

THE ELECTION, AND THE NEXT CONGRESS

by

Walter H. Capps

Though the outcome of the Congressional election in the 22nd District of California will not give me opportunity to state my views on the floor of the House of Representatives, I have remained attentive to the post-election discussion. Clearly 1994 was a watershed election and the Republicans were huge winners. Voters throughout the country registered their strong disapproval of the disposition of government, primarily at the federal level, as millions protested angrily against whatever situations or set of conditions seems to have destroyed our confidence regarding our current state or future prospects.

What was not endorsed, however, was the philosophical worldview of Newt Gingrich. Yes, Gingrich rose to power on the strength of voter resentment. But this does not mean that the majority agrees with him on the numerous topics on which he holds forceful opinion, including his strong denunciation of the counter-culture, his characterisation of the "moral crisis" in America, or even his strong advocacy of volunteerism.

Gingrich appears to be a thoughtful man, and he must have developed an interesting college course on the dynamics of American culture. He also has his favorite reading list, which, appropriately, includes Alexis de Tocqueville's DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA as well as THE FEDERALIST PAPERS.

But Garry Wills and others read the latter text differently from Gingrich, and Tocqueville's classis has traditionally been a favorite of both progressives and conservatives, all of which signifies that some of the major interpretive challenges in both readings have not been resolved. When Gingrich moves from these primers on democracy to the books of Alvin Toffler (admittedly suggestive, but not of the same formative intellectual stature as the others), he simply displays his favoritism. However, when he answers questions about the counter-culture as if these were interchangeable with questions about secular humanism (either topic prompting to launch into a denunciation of "ethical relativism"), he shows his historical parochialisms. Every scholar has these, no doubt, but who else has tried to transpose an undergraduate course outline into an agenda for the nation, or to ask national legislators to complete the required course reading before being sworn into office?

Certainly the social and cultural developments of the 1960s and early 70s may boast of highs and lows, but they can hardly be summarily erased as if being thoroughly off course. Yes, some of the "baby boomer" generation experimented with drugs, and some resisted going to Vietnam. But they provided very dramatic accomplishments in music and art. They were responsible for myriad technological breakthroughs and advances in health care and medical research. They fostered keen sensitivity to the fragility of the environment. They challenged unquestioned acceptance of war as a way of resolving disputes between nations. They tried to confront runaway

population growth. They cultivated a keen awareness and knowledge of peoples and cultures not previously our own. And, not least, they assumed leadership for major advances in civil rights and human rights. When Gingrich recounts the history of this era, his evident intention is repudiation and dismissal. A more competent historian would recognize that much of what the counter-culture stands for lives on beneficially today just as there is unfinished business as well as moral questions and challenges that have not yet been resolved or clarified.

The same is true with respect to the role of government. In the current political climate, it is easy to denounce government as the enemy of the people. But this is a simplistic view that flies in the face of the major contention of THE FEDERALIST PAPERS. A more careful reading of the history of the nation would provide vivid examples of the truth that effective (albeit limited and responsive) government is a fitting instrument of human freedom, apart from which there are no deliberate advances upon the common good. What is necessary today is a thorough and disciplined discussion of government's proper and legitimate role. How does federal government relate effectively to the states, counties, cities and other municipalities? What responsibility does the citizenry itself carry with respect to its children, its senior members, and the poor? How is democracy most effectively enunciated within a society that is becoming increasingly multicultural? In a post-Cold War world, how does this nation exercise its moral leadership with respect to the family of nations?

It would be shortsighted, indeed, at this crucial period in our history, if the nation found itself debating simplistic dogmas that are designed to satisfy penchants for ideological confidence, but do little more. In fact, until a legislative program reflective of this more complex history is drawn, Congress will continue to appear out of touch with the needs and challenges of the citizenry. In my judgment, this is the more permanent message of the 1994 election, a message the Gingrich people are in danger of missing in their haste to claim victory on the basis of an ideologically-driven interpretation of what some believe right and wrong about contemporary American life.

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