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ON RUNNING FOR CONGRESS

From the way the Congress and the nation are behaving, it would appear that the meaning of the 1994 elections has already been interpreted and assimilated. This meaning would be that 1994 stands as a veritable watershed in American political history, with Republican virtues triumphing solidly over Democrat profligancy and with the "Contract With America" assuming normative agenda status within all relevant contexts -- politically, legislatively, socially, and culturally. However, what this reading omits or neglects is that only 11% of the voting public were cognizant of the "Contract" on November 8, 1994, the day of the election, and that very few of the candidates for Congress had made an overt connection with Newt Gingrich (whom, we recall, faced the prospect of being defeated for re-election in Georgia just two weeks before election day) until it became apparent that he would be the next Speaker of the House. The manner in which the outcome of the election is being interpreted does not strictly coincide with what the contest seemed to be about as it was being waged. How do we know this, and why do we have the courage to say it? It is simply because we waged a campaign for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. We lost narrowly, by 1500 votes, in a district in which Republicans have consistently won for the past half century, but we came close, and may indeed have won had we understood the dynamics of the debate better. The fact is that respected polling data -- data on which every successful campaign is now dependent -- did not very helpfully disclose the terms of the election prior to the voting. Thus, the quick rush to interpret the outcome may be just as flawed; it is curious that those with failed projections prior to elections become just as certain about the meanings of out-

comes after the elections, and based on the same set of vectors that were used in the first instance. And how might we do better? Well, during the course of the campaign, we met with more than 300 voter groups, throughout a congressional district. And though the data we collected is not statistically scientific, we believe that we do understand, to a certain extent, the mind of the electorate. Indeed, part of the challenge of running for office is to engage in a debate -- oftentimes heated and spirited -- with those on one's own side who are offering encouragement and counsel on the basis of selected perceptions about how the voters are feeling, what the country is saying, and (the phrase we heard over and over again) "what this election is fundamentally about."

Dynamics of the Election

Before offering our analysis, though, we should explain something of the background and circumstances of our race for elected office. The candidate is a 60-year old University of California religious studies professor who has lived in the area for thirty years but had never run for public office before. The campaign manager had managed one congressional campaign before -- his candidate lost in the primary -- and had had rather extensive experience at various levels in Bob Kerrey's campaign for President in 1992. The two of us enjoy common roots in Nebraska, and are both products of Yale University training, he as an undergraduate and I as a doctoral student. Because of shared commitment to the Kerrey campaigns, we had an initial basis on which to build a partnership. But it was remarkably informal at the outset. As mentioned, I had to learn how to run for office while running for office. Since he had a full-time job, he could only volunteer in the evenings. After we won the primary, he joined the campaign full-

time. Our opponent was a State Assemblywoman, who had been elected to that office once after having assumed it upon the death of her husband from cancer; her husband had previously won six times. Consequently, on Labor Day, 1994, almost exactly two months prior to election day, our Republican opponent had 80% name recognition throughout the district while we had less than 30%. By election day, her 80% had increased slightly, and we had moved to approximately 65-70%. Including the votes that the Libertarian candidate received (approximately 2000 out of over 200,000 votes cast, we each polled close to 49% of the total: she won with 49.3% to our 48.6%. We raised approximately $400,000 for the general election against her estimated $650,000. We had at least 3000 volunteers in one capacity or another. Bill Carrick told us that no other candidacy in California at any level had more people "on the ground" the weeks prior to the election. We also paid minimum wages to our paid staff persons, and had the large majority of workers on volunteer status.

