreed on matters such as the deregulation of the Media, and permitting corporations to maximize profits and minimize taxes through the export of America’s industrial base. Later, Democrats continued the policies that permitted and encouraged the loss of American jobs.

The benign neglect that had worked for civil rights came to be extended to environmental concerns, health care, the minimum wage, and virtually any question that did not have an army of lobbyists fighting on their behalf. In addition to other oppositional ideologies, waves of libertarian sentiment appealed to an almost religious faith in the mythical “free market. Despite being ignored or attacked, environmentalism continued to emerge as a critical mass concern, though not as any kind of a movement.

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According to the American Presidency Project³, the two major parties spent a total of less than \$13 million to elect a president in 1956. In the next campaign, Kennedy’s victory over Nixon demonstrated the decisive nature of television, making politics become more and more about buying media time. Twenty years later, when Reagan entered the White House after a long apprenticeship as a minor Hollywood star-turned-corporate spokesman the two parties spent \$58.8 million.

However dramatic this increase of financing in presidential elections, the flow of money into every other level of electoral politics, including for relatively minor offices. Elections within specific districts turned

³ The project website is <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>. A chart summarizing financing is on <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/financing.php>.

increasingly on outside funding. By this decade, some of the hundred races for the U.S. Senate were spending more than had national elections earlier.

4. Where We Are Now

from the End of the Cold War to the Present

The power structure and its institutional translators in the West hailed the implosion of the USSR and its allies as the ultimate vindication of capitalism, as though the failure of one thing hardly proves anything about another. Some even resurrected assertions about the end of ideology and the end of history. As after 1945, the loss of its primary enemy forced an economy and society geared for war to find new enemies. The 1980s launched an international “war on drugs,” and twenty years later, the U.S. declared its “war on terror.” Since both are endemic to the modern world--and, to some extent, are byproducts of American policy--these amount to waging an undeclared but terribly lucrative and useful war without end.

The emergence of the American power structure as the dominant global power structure changed everything about the nature of politics in the country. Cold War liberals often rationalized the insane levels of military spending and the “abuses” of what they called McCarthyism as temporary obstacles to the reform of American civilization, but the end of the Cold War gave lie to all that. The fact that the U.S. failed to turn its resources to ending poverty or medical research or any genuine improvement of the quality of life, and the liberal complicity in asserting greater, more demanding military priorities has done remarkably little to damage Cold War liberal arguments. These simply repeat the discredited excuses for not pressing for change due to alleged necessity of putting everything into fighting drugs or terrorism. All of this leaves various alternatives to those who remember the past and seek to use it wisely to shape a more liveable future.

the Number One Super-duper Megapower

The end of the Cold War demonstrated the permanent character of the warfare-national security state in the U.S. It might have led to a national discussion over national priorities. As after WWII, though, the easiest option involved finding another international enemy.

This proved difficult for the last remaining superpower, but the U.S., drifted almost imperceptibly into Reagan's "war on drugs," followed by a "war on terrorism." Since both seem largely endemic to the modern world—and, some would say, the hegemony of U.S. interests in that world—the military contractors, warmongering pundits, and short-attention span politics would continue the priorities of the Cold War into new channels. This permitted even more lucrative opportunities what we used to honestly call the merchants of death moved into new technologies. From Reasan's Star Wars through the armed drones beloved of the Obama administration.

The nature of the war required pinning drugs and/or terrorism on the map. The senior Bush and Clinton moved quietly into the Balkans and Eastern Europe, much to the later regret of those eager at the time for a NATO presence to place a stake through the heart of the old Stalinist order. However, the rapid use of fossil fuels centered the attention of the world on the Mideast, and the most powerful military force on the planet—the U.S. really had no close rivals in that—insisted upon a major role in the management of it.

The U.S. had long relied on two client states sitting like bookends on either end of the oilfields. The loss of Iran in 1979 left the U.S. entirely dependent on Israel, where its old alliance with and subsidy of that country's most militarist tendencies backfired quickly. Realizing the U.S. had all of its eggs in the Israeli basket, that government simply set aside the peace agreements negotiated by Carter. To keep its old balance, the U.S, desperately needed a second major ally in the region, one in the Muslim world.

There existed no shortage of candidates. The U.S. had already become involved with the Saudi-backed terrorists working to subvert the secularist government of Afghanistan that had been allied to the USSR. After contributing to the ascendancy of the Taliban and the prominence of what became Al Qaeda, the U.S. also established ties to the government of Iraq. The Reagan cabal had financed and equipped both Iraq and the new government of Iran during the prolonged and bloody war between them. Operating on the idea that it could make contradictory agreements in secret, the U.S. made enemies on all sides.

