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essay

LIGHTS, CAMERA, DEMOCRACY!

On the conventions of a make-believe republic

By Lewis H. Lapham

The poor have been rebels but they never have been anarchists; they have more interest than anyone else in there being some decent government; the poor man really has a stake in the country. The rich man hasn't; he can go away to New Guinea in a yacht. The Poor have sometimes objected to being governed badly; the rich have always objected to being governed at all .

-G. K. Chesterton

As long ago as last June, well before the first rain of balloons fell on either of the summer's nominating conventions, it was hard to find a public-spirited citizen anywhere in New York who wasn't dissatisfied with the prospect of the November presidential election. No matter what the venue of the conversation--an editorial in the *New York Post*, a scholarly conference at NYU, a cocktail reception on Central Park West--the standard complaint relied on one or all of the following points:

1) Both candidates were paltry politicians. 2) Nobody was seriously discussing the serious issues. 3) The amoral news media subvert the hope of reason. 4) The country was being asked to vote for television commercials.

The dismal observations have become by now as much a matter of polite convention as remarks about the weather, and having listened to the requiem at the tomb of American politics for at least twenty years, I know when to regret the passing of Teddy Roosevelt, when to mention other crimes against democracy that the speaker might have overlooked, when to stare wistfully off into the historical past or glance sadly down at the marinated shrimp. But this year I ran across a more irritable tone in the voices of mourning, and on the Monday before the Fourth of July I was taken unawares by a sudden silence at a dinner party on East Sixty-fourth Street. Apparently I had missed one of the antiphonal responses, and both the woman on my left (a partner at Salomon Brothers) and the man sitting opposite (a network television correspondent) were waiting for my contribution to the sum of the nation's sorrow. I couldn't remember whether they had been finding fault with the Unabomber or Senator Alfonse D'Amato, but on the assumption that what was wanted was something politely apocalyptic, I said that if things kept going the way they were going, then we might as well assign the management of the country's politics to the Disney Company. The woman frowned, and the man impatiently tapped the table with his salad fork. They reminded me that we were talking about the most awesome office in the free world, about the fate of nations and the destiny of mankind, and that the topic was not one that invited levity. Anxious to avoid another mistake, I listened to the rest of the evening's conversation a good deal more closely than usual, wondering why the company was so skittish.

To most of the forty-odd people in the room--among them two or three Wall Street lawyers, several journalists, a Washington lobbyist, a television producer in town from Los Angeles, at least four investment bankers, the owner of a recently formed company supplying racetrack results to the Internet, and the proprietor of a resort island off the coast of North Carolina--the result of the November election was a matter of little consequence. Both candidates were as sound as J.P. Morgan or Ronald Reagan in their belief that money was good for the rich and bad for the poor, and what else was it important to know! Most everybody present was in the business of managing the world's traffic in expensive images--rendered as Hollywood movies and programs of political reform as well as stock-market symbols and Italian silk--and because the traffic was international, they found themselves more at ease with their economic peers in London, or Tokyo, or Berlin, than with their poorer fellow citizens encountered, preferably at a safe distance, in the streets of Miami or Chicago.

Nor were most of the guests much interested in the mechanics (as opposed to the theatrics) of American politics or

much worried about the future prospects of the American commonwealth. It was a fairly safe guess that few of them could name their congressman or deputy mayor and an even-money bet that several of them had shifted their principal financial assets to Switzerland or Grand Cayman. They could not afford to think that the difference between a Republican and Democratic administration was the difference between a marginally higher or lower tax rate and the number of invitations likely to be extended by the organizers of Washington policy conferences. Were Dole to be elected, the banker seated under the Picasso drawing might become a cabinet official; if Clinton remained in office, the television producer might be appointed to a presidential commission meant to study (and be appalled by) the quality of American education; in either event, one or two of the journalists might find themselves transformed into deputy secretaries of state. Otherwise the election would come and go without noticeable effect, the summer's campaign rhetoric as promptly forgotten as Newt Gingrich's Contract with America or the evening's carrot soup.

