

Campaign Analysis ...
The Great Mistake: Election '84*
By W. B. Allen

Carl T. Rowan, long-time defender of the Democratic Party, concluded his 1984 election post-mortem with the caveat that, apart from the presidential race, “the Democratic Party did damn well.” He is correct in that assessment, if he means by it that the Democrats scored impressive wins, despite appearing to deserve repudiation. We will see this clearly if we forget for a moment the mesmerism of incumbency and consider as we ought every eligible seat in a democratic election an open seat, for the burden of democracy is that lovers of the public good must seek to bring home to public opinion the true foundations of liberty and public happiness in every election and with respect to every seat. Only the “realism” of political science and the presumed magic of incumbency incline us to forget that the real work of elections is rather more the formation of public opinion than the mere attainment of office. To put Rowan’s caveat in the context of national offices alone, then, we must inquire what it means, that of 469 seats Democrats acquired 268 (57 percent), while Republicans acquired 201 seats (only 43 percent). Thus, Democrats overall did just about as well as Reagan did in his private race against Mondale!

If, however, Rowan meant to establish that the Democrats’ doing well amounted to serving the nation well, he was wrong. Their victory must be attributed less to their serving the cause of the public good and articulating the true grounds of liberty and public happiness than to Republican failure. The Democrats won by default, precisely because Republicans conceded to them without contest the struggle to form public opinion. Republicans never entered the contest. That was the great mistake of election ‘84, and the story of how it came about is nothing less than a snapshot of the current crisis in American politics.

Let us begin by recognizing that we are obliged to accept the institutional expression of public opinion as the only legitimate expression of the public voice in American life. It will not do to hide behind sophisticated polling techniques and other arcane devices, to argue that there exists an independent public opinion apart from that embodied in the constellation of elected representatives. It is tempting to rub the magic lamp of independent public opinion in order to pretend that we have majority support for our own conception of the public good. The public opinion which is definitive and legitimate, however, is that which takes shape in the constellation of representatives produced by a deliberative appeal to the mind of the public. Given that fact, what is the condition of the Republicans in the aftermath of election ‘84?

Poor indeed! Mere numbers alone would argue that we cease all talk of a realignment in American politics. Yet, every credible index of public sentiment suggests that just such an opportunity did await the Republicans. One need only note the growing numbers of younger voters registering as Republicans. That the people chose to stand pat,

* Published in the *Claremont Review*.

therefore, must be explainable on the grounds that what the people were ready for, they were never offered.

The Theory of Realignments

The model for all realigning elections remains the first, the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800. Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party in that year initiated the process which culminated at length in the demise of the Federalist Party, the party which designed, initiated, and administered the government of the United States for the first twelve years under the Constitution. Jefferson's party achieved this end by means of a forthright challenge to the Federalist leadership in, a coordinated, national political effort. They emphasized their differences to the point of labeling Federalists "monocrats" and "aristocrats." Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans challenged the existing governing pattern and won, in the House of Representatives, by one vote!

The model for all realigning elections, far from being a landslide, was one of the closest elections in our history. Subsequent realigning elections have not departed much from that standard. This ought not to surprise us. Rather, the attention concentrated on the landslide victory as the key to a realignment should surprise us, for landslides generally reflect overwhelming consensus, far more easily marshaled for the status quo, and noncontroversial alternatives in general, than for a sharp departure. Realignment elections flow from starkly, posed, fundamental alternatives, calling upon the people to decide something more than the mere question of who shall be in office. In such a case, where people must consciously choose to alter their habits and inclinations, it would be natural to expect a narrow electoral victory, not a grand one.

The Republican Appeal

The Republicans, from the top of the ticket down, generally failed to pose such alternatives to the American people, despite evidence that the people are disposed to make just such a judgment. Although the Republican Party has become more conservative in recent years, the Republican syndrome remains what it has been for decades, a preference for campaigns which minimize differences, inspired largely by a fear of offending significant blocs of voters. No more vivid example of this can be found than the velvet glove treatment of Jesse Jackson. Jackson is a radical leftist whose notions are greatly incompatible with preserving the conditions of American liberty. But the American people could not perceive that to be the understanding of the Republican Party. The Republicans never said so, nor did they ever appeal to Americans, blacks above all, to repudiate the leftist ideology of Jackson.

The significance of the Republican treatment of Jackson lies in the fact that, among the activists who control the Democratic Party, Jackson is not the pariah he appears. He is completely at one with the radical leftists who, using the cover of the nuclear freeze, have sought to co-opt the party and use it to advance the cause of social democracy in America. His "rainbow coalition" is nothing but their focus on "peoples of color," artfully named. Here, too, the velvet-glove approach obscured the true issue at stake; namely, preservation of a constitutional way of life dedicated to eliminating class warfare. The consequence: a bitter campaign, exploiting and inventing class antagonisms which bear the seeds of future crises in American politics.