Our opponent was known for her "anti-choice" position, and for being "tough on crime" (she had the endorsement of most law-enforcement officers) as well as being very much in favor of Proposition 187, the anti-illegal immigrant initiative. We ran on pro-choice principles, separated crime from punishment-for-crime, and opposed Proposition 187. Our opponent had Phil Gramm, Newt Gingrich, and Bill Bennett come to the district to stump for her. We had Hillary Rodham Clinton, Bruce Babbitt, Leon Panetta, and, on two occasions, George Stephanopolis. Our campaign was decidedly more visible than our opponent's. We were "on the road" almost constantly. Our opponent, from our vantage point, seemed to be following a "hide-and-seek" strategy. We appeared but three times together in voters' forums, although there were more than a dozen such meetings

scheduled. She was always heavily scripted, addressing audiences from notes and paragraphs that had been written out prior to the events. We tried to compose new statements for each occasion. Our banner was that government is inevitable, so we should strive for competent, resourceful, efficient government. Her charge was that government frustrates private enterprise from doing what it does best. If government would only get out of the way, the economy would surely improve and there were be more tax revenue to rebuild the institutions of the land. Her agenda was thoroughly compatible with that of the Christian Coalition, from which she received considerable help both in terms of volunteer activity and financial support. We were more broadly-based Democrats who frequently invoked the memory and words of Thomas Jefferson, and talked at every stop about reinstituting a resilient democracy as the founders had envisioned it. The contest between us, in numerous respects, was microcosmic of the national debate. Thus, we believe it can be probed as a kind of "case study" concerning the dynamics of the election, and the significance of the outcome.

Thematic Foci of the Campaign

Throughout the campaign we attempted to be savvy about the criteria voters would employ when making their decisions on election day. On numerous occasions we were reminded of James Carville's oft-quoted injunction from the 1992 presidential election, "it's the economy, stupid!" And we were altogether willing to be just as clear and singleminded as this as we made our own case to the voters. Thus, we consulted with paid professionals, who were relying on polling and focus-group data, as well as with long-time residents of the 22nd District who seemed to have

insight into the mood and mind of the people. What we (speaking as a first-time candidate) did not sufficiently anticipate was the degree to which the campaign for public office could be conducted as a continuing conversation with voters, which conversation was in fact a two-way street. Thus, positions on issues, together with identification of the primary issues themselves, were very considerably shaped by the conversations themselves. By the final days of the campaign, we were quite certain that we knew what the people were mostly concerned about, and we had obtained a reliable sense of how they felt -- and, consequently, how they would vote -- in most instances. Thus, when the votes were tallied, we were not terribly surprised. Yes, we did believe (though never with anything close to absolute certainty) that we would win the election, though we recognized that it would be extremely close. But the more important fact is that we sensed that a large surprise was in the offing. We call it "surprise" because it was not precisely identified in the forecasts that had been offered.

What the election was primarily about, it seemed, was the credibility of government. One can come to this conclusion simply on the basis of the prevailing mood of the people, which, without question, was that of anger. Disappointment was prominent too, together with absence of hopeful expectation, but the primary spirit was that of anger toward whoever in authority had allowed the country to degenerate into the situation in which we find ourselves today. We heard the lamentations at every stop. Oftentimes it came in the form of an observation like "this isn't even America any longer," or in postulated contrasts between the way things are now with the way they were (or were presumed to be) during some previous period in our history. Certainly Bill Clinton, and the Clinton administration, was entailed in this judgment, but the critique was far more extensive than this. We kept hearing

about "Washington" -- not about the President or the Congress per se, but about how irresponsibly whoever was in charge was managing the resources of the nation. In this instance, "Washington" was far more culpable than Sacramento (the seat of state government), and county and city government came off pretty much unscathed, except for excessive zoning and building regulations. Some of the campaign, as we journeyed from place to place, we felt that we were contending against a most formidable combination of cities, i.e., Washington and Los Angeles. Washington is known as the place to which elected persons to go quickly to become completely out of touch. Los Angeles symbolizes the direction in which wayward civilization is tending -- with its increases in random violence, neighborhood gangs, and illegal immigrant population. The voters in the 22nd District of California seemed united in wanting to resist any further "losangelisation" of their society as well as their culture at the same time that they were searching for a way to escape from the debilitating clutches of Washington. At no one of our campaign stops (except when a special interest was being recommended) did anyone propose anything in the form of a suggestion as to what government might add to its current list of sponsored activities. We heard nothing whatever, for example, about new programs for children, new programs for the homeless, or for any other segment of the population. In fact, what we heard repeatedly were calls for government to "get out" of a large range of activities in which government efforts were judged to be inappropriate or ineffective. Politicians tend to interpret this theme as having primarily to do with fiscal matters, as if it were an issue of overspending and, therefore, of adding to the budget deficit. Surprisingly, we believe the economic component is rather secondary to a more basic concern. The candidate tested this on at least two occasions, recalling that his father, an auditor for the Union Pacific Railroad, and one who had lived through the de-