A U.S. military presence followed. To the cheers of the contractors and generals—armchair and otherwise—the U.S. seemed to have finally shed “the

Vietnam syndrome.” After giving mixed signals to Iraq about the adjustment of its borders with Kuwait, the U.S. launched Bush Senior's Saudi-funded First Gulf War. Cocooned by largely fictional atrocity stories and cheered by a delighted media, there was even talk of Bush winning reelection without Democratic opposition in 1992. In the end, the cost brought down Bush and established the U.S, as brutalizing cynical force in the region, the target for the kind of terrorist groups that it had itself funded and encouraged.

Indeed, the enemies U.S. faced after the end of the Cold War—as after WWII—had been largely its old beneficiaries. Both parties had jointly managed—with nary a peep of difference—the government that had supported Noriega to Bin Laden to Saddam Hussein, but also agreed simultaneously to revise their assessment of them as enemies.

the No. One Dogma of “Progressive” Voters

As evidence for its validity or usefulness faded, “progressive” institutions, organizations, and ideologues have clung tenaciously to their one great dogma. Rooted in the faith that the two-party system remains an eternal, ultimately unchallengeable reality, it believes it more damaging to progressive interest to challenge it than to accept the need to stay within it. However, this dogma represented no more than a continuum of unexamined impressions of a new one-way perception of realities.

The realities of electoral politics had changed radically in the twenty years since Reagan's deregulation of the media. The same corporate media transformed itself into what observers called a public affairs entertainment programing. Not only did cable television became endemic, but the growth of the internet has also helped provide a new citizen-consumers with the power to choose the most comforting bits and pieces to put together their own sense of reality.

This made politics increasingly a conflict of hallucinations. In lieu of a debate over issues or even substantive values--matters of war and peace or global warming--“news” highlights what maximizes viewership (and advertising revenues). With Reagan as the figurehead for this, the presidency little more than a communicator, the mouthpiece for the real power remained in the large, unelected layers of what Eisenhower had quaintly called the Military-Industrial Complex, sustained by armies of lobbyists. As such, with politics increasingly reduced to the presidency, the

presidency became increasingly an issue of celebrity.

However, skepticism and resistance persisted, even at the ballot box. In the presidential election of 2000, Ralph Nader headed the largest independent progressive third party effort since 1948. Owing to the general media blackout on his campaign, the millions of Americans who voted for him actually represented a considerably larger portion of those voters who were aware of the option.

The presidential election of 2000 cost the American people more than double what they had spent twenty years earlier. In return for over \$135.1 million they cast their votes and got a president who got less of them than his opponent. Nothing more clearly confesses the absence of any Democratic agenda distinct from warmed over Reaganism than its failure to contest effectively the outcome.

Consistent with that one self-gratifying dogma, liberals insisted that the Democrats, who had chosen not to mount an effective challenge to being counted out in Florida, blamed Republican success on Nader. Later, when Democrats cravenly followed Bush in foisting horrific policies on the nation, they continued to insist that the responsibility for those policies belonged on Nader and those who had not voted the Democrats who helped promulgate those horrors. The assertion that those who do challenge the two party system are objectively aiding the more reactionary forces in society has become as vital part of the disparagement of independent action of any sort, including the street demonstrations and strikes that the dogma has made increasingly scarce.

In fact, the Democrats responded to Bush's victory by functioning as loyal promoters of the Republican agenda on every single major initiative of his administration. Most despicably, the Democrats embraced measures more draconian than those of the Cold War in response to Bush's war on terror, sparked by the attacks of September 11, 2001, the forewarnings of which the White House failed to take seriously.

Perhaps the most depressing and disgusting thing I have ever witnessed was the liberal and labor willingness to join with the rest of the Democratic Party in embracing Bush's Hitlerite doctrine of preemptive war. Subsequently, they have rationalized the idea that the government can lawfully kidnap, torture and/or kill any human being on the planet, including U.S. citizens

without the least accountability. That constitutional authorities and lawyers could make such arguments with a straight faced--that liberals and progressives would defend such things--is a condemnation of the system in and of themselves.

To some extent, though, the chickens came home to roost. Capitalism marked lack of reflectiveness characteristic of the Cold War seemed virtually celebrated the fall of the U.S.S.R. in a celebrity orgy of unrestrained and unaccountable greed that closed the twentieth and opened the twenty-first century with an unprecedented polarization of wealth. From the Savings & Loans crisis on, government repeatedly bailed out large corporations in trouble,. After the first few years of this, Clinton and the Democrats insisted that the nation had to pay for the prosperity it had enjoyed in the 1980s, but that this should be shared by those who enjoyed none of that prosperity.