One notes the same tendency in Republican responses (or non-responses) to AFL-CIO misrepresentations. Though the provocation on this score was certainly milder, the implications were no less severe. The unions' platform proposals for both party conventions this year were an undisguised characterization of the Reagan Administration as the enemy of the people. Their arguments, however, exceeded the usual, and perhaps excusable, labor movement rhetoric. They extended to a repudiation of the founding "first century of America," which they attacked in the very first sentence of their document as systematic "favoritism of the few at the expense of the many." If America has any claim to human respect, and the Republican Party any title to expound that claim, it surely arises from the principles enshrined in the Founding and consummated in the first hundred years! Yet, the Republican campaign was silent on this direct challenge.

Even the question of national security policy and defense, a Republican basis of strength, did not receive its due development in this campaign. After all, the problem is not that Democrats are soft on defense. The problem is that they are wrong on defense. It may be true that the case for American concern in Central America could not have been made more forcefully in Congress. Since the wrong congressmen are there, the case needed to be made most forcefully before the electorate. And while it may be true that the people find it frightening to contemplate living in a world without on-going arms control talks, the point is that it may endanger the people far more to perpetuate an illusion of security.

America's Needs: A Party's Mission

Even this sampling of election issues goes to show the character of Republican failure. Analysts erred in blaming Jesse Jackson for the perilous racial polarization in this election, especially in the South. True enough, Jackson's racist appeals served to antagonize Americans who felt excluded from his appeal or who were still attached to the goal of a color-blind United States. Nonetheless, who can remember any appeal made to black Americans to eschew Jackson's divisive claims and to cast their votes in affirmation of the goal to eliminate once and for all the question of race in American politics?

Much of the class, race, and interest-group-based rhetoric of our times is the legacy of nineteenth century socialist radicalism. This is alien to the mission and mechanisms of American life. What America requires is a statesmanship that aims at recovering the proper terms of American political rhetoric. The goal of the United States Constitution is to eliminate class warfare – not, *à la* Marxism, to eliminate differences sown in human nature, but to eliminate the exploitation of these differences for the sordid purposes of inordinate ambition. It is therefore legitimate, and necessary, to formulate policy goals which reaffirm the constitutional tendency to augment the middle class, for that is the means to render obsolete the appeal to class antagonism.

It is even possible that the AFL-CIO can be brought to see its future in the preservation of the American past. At least, they can be brought to see the contradiction in their assault on the system that offers the chance to achieve their express hope: "A top priority must be ending the erosion of our nation's middle class." The key to this mission is to respond to citizens' justified fears of a cloying, overweening government presence in their lives. One doesn't need to start writing prayers in order to perceive excessive state

intrusion in the active inhibition of the least display of piety in our schools. Nor need one fear a resurgence of slavery from the desire to encourage the individual initiative and inventiveness, upon which Lincoln relied to provide resources sufficient to spare the treasure ultimately expended in the crisis over slavery. People are better off when we appeal to their sense of opportunity rather than their sense of deprivation, and only such a people can respond to the challenge of self-government we aim to defend. We owe them, then, a free and stable economy, dedicated to growth. They make best use of it when we can also assure them their liberty and personal security, and in that respect nothing is more necessary than to free citizens from the fear of government intemperance.

The party that can accept this mission might indeed inspire a realignment in American politics. It will offer to reconcile diverse constituencies which have been left to imagine that their welfare can come only at the cost of their competitors. It will also take seriously the task to carry the nation into a future beyond nuclear terror, rather than to rely upon perpetual negotiations and the false idea that humanity henceforth must live under the eternal threat of annihilation. It would never bargain to keep what we have, but only to gain something more, to bring about peace and stability in the world. This should be the aim of every negotiation, for this would tend to enhance the security and common good of the United States. And not even the best bargaining would replace our reliance upon the capacity of the United States to vindicate the cause of humanity. The way to fulfill American hopes is to rekindle in America a spirit of progress, trust in ourselves, and faith in our mission.

The mission of the United States is to preserve, against all odds, a hospitable sanctuary for the idea of humanity. The people of the United States require real assurance that the mission still lives as the basis for exercising any fundamental choice. Men from around the world assemble together in these United States to vindicate, in the one place where men can, what the Founders originally claimed – that men everywhere and always could enjoy no greater good than that of self-government. The earth is a hill in the cosmos, astride which America sits as a beacon of hope lighting a path to the glorious fulfillment of mankind's destiny. The people's voice in election '84 proclaimed that they had no reason to consider one party more than the other as fit to captain this mission. Safe to say, then, that only new occasions and new reasons for the people to speak differently will determine whether this country's near-term political future will be Republican.