pression, nevertheless had a very friendly attitude toward income tax. The candidate quoted his father, who had called income tax "a good deal." "Look what you get for your money," the candidate's father had pointed out. "You get schools and libraries and parks and roads and bridges and police protection and armies, and it really costs so little." Expecting an immediate outburst of negative reaction to this defense of income tax, the candidate was surprised to find that significant numbers of persons present (maybe 30-40%, on a very unscientific testing) seemed to like the idea. From this, and from numerous additional conversations and responses, we have concluded that there is still a willingness among the electorate to be supportive of good, effective government, but there is little if any confidence that those who have come under "Washington influence" know how to do anything except survive and occasionally win successes in Washington -- which place is demonstrably out of touch with the people of the country. Our conclusion is that current national government has lost the bond of trust with the people of this nation. This, we came to appreciate, was the prevailing interest of the voters. And, of course, the disappointment, the disgust, and the anger was heaped upon the Democrats and the Clinton Administration, for these were correctly understood to be the group currently in charge. But it was not the simple matter of being in disagreement with one or another position on one or another issue. Rather, what voters voted was an accumulated recognition that national politics -- characteristic of the way things were being mismanaged in Washington -- had been moving down some wayward, thoroughly co-opted path of no identifiable positive value, simply on the steam of its own momentum. Those who proposed the "Contract With America"partially under- stood the revulsion voters had toward "the mess in Washington." But it was only tangentially about budgets and deficits, and it translated into victory for the Republicans because Republicans were understood to be the lesser of two evils. Just as

there was disgust with Washington, so also was there very little enthusiasm for partisan politics of either prominent orientation. To be sure, a Democrat loss translates into a Republican gain, but Republicans will soon learn that their accession to power cannot be equated with the acquisition of a mandate for their proposed "Contract With America." The truth of the matter is that the apparent winners of the contest -- Newt Gingrich, by dint by his succession to the Speakership of the House of Representatives, and those who are most closely aligned with him -- are much better known for their identification with the voices of anger and protest than for their ability to enunciate the principles by which a healthy political party can sustain its vitality while leading the nation forward. Viewed from the national perspective, the 1994 election does not stand as the event which marks a decision by the citizenry to chart a new path. Rather, it symbolizes an explosion of collective emotion against prevailing government no longer trusted or respected, and, at times, hardly even recognized. We had voters address us by asking, "what, if anything, do you plan to do for me?" -- insinuating that there was hardly anything of substance or significance that we might achieve even if we found ourselves in positions of perceived power.

Running as a Democrat Candidate

Without question, Bill Clinton is implicated in these judgments. Our evidence confirms that the Health Care Reform initiative was the evidence most frequently cited to demonstrate Washington's being "out of touch." It was not health care per se that was questioned, but, rather, the manner in which the new administration set out to do its work coupled with the threat of another ineffective and intrusive Washington bureaucracy that would limit the citizens' right to choose health-care providers and usurp their abilities to manage their own destinies. We must reiterate that the discussion of this issue never really fo-

cused on the exegencies of health care. Yes, there was some mention of the fact that not all Americans are covered, and one could discern some dismay over this fact. Yet, the force of this matter was obscured since a large proportion of the citizenry not adequately covered are young people who currently enjoy good health and/or find themselves in low-paying (sometimes part-time) positions that have no real employment packages at all. Consequently, whenever the issue of health-care reform was introduced, the discussion would move quickly to the subject of the intrusions of the federal government into the lives of law-abiding, tax-paying citizens. Once again, the message was that "government, at least in the form in which it is being practiced in Washington today, is not to be trusted."