Why then the attitudes of grave foreboding! Why not simply enjoy the comedy of the nominating conventions and take comfort in the accumulating profits in the stock market! The questions stayed in mind during the somber discussions of Clinton's failures as a statesman and Dole's failures as an actor, and by the time the caterers served the lemon sorbet I understood that the criticisms of the year's political entertainment encompassed two sets of concerns, one of them about the style of the performance, and the other, more troublesome but less clearly expressed, about its lack of meaning. Although few of the people at dinner believed in the practice of democratic self-government, they deemed the belief necessary to the maintenance of public order. Too general a loss of faith in the symbols of democracy might lead to rioting in the streets, and it was therefore incumbent upon the managers of Democracyland to make a good show of flags and speeches and counting votes. But the guests also wished to think of themselves as patriots instead of exiles; worried about their own degrees of separation from what was once a familiar plot, they were reluctant to concede that the American political system grants parallel sovereignty to both a permanent and a provisional government, and that it is always a mistake to let them be seen as different entities.

The permanent government, a secular oligarchy of which the company at dinner was representative, comprises the Fortune 500 companies and their attendant lobbyists, the big media and entertainment syndicates, the civil and military services, the larger research universities and law firms, It is this government that hires the country's politicians and sees the terms and conditions under which the country's citizens can exercise their right--God-given but increasingly expensive--to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Obedient to the rule of men, not laws, the permanent government oversees the production of wealth, builds cities, manufactures goods, raises capital, fixes prices, shapes the landscape, anti reserves the right to assume debt, poison rivers, cheat the customers, receive the gifts of federal subsidy, and speak to the American people in the language of low motive and base emotion.

The provisional government is the spiritual democracy that comes and goes on the trend of a political season and oversees the production of pageants. it exemplifies the nation's moral aspirations, protects the citizenry from unworthy or unholy desires, and devotes itself to the mending of the American soul. The tribunes of the people mount the hustings to give voice to as many of the nation's conflicting ideals as can be recruited under the banners of freedom and fitted into the time allowed, ideals so at odds with one another that the American creed rests on the rock of contradiction--a self-righteously Christian country that supports the world's largest market for pornography and cocaine; a nation of prophets and real estate developers that defines the wilderness as both spiritual retreat and cash advance; the pacifist outcries against the evils of the weapons industry offset by the patriotic demand for an invincible army; a land of rugged individualists quick to seek the safety of decision by committee.

Positing a rule of laws instead of men, the provisional government must live within the cage of high-minded principle, addressing its remarks to the imaginary figure known as the informed citizen or the thinking man, a superior being who detests superficial reasoning and quack remedies, never looks at Playboy, remembers the lessons of history, trusts Bill Moyers, worries about political repression in Liberia, reads (and knows himself improved by) the op-ed page of the Wall Street Journal.

When giving voice to one or another of the conflicting ideals at large among the population, the provisional government--as liberal as it is conservative, enthusiastically welcoming ideas from both the Republican and Democratic workshops of liberty--promotes heroic public-works projects as hopelessly incapable of construction as the flat tax, the balanced budget, the Republican Revolution, or Clinton's reform of the health care system. It is the provisional government that demands the breaking off of trade with China (on the ground that the Chinese shoot political prisoners and make copies of Tom Cruise movies); it is the permanent government that ignores the demand on the ground that

too many American manufacturers have become dependent on cheap Chinese labor. The provisional government proposes a Constitutional amendment to make abortion a crime against the state; the permanent government discounts the proposal as both foolish and impractical. The provisional government passes mandates for racial preference and affirmative action; the permanent government hires whom it chooses to hire. The provisional government undertakes to guarantee health insurance to every family in America; the permanent government decides the gesture is too expensive.

The multiplication of good intentions lends verisimilitude to the morality play about a democratic republic delighting in the joys of free expression. But let the words threaten to result in actions that will disturb the comfort of the permanent government and the speaker quickly comes to be seen as a dangerous and irresponsible demagogue. While the snow was still on the ground during last winter's primary campaigns in Ohio and New Hampshire, Patrick J. Buchanan's vivid rhetoric was perceived as harmless entertainment. He was fun to have around; and to hear him talk about stoning abortionists and gunning down peasants on the Mexican border was like reading a book about Genghis Khan. By the third week in March it had occurred to all concerned (to the news media as well as to the political establishment in North Carolina) that an embarrassing number of voters might take Buchanan at his word, and his candidacy melted away in the first warmth of spring.

