

The restive voter is the defining feature of American politics as the twentieth century counts down its final years. Underlying causes of the nation's civic unease are much debated. Our heritage as a people unwilling to be ruled — what Alexis de Tocqueville in 1833 called "that township independence which is the life and mainspring of American liberty" — may be reasserting itself. Post-Cold War "blues" may have set in now that America's greatest role to date, rescuing mankind from authoritarian imperialism of many stripes, has all but vanished. Or maybe our political leaders are suffering a general loss of stature by modern media overexposure.

For whatever reason, it is abundantly clear that dissatisfaction with government is high among the governed. Besieged by polling data, television and print media commentary, talk radio, e-mail, fax, phone and postal communications, the Washington establishment spends ever more time attempting to gauge the public's mood and identify itself with, not to say redress, its concerns. The incumbent President, empathy his principal stock in trade, has mastered the tradecraft of populist electioneering in the information age. Many who covet his job strive mightily to cast themselves as "outsiders," untainted by identification with the Washington arena.

The Art of Followership

Where aspirants to national office once emphasized the results, outcomes and *desiderata* of federal policies and programs, today one finds them focusing on winners and losers, the constituent blocs of voters or financial donors who perceive a benefit or loss from the government's actions. Organized interest groups are quick to claim that their lobbying contributes to 'an informed national dialogue'; yet their very nature is to gain special dispensation, a concept irreconcilable with the common good. Retail politics is not new in the United States; its primacy at the national level, however, is.

The new empathetic politics is a form of 'ambulance-chasing,' seeking out the disaffected to exploit them for political benefit by amplifying their grievances and elevating their status as victims. Victims of tragedy and their arresting vignettes fill the place once reserved for facts, statistics and analysis in public policy debates over health care reform, responses to airline terrorism, intervention in Haiti,

strategy to avert bankruptcy of Medicare, and future relations with Vietnam, to name but a few. In the 104th Congress, Democrats resisting program cuts reflexively hold up 'the starving child' like a wooden cross to a vampire.

As the nation's legislators and chief executives play out this 1990s reprise of "Queen For A Day," parading special interest poster children before the cameras, the awe and respect once commanded by the institutions they represent is diminishing. All too many politicians, lacking any overarching convictions, trade on what remains of their official prestige to purchase the transitory loyalties of one advocacy group after another.

The Perpetual Election

"We are not in an election yet. Let's govern," implores a disaffected Senator Bill Bradley after announcing his decision to quit the Senate. His actions, not his words, tell the story, however; for we are in an election — a perpetual election. The notion of "governing," with its implication that partisan advantage is to be subordinated to a higher, common good, appears archaic as Democrats and Republicans alike disaggregate the map of the United States by electoral votes and interest groups and chart strategies for long-term preeminence.

Republican Senator Al D'Amato holds hearings to call for a cutoff of commerce with Iran. Recognizing this as a preemptive stake on New York's 1996 electoral votes, President Clinton chooses the World Jewish Forum to announce his countermove to tighten sanctions on Iran. The dignity and gravitas of high office are no brake on each politician's eagerness to pay homage to the particular agendas of selected constituent groups.

The President rails against those who would curb the growth of Medicare, the Senate passes a bill to lift unilaterally the arms embargo on Bosnia, and Congress convenes hearings into the fatal mishaps between federal agents and resisting citizens at Waco and Ruby Ridge. Each plays to a select audience; but will any of these actions rectify the situations that caused the public concerns in the first place? It is no accident that the word "pander" has become a staple of the political reporter's lexicon today.

And so it goes with U.S. Trade Representative

THE EMPATHIES

Mickey Kantor's high-decibel confrontations over auto and auto parts sales to Japan; while the Administration mugs for the Rust Belt blue collar crowd, U.S. automakers quietly step up overseas manufacturing operations to produce cars for the Asia market that are not even made or sold in the U.S., such as GM's Opel and Ford's Escort. Commerce Secretary Ron Brown's special assignment to "deliver" California to Mr. Clinton in 1996 is transparently reflected in the CEO invitation lists for the VIP business development missions he leads around the world. Forget the old saw about partisanship stopping at the water's edge; everything is about 1996.

Old Ethics and New Faces

The paradox of federal politics is that the more office-holders shape the public's business to promote their own re-election, the more voters are drawn toward the very opposite objective. As the national debt has soared, as savings and loan institutions have failed, as public schools have deteriorated, as entitlement programs have grown at once unstoppable and unsustainable, and as Washington lobbyists have smothered the stewards of the purse-strings and the tax code, voters passionate for change have concluded that the key to this problem is not the issues, but the legislators themselves. Term limits, political financing reform, and general anti-incumbency fervor have become determinative issues at the ballot box — a worst-case scenario that cost Democratic incumbents dearly last year.

Not until voters are persuaded that the political system is cleansed of these distortions will they again restore their focus to the public policy choices involved in solving the nation's problems. New faces from the 1992 and 1994 change-overs in the Executive and Legislative Branches will not allay the public's vexation if they fail to practice new ethics.

Republicans won so overwhelmingly in 1994, and with such unity of agendas, that 1995 dawned with an aura of tremendous possibility for regenerating the vitality of the federal government. Eight months later, baited into partisan scrimmaging on one issue after another, and lured by the sidelights of Whitewater, Waco, New Hampshire beauty contests, and book tours, the Republicans' momentum is flagging on their core issue: restoring the federal budget to health.

Surprisingly outwitted in their sparring with the White House and Democratic legislators, Republicans in Congress have let damaging questions linger: questions about whether their zeal to end reverse discrimination in affirmative action programs includes any commitment to improve the condition of America's minority citizens; whether their recriminations over the ATF and FBI actions at Waco and Ruby Ridge signal a political parting of company with the nation's law enforcement community; whether women attracted by the Republican emphasis on individual rights are to be treated as an exception when it comes to reproductive issues; and whether their budget-balancing plan is, as the Democrats never tire of warning, intended mainly to benefit the wealthiest in America.

Pushed so far from the center on so many issues, the Republicans may let this historic opportunity for fundamental change slip through their fingers.

The Real Issue

But speculation on the fortunes of the two main parties — or the prospect of a third — only obscures the real issue. "We live in a time when, on a basic level, politics is broken," says Senator Bradley. The real issue is not who is up and who is down, but whether the United States of America remains capable of acting decisively in pursuit of the national interest.

Sacrifice is the moral core of leadership. A true leader demonstrates commitment to a cause, and in turn demands commitment from others, by sharing in the rigors, burdens and hardships of the tasks at hand. Too many politicians today follow the path of least risk to themselves; and too many voters rightly see their self-promotion as an absence of commitment.

Americans are not the weak, selfish, divided and cynical lot they have been taken to be by the political class. Only when persons of principle step forward and treat public service as a higher calling will we rebuild a political tradition of true leadership sustained by genuine popular support for the government. Until that day, we shall all be feeling America's pain.

— **Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Jr.**
Partner