As soon as we caught the spirit of the continuing conversation, we began tempering our presentations by insisting that we were running "only to be the people's representative" as distinct from being like the professional politicians. Thus the voters were given a somewhat complicated choice that was not easy to clarify. On the one hand, they had a candidate who had not run for office before (good), was not altogether comfortable doing so (good), wanted only to "represent" the people of his district (good), or so he said, but suffered from his identification with the political party currently in power in Washington. On the other hand, they had a candidate who was a current office holder (both good & bad), had become a professional politician (bad), but had organized her campaign around the protest against Washington (because she did not represent the political party currently in power) with which persons who had become overtly untrusting could identify (good, or at least good for her). We were interrogated repeatedly, "how do we know that you are not a Bill Clinton clone?" In the beginning we offered responses that acknowledged the numerous positive accomplishments of the Clinton administration while admitting that we disagreed with the ad-

ministration on some matters. But midway through the campaign, we sought to deflect the force of the question by responding, "you know that I'm not Bill Clinton because I play the tuba" (a reference to the fact that we frequently marched in local parades carrying the oom-pah, oom-pah instrument). Hearers would sometimes laugh, as they also seemed to enjoy witnessing the candidate play the tuba as he marched down the street, but it was the frequency of the question that was most disturbing -- an indication of deep-seated voter concern regarding the matter of political affiliation and sponsorship. As Democrats learned, there was no easy way to win an election within these dynamics. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that these very voting dynamics were more circumstantial than substantive. They did not reach deeply into any particular ideological substratum. Thus, the results of the election can hardly be construed as a victory of one ideological orientation over its opponent, as if the contest were waged primarily on ideological grounds. We didn't witness the expression of any strong ideological preference in the voting patterns of the people of our district. What we found instead was a strong, multiple expression of disappointment, disgust, and revulsion against government that had grown out of touch, and, therefore, government in manifest danger of losing completely the permission of the people to govern. This, by the way, is how we would explain the recourse to volunteerism that is being touted prominently as an alternative to dependence upon government. And the entire voter profile is thoroughly consistent with the injunction on the bumper sticker that is to be found on thousands and thousands of automobiles: "Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty." It is forced to be <u>random</u> because there is no fitting or acceptable way by which it might be institutionalized or otherwise formalized or regularized. The sobering fact is that the mode of formal institutionalized government the people will vote in, support and defend is a extensively fortified penal system whose primary

function is to deal with the incidences of random ("one, two, three, but no more") violence.

All of this -- after the bond of trust between government and the people had been broken -- dictated the strategy of political victory in 1994. This trust was so thoroughly broken that it could not be repaired. Therefore, anyone running on a platform that pretended to know how to fix things was judged to be a political innocent, that is, someone so naive as to be courting certain disappointment, frustration, and depression. The only viable alternative was to become (as we were urged to become) "a channel of the peoples' anger and frustration." And this meant one would down strongly on the accusatory side in virtually all possible "anti" situations. That is, when "anti-crime" legislation was being considered, one had to prove oneself more "anti" than one's opponent. When "anti-government" rhetoric surfaced, winning strategy dictated that one would demonstrate more "anti" venom than one's opponent. When "anti-illegal immigration" was the issue, here, too, one had to show more "anti" feeling and sentiment than one's opponent. When mistrust of prevailing authority stands as preamble, based on voter consensus, a successful campaign for election victory can admit to no suspicion regarding the veracity of this cardinal principle. Our attempts to urge voters to "vote your hopes, not your fears, and vote your ideals, not your anger" simply ran counter to the prevailing collective temperament within which the election occurred. Of course, we were unwilling to win the election at any cost, and, particularly, if this required us to make common cause with a sense of contemporary American social and cultural life of which we are thoroughly untrusting.