The genius of elected politicians consists in their ability to sustain the pretense that the two governments are one and the same while simultaneously satisfying the very different expectations of their temporal and spiritual constituencies. The effort calls for a sense of occasion. When standing in the well of the Senate or when seated in a television studio opposite Tom Brokaw, it is the duty of politicians to denounce sin and read from the American book of virtues, to insist that the drug traffic be stopped, Saddam Hussein punished, and the federal budget brought into balance. Offstage, and between appearances on C-Span, it is the duty of politicians to arrange, in the manner of bootleggers during Prohibition, steady supplies of subsidy and debt. Speaking to a national television audience on a Wednesday night in the spring of 1995, Dole presented himself as a member of the provisional government and waxed indignant about the immorality of Hollywood films that exhort honest and upstanding citizens to misplace their children and abandon their wives. A few days later, reconstituted as a member of the permanent government at a fund-raising dinner in Las Vegas that provided \$477,450 to his presidential campaign, Dole assured the owners of that city's gambling casinos that he would scotch any misguided attempt on Capitol Hill to pass a law limiting their profits.

As with the different forms of polite language, so also with the different rules of proper conduct. Acts deemed praiseworthy when performed by agents of the permanent government (stealing trade secrets, rigging balance sheets, selling junk bonds) appear blasphemous or obscene when attempted (under the rubrics of foreign espionage and inventive fiscal policy) by the servants of the provisional government. IBM dismisses 125,000 superfluous workers, and the newsstands thicken with four-color praise for the happy return of the entrepreneurial spirit that made the country great. The Senate votes to eliminate 150,000 crippled children from the welfare rolls, and the sponsors of the bill stand accused of sadism. A stock market swindler sells a book of claptrap economic theory for a publisher's advance of \$1 million, and he shines forth on the best-seller list as a friend of the common man. Newt Gingrich signs a similar deal for a similar book with Rupert Murdoch, and enraged Democrats recommend an ethical investigation. By confessing to the monstrosity of their sexual appetites, movie stars add luster to their celebrity; Senator Bob Packwood tells his diary about his bungling search for love in a harem of staff assistants and finds himself expelled from Congress.

The quadrennial presidential election is the most solemn of the festivals staged by the provisional government, and the prolonged series of ceremonies--the ceaseless round of public opinion polls, the muster of earnest newspaper editorials, the candidates riding the parade floats of the Washington talk shows--belong to the same order of events as the songs and dances performed at a Zuni corn harvest. The delegates gather to invest the next president of the United States with the magical prowess of a kachina doll, embodying the country's ancestral truths and meant to be exhibited in hotel ballrooms and baseball parks. Bustling with images salvaged from the costume trunks of American history, the amplified voices of conscience ascend the pulpits of liberty to proclaim their faith in nobody knows exactly what, but something that has to do with a noble spirit, a just society, and America the beautiful. As always, the language is abstract, the speakers being careful to avoid overly specific reference to campaign finance reform or the depletion of the Social Security trust fund (questions best left to the sounder judgment of the permanent government) and directing their passion to the telling of parables--about character, thrift, integrity, family values, individual initiative, points of light. The intention is to make a loud and joyful noise in which the contradictions inherent in the American creed will vanish in a cloud of balloons or march triumphantly out of the convention hall with one of the high school bands.

What troubled the company at dinner on East Sixty-fourth Street was the lack of gravitas in this year's staging of the America Is a Democracy Festival. Neither candidate took naturally to wearing the masks of bountiful renewal. Clinton was too obviously made of wax (i.e., a contrivance of the provisional government so often stamped with the faces of contradiction that it had lost all sense of identity), and the bright linen of his public virtue was noticeably soiled with the mud of scandal. Dole was too obviously a creature of the permanent government, the kind of man one wants to know at 4:00 A.M. in an after-hours club but not the next morning in church. The grotesque inadequacies of the two candidates offended the sophistication of the Manhattan dinner guests, all of them accustomed to seeing Pavarotti in Tosca and Michael Jordan in Madison Square Garden. Here they were in the front row of American success, and the stumbling performance of the prayer for rain was an insult to both their intelligence and wealth. The television correspondent mentioned the summer's competing attractions, among them the Olympic Games in Atlanta, and asked indignantly why, if America was still the richest and most powerful country on earth, it couldn't stage a better minstrel show.