Then, in 2008, the economy collapsed. The administration of Bush Junior proposed an unprecedented no-strings attached \$700 billion bailout of the endangered banks and corporations, and the Democrats hurried to go on record in favor of it. There were no bailouts for the people, no challenge to the doctrinal hostility to progressive taxes.

In desperation, the public turned to the relatively unknown Democratic contender, Barack Obama, a black legislator from Illinois turned U.S. Senator. Those who remembered FDR or LBJ saw Obama as somehow the embodiment of those traditions. Those who did not saw the fresh photogenic face of an African-American offering platitudes about hope and change. It was broadly believed that Obama would end the wars, undo the camps, the torture, the surveillance state, and restore some of the worst cuts over the previous twenty years.

In fact, though, Obama broke all records in terms of fund-raising and got more corporate money than anyone who ever ran for president. His campaign declined public funds, which left it greater options in terms of private financing,. The APP reports that, in 2008, it spent nearly \$746 million, with the Republicans still at \$84.1 million, totaling a vast increase over what both parties spent in 2000. Worse, according to Center for Responsive Politics and the Open Secrets website, the 2012 presidential election cost \$2.6 BILLION!!!

With an overall campaign funding of \$6.3 billion.⁴

Once in power, the new Democratic administration further demonstrated its loyalties with an \$831 billion stimulus package. As with the Republican-lead bipartisan bailout, the Democratic-led bipartisan stimulus had no comparable help for those facing foreclosures, unemployment, rising tuition costs, and the other exigencies of the depressed economy.

The victory of the Democrats actually deepened the trends they had been elected to modify or thwart. That is, the government continued to pull funding for hospitals, schools and public services and then used the lack of funding to privatize these functions as much as possible. Real wages and salaries collapsed. Unions that had pinned everything on having Democratic allies in government, found themselves under persistent attack, losing members and powers at an unprecedented level.

More than this, Obama's Justice Department, which repeatedly refused to investigate, much less indict criminal activities by the Republicans who had preceded them, has been even more vigorous in prosecuting whistle-blowers exposing wrongdoing in government and business. It has continued the torture, the renditions, and assassinations, as well as expanding the waging of undeclared war to new countries. And it has deepened the mechanism for repression.

Meanwhile, even as the various Patriot Acts stripped American citizens of long stated human rights, including freedom of speech and expression, the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision ruled that dollars spent in electoral politics enjoyed the protection of free speech. Its 2014 Hobby Lobby case even mandated government respect for the moral sensibilities of soulless corporations declining to accord workers what they've earned for the allegedly religious convictions of the business.

What Can be Done?

The two-party system boils the idea of self-government into a perennial deference to the government. It accords the people no real power in governing, other than periodic consumer satisfaction cards with no space for registering dissatisfaction. It is axiomatic that people with a vital stake in the *status quo*

won't change it. Voting has never accomplished anything the power structure didn't want accomplished. After all, the party system evolved not to allow the people to make decisions but merely to ensure that only responsible parties and respectable politicians would decide how to cut wages for teachers or hike tuition for students or best shave into granny's extravagant Social Security check.

What, then, can be done?

The people DO have the power to change things. People--not the dominant two parties--used their numbers to secure abolition, to shatter the idolatry of the non-existent free market, or to establish the most basic equal rights. When large numbers of people reject their designated role as consumers of whatever the parties offer them and engage each other as citizens acting for their own concerns and interests, they force change. This challenges not only the power structure but institutions, organizations and leaderships that exist to mediate between the power structure and the discontented. It is no accident that the historically more recent efforts for gay and transgendered rights have made great strides in all areas, precisely because they lack such traditionally mediating forces.

Related to the institutional structures are cultural ideas of "respectable" behavior that make even identifying the problems taboo. Unreflective people regularly assert that you have no right to any political views if you don't vote, which--given the general restrictiveness of elections--basically dismisses anything beyond the parties to whom most voting and news coverage is restricted. Not discussing politics with our peers leaves one at the mercy of what we're told by media and government and the priorities attached to them. These cultural limitations leave women, people of color, or working people generally even more restricted to behaving as consumers picking the best item on the shelf.

As in other forms of advertising and public relations, media provides us with symbols that belie the absence of substance. Republican candidates attend the Grand Ol' Opry even as they actively foster policies to permit companies to export jobs. The Democrats preside over unprecedented levels of poverty imposed on African American communities but offer a black president. Both parties have offered saleswomen suitable to specific demographics, all offering policies that will result ultimately in substantive harm to the lot of most

⁴ <http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2013/03/the-2012-election-our-price-tag-fin/>

women.