Meaning and Message

This, it seems to us, is what the election was about. To call it a victory for Newt Gingrich is simply to identify one if its chief beneficiaries, that is, the person who has taken -- or has been handed -- the greatest advantage. To see in it the unfolding of a mandate for the "Contract With America" is to presume more ideology than has been systematically or coherently articulated. It is important to note that the Contract is primarily a document of reduction and negation, urging downsizing and/or eleminating government bureaucracies, unfunded mandates, budgetary excesses, unnecessary rules, unused buildings, outmoded procedures, dispensable regulations, and the like. While many of these reductive, deconstructive measures may be in order, they cannot possibly substitute for bold recommendations concerning how government might function constructively and positively. For this to happen, the modality must change dramatically. There are no clear signs yet that those mounting the protest know how to make the transition once the powers of negation have done all that they are capable of reducing or negating. After all, those who have suddenly assumed power in Washington have spent the past forty years playing the role of critics and reactionaries: this is what they have learned to do best. The election signifies that political, social, cultural, and (to a certain extent) historical critique has suddenly been elevated to the position of being the dominant modality through which the will of the people is being expressed. The masters of criticism are now in charge, having been placed in the position of national pre-eminence by a collective spirit of enforced negation. But to treat this development as an important new ideological shift, or even to interpret it is as a clear victory of one of the two dominant political parties over the other, is to significantly misread and mistake the outcome of the election. According to the analysis we are offering, based on the experience that was ours, the most sobering fact about the election of 1994 is its demonstration of an increasingly restive American popula-

tion that is unsure of its direction and no longer confident of its previous confidences. Such a situation is the clearest of all mandates for the kind of national discussion that the election cycle of 1994 rather skillfully avoided, but which must be faced if the nation is to meet its challenges and responsibilities in the dramatically new global situation that was created by the ending of the Cold War as well as the sureties of the Cold War era. In every respect -- and the Clinton people surely appreciate this -- we are living in "a new age," as perceptible to certain social, cultural and historical analysts as were the shifts in collective human orientation that characterize certain periods of the past. In this light, the perception that "current Washington is out of touch" may be reflective of serious anachronisms that reach far beyond the seeming failure of certain politicians to "get it right" on certain pending legislative and/or moral issues. Being "out of touch" at the onset of a new age is to render oneself helpless in knowing how most effectively to be representative, for it means that one is unclear about just what and whom one is representing. Having seized power, Newt Gingrich is clear about the ramifications of the election. He is the self-proclaimed "revolutionary" against whose advances the opposing party can only stand as "reactionaries." His intent is to restore the viability of "American civilization," an accomplishment he truly regards as being necessary to the salvation of human life on this planet. Unless these goals are met, he attests, the entire world will eventually come to resemble the conflict and trauma that are not characteristic, in his words, "of places like Bosnia, Haita, and Somalia." These are the post-election ideas that are being advanced on the strength of the anger that was congressionally institutionalized following the election of November 1994. Of course, we would like to be there to question the wisdom of the new proposals, and, perhaps, to offer some fresh ideas -- we think they are more viable -- about realistic domestic and international expectations in the years ahead. Yes, American national life

did lose something when it was forced to embrace the manifold complexities of the post Cold War era. And life in our towns and cities have indeed been affected by demographic shifts and population increases. But the temper of our future life will never be the same as anything we have left behind. And only very limited resourcefulness can be derived from reaction and protest. There is no turning back, but there can be a yearning for an increasing number of civil societies (exhibiting "democracies" not necessarily identical to our own) throughout the world, and for a humane, compassionate, and resilient citizenry here at home. In short, reaction must progress to reconstruction. The election of 1994, however, was the moment of protest, in the midst of which we had assumed that we could run a campaign of positive affirmation, Eventually fear and anger must be vanquished by hope and the restoration of idealism. Eventually, we recognize, the campaign that we were about will become victorious. Eventually Democrats will become just as creative and skilfull in their postulations as they are forced to be today in assuming the unfamiliar role of critics and reactionaries. The outcome of the 1994 election makes considerable sense when one considers it in light of the dynamic that became increasingly clear to us as we campaigned throughout the 22nd District of California. We understand why a campaign like ours lost narrowly, for the national odds were against us. But the conversation that belongs to a resilient democracy continues on, and, we trust, moves forward. And we probably would not have known very much of any of this had we not been candidates ourselves.

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[first draft]