Other voices at other tables extended the range of complaint to the lack of principled people in Washington and the loss of civility in the films of Oliver Stone. The unanimous tone of nervous irritation suggested that the guests had begun to worry about what might happen to their own privileged estate if it became too apparent that the agendas of the permanent and provisional governments had as little to do with each other as the bond market and the phases of the moon. Over the last four or five years, entirely too many people (envious and irresponsible people) had been talking about the widening gulf between the fortunes of the rich and the misfortunes of the poor. The fact was certainly plain enough, but what if it should become too widely accepted as proof that the premise of an egalitarian democracy was as extinct as the Dusky Seaside Sparrow! *

The company at dinner had noticed that something was amiss in the engine room of freedom. They could tell by looking at the crowds in the streets, and by the airport and restaurant signs they saw printed in Korean or Spanish, that the United States was tending toward the multiracial and multilingual society described by literary academics as anti-democratic and portrayed on advertising posters as the United Colors of Benetton. The newly enfeebled minorities might respect the same rules of commercial enterprise, but who was to say that they would agree to belong to the same political enterprise! Anybody could open a grocery store or operate a fleet of taxicabs, but it was something else entirely to know the words of the Marine Hymn and the "Ballad of Buffalo Bill." The division of the country into separate provinces of feeling (some of them as large as Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, others as militant as the Freemasons lately confined to quarters in Jordan, Montana) made it increasingly difficult to bind together what was once the American polity with a common narrative. It was getting harder and harder to pump up the parade balloons with the willing suspensions of disbelief, which was why the news media were sending 15,000 correspondents of various magnitudes to the summer nominating conventions, why the networks already had granted free time to both candidates in October, why the campaigning season never ends. If the American Commonwealth was nowhere to be found among the strip malls between Boston and San Diego (a wilderness in which the squares of safe suburban lawns begin to seem as isolated from one another as the fortified stockades on the old Indian frontier) maybe it could be simulated on television--not only with the convention broadcasts and the pious commentary of David Brinkley but also in the exemplary displays of egalitarian good fellowship presented by Seinfeld and Murphy Brown.

Reminded of the media's ceaseless advertisement for a democratic reality, I understood that the evening's lament was also part of the necessary ritual. The guests might as well have been shaking cornstalks and beating feathered drums. As statements of fact, none of the points of complaint about the November election made any sense. Few of the people present had any use for politicians who weren't paltry, for the perfectly good reason that non-paltry politicians disturbed the status quo. Nor did they wish to engage in serious discussion of any issues that might seriously inhibit the sovereignty of money. The country was being asked to vote for television commercials because only in the happy, far-off land of television commercials could the American democracy still be seen to exist. But understood as ritual chant, the remarks at dinner sustained the nostalgic remembrance of time past. The company might object, in Chesterton's phrase, "to being governed at all," but nobody was eager to sail away, at least not yet, to New Guinea or Barbados on a yacht, and if the political small talk was more obsessive than in years past, louder in volume and grimmer in tone, possibly it was because the citizens on East Sixty-fourth Street--as superstitious as the new media they habitually reviled and as stateless as the oligarchy of which they were a part--were making the noises of democracy to ward off the fell spirit of a future to which they couldn't give an American name.

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The standard set of observations attributes the increasing distances between rich and poor to the policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations, but the trend has become even more evident under the auspices of the Clinton Administration, Supported in large part by the steady rise in the stock market (up 61 percent in the last three years), the share of the nation's income going to the wealthiest 5 percent of the population increased from 18.6 Percent in 1992 to 20 percent in 1993 to 21.1 percent in 1994. Within the last eighteen months, Roughly 1 million men between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-five (i.e., in their prime working years) disappeared from the labor force.

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