

Generating Political Hope in a Time of Fear



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We are in a colossal conflict between hope and fear. Hope is our friend. Fear is our enemy. In his book *Indispensable Enemies: The Politics of Misrule in America*, political essayist Walter Karp wrote:

There is, in this republic, one great wellspring animating citizens to act in their own behalf. Their own understanding that, by means of politics and government, what is wrong can be righted and what is ill can be cured. In a word: Hope.

The opposite condition, the condition safest for party power is public apathy, gratitude for small favors, and a deep general sense of the futility of politics. Yet there is nothing natural about political apathy, futility, and mean gratitude. What lies behind them is not “human nature” but the citizens’ belief that politics and government can do little to better the conditions of life; the belief that they are ruled not by the men whom they’ve entrusted with their power, but by circumstances and historical “forces”—by anything and everything that is out of human control; the belief that public abuses and inequities are somehow inevitable and must be endured because they cannot be cured.

The condition of public apathy and futility, however, is swiftly undone by reform and even by the convincing promise of reform. Every beneficial law reminds the citizenry anew that the government, which is their government, can help them remove evils and better the conditions of life. Every law which remedies an abuse reminds the citizenry that other abuses can be remedied, as well. Every beneficial law rips the cover of inevitability from public inequities and rouses the people from apathy. Reform in America does not bring passive contentment to the citizenry—it inspires active hope.

THE GOOD NEWS: CLEAN-MONEY ELECTIONS

With these words in mind, let me start with some good news from the states of Arizona and Maine. Public Campaign, where I work, collaborates with these states very closely. Arizona and Maine are two of the first six states in the country to enact full public financing of elections, what we call “Clean Money/Clean Elections” campaign reform. “Clean Money” inspires hope. Candidates for state office in the reform states do not have to run for office the way everybody does everywhere else. In order to qualify, they have to raise a fairly large number of small contributions. Once they hit the number they need, based on the size of their district, they qualify for full public funding. They have to agree to raise no private money and to abide by spending limits. In addition, if they are opposed by a candidate who is being funded the traditional way or, if they are being targeted by outside groups spending independently, they can get some additional matching funds so that they have a level playing field upon which to operate.

This is now the second cycle where these laws have been in effect, though this was really the first full test. The result from Arizona and Maine is that fully half of the elected officials from both states ran clean. Three-quarters of the Maine state Senate in 2003–2004 are made up of people who ran clean, as are more than half the House. Nearly half the Arizona House; about one-sixth of the Arizona Senate; the Arizona governor, secretary of state, attorney general, and nearly all the statewide offices in Arizona are held by people who ran free of dependence on private money. Not only that, but the opportunity to run a viable campaign without dependence on big donors has dramatically opened the process to a more diverse array of candidates. More women are running. More Hispanics and Native Americans are running. It is hard to quantify, but we think more working-class people are choosing to run for office. There is more competition. There are more contested races. There are more third-party candidates and independent candidates. These are not just Democrats; there is a fairly high level of participation from Republicans, too. There even is a Green elected in Maine to the state legislature.

These people tell us that they feel less beholden to moneyed interests in office. They are more independent, in general. They are independent, as well, of their own party leadership. They just don't feel like they owe somebody. There is no lobbyist who can put her arm around them and say, “Hey, I hear you have a big campaign debt, let me help retire it for you,” and before you know it another good person has been trapped by our corrupted system.

This is like living in America when Wyoming and Idaho had just given women the right to vote. It was a radical idea then. But here we now have some states that are already making it possible for candidates to run free of any dependence on private contributions and the results are very encouraging. We need to defend these victories. We need to expand them.

How are we going to proceed? Winning “Clean Money” in more states is very important to eventually winning it nationally. North Carolina has enacted full public financing of judicial elections, operating on the same idea that we shouldn’t have our judges corrupted by the need to raise money. New Mexico has adopted full public financing for its Public Regulation Commission, a statewide body that oversees corporations and utilities, whose officeholders are heavily lobbied by moneyed interests. We have about a half-dozen other states that we think are close to enacting some version of Clean Money–style reform, though with political scandals involving pay-to-play corruption cropping up continually, there are always new opportunities that we can’t predict. Just think of how Enron and WorldCom suddenly lit a fire under Senator Paul Sarbanes’s corporate-reform bill in the summer of 2002. This is one more reason why we have to keep the home fires for reform burning, to be able to take advantage of the next big scandal, which we all know is inevitable.

One of Public Campaign’s key initiatives is to make a big issue of how money corrupts the presidential selection process. In the 2004 presidential election, neither candidate was a participant in the public financing system. That way, they were not hindered by the spending limits that come with taking public financing.

We think that in the future the public can be rallied in a significant way to oppose the buying of the presidency. We see this as a major organizing vehicle. We already have partial public financing for our presidential elections. We feel that this is something that we all have to defend and fix. The system is obviously not working well. It needs to be strengthened. We have models from states like Arizona and Maine to use in strengthening it. We have a big fight here, but we think we actually have a chance of moving this issue forward.