All of this fits a political universe where the destroyers of the American economy wear flag lapel pins and those lobbying against the needs of poor do so in the name of religion. So, too, for half a century, the one thing that politicians, pundits, and professors of all sorts have emphasized is that “demonstrations don’t work.” To point out the obvious, they do this precisely because they do work. In fact, taking the long view of our political history, independent mass action of one sort or another has been the only thing that has ever worked.

Yet, that “progressive” dogma persists that it makes sense to vote for “lesser evils.” In fact, if you are willing to vote for someone simply because they are not quite as bad as the alternative, you are not simply throwing your vote away, but using your ballot to sanction the shift of organized politics farther and farther to the right. This has allowed the Democrats to become--to use Clinton’s own term--“Eisenhower Republicans,” while the Republicans have made it a matter of pride to cater the most reactionary prejudices of what is now their base. This suited both parties, Republican rhetoric against women’s rights pandered to their base and allowed the Democrats to use the “Republican war on women” to win votes without having to offer even the old hollow promise of doing something in terms of policy.

Old habits die hard. the Democratic Socialists of America, because “the U.S. electoral system makes third parties difficult to build” expects “progressive, independent political action will continue to occur in Democratic Party” “Progressive Democrats of America” declares another advocate of socialism, “was founded in 2004 to transform the Democratic Party and our country.”⁵ By abstracting their values from what they do politically, they can help to elect Wall Street flunkies as a means of fostering socialism because of the idea that they, as voters, have between their ears. In a social and political sense, a vote for a candidate who solicits votes based on his advocacy of draconian national security measures will likely promote those measures regardless of what those who vote for him/her might be telling themselves but have no means to socially and politically express.

⁵ Section 5 of the 1990-95 update of the 1982 document. Democratic Socialists of America http://www.dsaua.org/where_we_stand#strat; First line of the self-description. <http://www.pdamerica.org/>

Politicians and pundits playing on fear and hysteria--and on the desire to fit in--magnifies their influence through those who echo their talking points. An almost hysterical sense of urgency certainly helps push people to vote against their own interests. Decade after decade, we have heard “progressives” arguing that--just this one time--we need to buy time for the people to put together a movement or build a better alternative than supporting the lesser-evil. But when have they then built such a movement? Under pressure of these arguments organized labor, women’s organizations, and even the designated spokespeople for the black, native American or Latino communities have also veered away from strikes, mass demonstrations, and any sorts of independent action.

The very existence of people who do not embrace these rationalizations represent a standing challenge to the lesser-evil rationalization, and requires the faithful to demonstrate their rectitude by focusing the ire on the unbelievers. This makes it all the more important to make the radical presence evident and unavoidable. People who can’t give voice to their radicalism surrender their social and political visibility. Those who are intimidated enough to add their voices to the hysteria are what they socially and political choose to be.

We need to start where we can, among those many people level-headed enough not to fall for this flim-flam but disorganized as to their response. We need a long-term electoral strategy for positive change on matters of the systemic assault on the natural world, mass immiseration of the human race, peace, justice, and equality. It should center on weakening the “progressive” habit of tailending the AFL-CIO into support for the corporate Democratic Party and its concomitant tendency to hallucinate the ghost of comic-book superhero version of FDR.

Some have called for boycotting elections, and not voting is surely preferable to voting for what you don’t want. However without making a public issue about why you are boycotting the election—say a mass march on the Board of Elections--this solution has politically no impact, and is detrimental in that it diverts us from that central strategic concern.

Voting for an independent alternative would be better, but sometimes not much. The most primitive aims at no more than a “protest vote,” using the ballot for the “moral suasion” of those with power.

Establishing an ongoing third party that does nothing for voters but permit their more regular “witnessing” is scarcely of more value.

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There are often any number of options that neither represent a section of the capitalist class at the polls nor take positions that bar us from supporting them in principle. The Green, Socialist, and Peace and Freedom Parties fall into this category, as do a number of others.

There exists no reason why various socialist

currents and the legions of independents interested in the issue could not combine into a general insurgent action committee. It could make endorsements, raise funds, and even organize volunteer help. It could also actively discourage campaigns that divide the insurgent forces and weaken their impact, and encourage every effort to unite broadly all the available insurgent forces behind that common strategic goal.

This is not only strategically do-able, but a few successes along these lines could open the door to even wider options.