WINNING THE 2002 ELECTIONS ON FEAR

Now let me turn to September 11 with a quote on the state of American society in the wake of World War I. Randolph Bourne, in his famous unfinished essay “The State,” written in 1918, said:

War is essentially the health of the State. The State is the organization of the herd to act offensively or defensively against another herd, similarly organized. Animals crowd together for protection and men become most conscious of their collectivity at the threat of a war.

The more terrifying the occasion for defense, the closer will become the organization and the more coercive the influence upon each member of the herd. There is, of course, in the feeling toward the State, a large element of pure filial mysticism. The sense of insecurity, the desire for protection, sends one’s desire back to the father and mother, with whom is associated the earliest feelings of protection. It is

not for nothing that one's State is still thought of as Father or Motherland—that one's relation toward it is conceived in terms of family affection.

The war has shown that nowhere under the shock of danger have these primitive childlike attitudes failed to assert themselves again, as much as in this country, as in anywhere. If we have not the intense Father-sense of the German who worships his Vaterland, at least in Uncle Sam, we have a symbol of protecting, kindly authority and in the many Mother-posters of the Red Cross; we see how easily, in the more tender functions of war service, the ruling organization is conceived in family terms. A people at war have become, in the most literal sense, obedient, respectful, trustful children again—full of that naive faith in the old wisdom and all-power of the adult who takes care of them—imposes his mild, but necessary rule upon them and in whom they lose their responsibility and anxieties.

I went through September 11 as a resident of the Bronx. The father of one of my son's best friends in elementary school, a firefighter, was killed in the North Tower. The mother of another friend of his from summer camp was also killed at her job, high in the South Tower. Another good friend of mine narrowly escaped with his life. How have I been affected? I continue with my life as before, but now I own a small but sufficient supply of potassium iodide, which is supposed to protect the thyroid gland—in the event that the Indian Point Nuclear Plant, which is twenty miles up river from where I live and which the planes of September 11 flew over on their way down to the World Trade Center, has a catastrophic failure.

Every time I look at the New York City skyline, whether from close or afar, I wonder, semiconsciously, if a huge bomb is about to go off or another building is going to fall. I am sure that residents of Washington, D.C., feel the same way. I believe the Republicans prevailed in the 2002 election for one simple reason—people voted their fears, not their hopes. The conservatives very astutely played on peoples' fears in the way that was almost the mirror image of that famous 1964 television ad that Lyndon Johnson used to demolish Barry Goldwater's candidacy.

That ad was only run once. That was enough. It begins with a little girl in a field, picking petals off a daisy, counting. When the count reaches ten, her image is frozen and then we hear a male voice doing a countdown. When he reaches zero, we see a nuclear explosion and a mushroom cloud and we hear President Johnson's voice. "These are the stakes. To make a world in which all God's children can live or to go into the darkness. Either we must love each other or we must die." The screen fades to black and we read, "On November 3rd, vote for President Johnson." The ad didn't even mention Goldwater, but everyone knew it was suggesting that he was too trigger-happy to be president.

Now, think of what was the most resonant image of the fall 2002 campaign. What I'd like to suggest is that it also was a mushroom cloud—relating to Iraq and its supposed weapons of mass destruction. More or less, the Bush administration was saying: "Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof, the smok-

ing gun that could come in the form of the mushroom cloud.” How many times did we hear that?

Did the Democrats have a response? One or two tried to argue that preemptive war against Iraq could actually make things worse. But, as Jim Hightower makes clear in chapter 35, the Democrats were not willing to forcefully rebut Vice President Cheney for saying, “The risks of inaction are far greater than the risk of action.” The Democrats rushed the vote on Iraq, thinking that this would then allow a turn back to the issues of the economy. Instead, what the Democrats did was validate the Republicans as the best people to handle the job of protecting America’s security. Why vote out the party that you have just entrusted with your physical security, especially when you have no clear sense what the other party is going to do to improve your economic security, other than moan about how bad things are?

LIVING WITHOUT POLITICAL HOPE

Since September 11, Americans seem to be experiencing and expressing two contradictory phenomena. Trust in government is up, reversing the historical trend of the last forty years. At the same time, the majority says the country is moving in the wrong direction—that the state of the economy is not the best and that our children’s lives and future will be worse than ours. I see only one way to reconcile these two seemingly discordant trends.

Right now we have a life with little political hope. We live under a political duopoly that smothers nearly all meaningful independent insurgency. Those without money have no meaningful access or voice. Most incumbents of both parties are guaranteed reelection unless they happen to represent a swing district. Those in competitive or potentially competitive races fear taking courageous positions on any topic that can be turned into a thirty-second attack ad by the opponent. We can’t move in an alternative direction if we can’t effectively hear people who want us to move in another direction, and most of our elected leaders are too cowardly to make any sustained opposition—Paul Wellstone being one of the few, and now dearly missed, counterexamples.

Add to that debilitating mix the sense that we are newly threatened and newly vulnerable, however untrue that may be for those of us in the United States who never took for granted their inviolability. As a result, we who would like to move the country in a different direction are in for very difficult times. My sense of security is only partly about whether I have a job or a roof over my head. I also want to know that we are doing everything we can to protect my kids from another September 11. What the federal government chose to do in its aftermath did not make us safer. But, on that issue, there has been hardly any dissent from the so-called opposition party.

Difficulties in postwar Iraq and in the domestic economy are affecting American politics. But Democrats must realize two things: First, if there is one constant in all the public opinion surveys I have seen on our interventions in the Persian Gulf arena, going back to the first Gulf war, it is this: Americans want to get the job done. They understand that goal to include creating a better regime in Iraq. Most Americans are not foreign policy isolationists; they are actually idealists. They believe, perhaps naively, that America is a force for good in the world, and that includes fighting for democracy and human rights and against dictators and thugs. People who opposed the invasion of Iraq and who opposed American policy in much of the rest of the world need to articulate a clear alternative American foreign and national security policy. Communication of these alternatives must be made to connect with most voters.

Second, the uncertain economy is not an automatically good thing for the Democrats. They need a clear and convincing vision of where they want to take the country on the economy that goes beyond slogans about “growing jobs,” stopping corporate outsourcing of jobs overseas, and restoring the so-called glory days of the Clinton-Gore years. You can’t beat something with nothing. Plus, we all know how Republicans play on and inflame economic fears by picking on surrogate targets for popular anger. For example, in 1988, the first George Bush used a murderer named Willie Horton to tag Michael Dukakis as an out-of-touch liberal. If the Democrats don’t have an effective message on the economy, they will continue to be vulnerable to the classic divide-and-conquer tactics of the Republican right.

CREATING STAR WARDS

As the response to September 11 showed, Americans recognize their common destiny. We were moved by the response of the firefighters and police and emergency workers precisely because they were common people doing uncommonly courageous things. Trust in government went up because we saw a different kind of government in action that terrible day and because we want to believe in a government that works and actually will take care of us.

The outpouring of sentiment and voluntarism in the immediate aftermath of September 11 shows that there still are deep wells of civic solidarity in America. One way to tap those wells is to figuratively wave the flag and insist, yes, we are *all* in this together. As I wrote in an article for TomPaine.com:

We must protect the environment because its degradation threatens us all. We must invest in universal health care because disease observes no boundaries—gated communities won’t protect you from SARS, AIDS, asthma, or anthrax. The benefits of democracy are not reserved for the wealthy; they belong to everyone—we

fight for an equal voice for all Americans and to protect politics from the distortions of big money. We are only as well off as the poor, elderly and disabled among us, and there but for the grace of God go I—we need a viable social safety net. We believe every person has the same intrinsic worth, that society's health depends on everyone having an equal stake, and that there is strength in diversity—we want an inclusive society that values everyone regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. Money is not the measure of all worthwhile things—markets left to their own devices will not care for the poor, educate our children, create public parks, or seek justice for all. Those who benefit most from what democratic society provides have a greater obligation to give back to it—we believe in progressive taxation. The multiple crises facing the world require multilateral cooperation, not go-it-alone imperialism.

We must boldly insist that the overclass not use this moment to further enrich itself. This was the point at the heart of a speech by Bill Moyers that I helped to write in the fall of 2001. The words we used then, I suspect, will only be timelier as we strive to block the worse excesses of Congress. “While we have our hands on our hearts, they're trying to pick our pockets.” That was the central phrase of the Moyers' speech.

The issue is war profiteering, twenty-first-century style. For example, the 2002 Homeland Security bill included a clause protecting pharmaceutical companies from lawsuits for potential side effects from their drugs that may cause autism. What does that have to do with homeland security? It's all about excess profit security. We have to be very clear about that. In past wars that this country has fought, taxes were raised, profits were restrained, and the burdens were shared, more or less, equitably. Why did that not happen with the American war and post-war in Iraq? At a minimum, how can anybody possibly justify further tax cuts for the rich and service cuts for the poor during these times?

The new nature of the war and post-war in Iraq may require some unexpectedly progressive changes in domestic policy. For example, we should be arguing that universal health coverage is the only way to truly protect against biological warfare. After all, people without health insurance tend to delay trips to the doctor or the emergency room. Yet if we want to prevent an outbreak of smallpox, or anything worse, we need people to get medical attention right away. As it is, most hospitals in major American cities go on lockdown on any number of nights a week. They refuse all emergencies because they're already beyond capacity. This is a crisis that no one is talking about, but it could make a huge difference if we try to address it now.

And if we are smart, we won't worry about calling this “universal health care,” or “single payer.” Call it “National Medical Defense.” Or call it “Star Wards.”

We can't stand apart from the herd, as if we are better at repressing our fears and our need for security. We are part of a social organism seeking to protect itself. It makes little sense to deny the need for self-protection or try to change the subject

to the economy. We have an opportunity, still, to build a stronger and more just country that is part of a stronger and more developed world. But to do so, we have to draw on our deepest democratic aspirations. We have to talk to our fellow Americans, address their real concerns, and not sneer at them for being so benighted.

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