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American Soul***

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Interpreting the 2004 Election: Polarization and the American Soul

By Ralph Hancock, Ph.D.

To no one's surprise, a hard-fought, too often rancorous presidential election season has been immediately followed by a struggle within the punditocracy to stamp a definitive meaning on the outcome. An exit poll indicating that a surprising (to some, at least) 22% of voters reported "moral values" as their highest priority has been seized upon by spinmeisters from the left as well as the right to support the claim that the re-election of the President is above all a victory for the morally and religiously conservative. In an intriguing confluence of opposing ideological interests, the triumphalism of certain elements of the religious right has been seconded by the self-flattering alarmism of the leftist, the latter led by a number of quite unhinged forebodings at the New York Times, where Gary Wills has solemnly declared the End of Enlightenment. Even Nancy Pelosi, House Minority Leader, permitted herself to wonder aloud whether the Constitution could survive the onslaught of the religious conservatives. All this triumphalism on the one hand and alarmism on the other on this basis of 51%! I suppose 52% would then have to signal either the Second Coming or the End of the World as We Know It.

Of course things are rarely so simple, and democratic elections, almost never. Many factors contributed to Bush's victory, and arguably concerns related to security far outweighed issues such as homosexual marriage and stem-cell research. I will leave the parsing to the experts in such quantifications. In any case, every categorization of the issues ("Values" / "War in Iraq," "War on Terror," "Economy," etc.) is somewhat arbitrary, and always imposes the pollster's own conceptual grid upon the confusing welter of public opinion – or perhaps, rather, public inclination, sensibility, taste, affection, etc.

It may well be, for example, that the concerns of certain more conservative voters that pollsters attempt to capture with labels such as "Values" and "Security" could instead be articulated as part of a larger whole, a quality of the citizen's mind and heart in which certain enduring features of a way of life are held to be worth standing up for politically and militarily, as the case may be. To be sure, such an articulation would itself be a particular, even a partisan interpretation, a perspective grounded in a certain understanding of the common good. This is not at all to say that all interpretations are equally valid or invalid, but rather that the question of the best interpretation of this election is not a neutral, social-scientific investigation, but a problem bound up with that of the meaning of this "common good." It follows that, as we inquire into the meaning of this most recent, or of any election, there is no way to evade a more fundamental question: what makes our democracy good? - the question, that is, of the character of the good and free life that our political institutions and public policies are supposed to serve. This question is the task inherent in what I like to call (paraphrasing Tocqueville) a higher partisanship.

The crudeness of the pollsters' category "values" has been apparent in the Democratic response to some Republicans' efforts to claim the term for themselves. After all, they complain, don't we have values, too, values such as equality, respect for diversity, fairness, compassion etc.? Yes, indeed. But these are proba-

bly not the “values” the pollsters were expecting to tap into. Every social or political objective, including “progressive” ones, can doubtless be framed as a “value.” In the current political parlance, however, the term “values” indicates precisely those goods that do not fit within the scope of secular, progressive objectives that cannot be reduced to material well-being or individual self-expression. If the term “values” means anything, it is a polite way of saying “traditional values,” or “values consonant with traditional religion and personal morality.” If it means anything, then protecting the unborn (a.k.a. “restricting choice”) is a value, but guaranteeing social security is not.

This terminological clarification does nothing to settle the debate between traditional and modern or progressive conceptions of American “values.” In fact the political and ethical culture of the United States has always accommodated concerns from both sides of this divide: traditional “family values” have found a place alongside relentless economic and technological dynamism, faith in God has been no less respectable than faith in a rising standard of living for all. As Tocqueville saw more clearly than anyone before or since, we have always been heirs at once of the Puritans and of the Enlightenment. And the great majority of Americans would surely be very happy to prolong this accommodation, this blessed incoherence. In this sense, the relentless characterization in the media of “red” and “blue” America as radically “polarized” may be increasingly true of elites (media, intellectual, entertainment, etc.), but it is surely mistaken when applied to the electorate as a whole. Most Americans still welcome the chance to situate themselves somewhere in the middle of the ideological spectrum (though there are more self-described conservatives than liberals). A 50-50 (or a 51-48) electorate is perfectly compatible with a bell-curved ideological distribution, heavy in the middle.

But will American voters always be given this chance – will there always be a middle to gravitate towards? The decisive question may not always be where Americans would like to see themselves ideologically (somewhere not too far from the middle, embracing goods both traditional and modern), but rather whether such a middle will always exist. In this sense, the polarized elites might, alas, be right; they might be the canaries in our political coal mine. Not every issue admits of an indefinite postponement of the question of our ultimate priorities, or of the proper limitations of our individual self-expression. The question of homosexual marriage, most notably, seems to confront Americans with a choice that cannot be finessed between traditional and modern visions of a good and free life. And of course it was not the traditionalists, but “progressive” activists and their judges and mayors, who put this issue on the national agenda. (“Civil Union” may seem to recommend itself as a third way, but everyone, or at least all its most active proponents, surely see it for what it is: a convenient means to complete the liquidation of the authority of marriage as this institution has been understood for ages.) The day of our blessed incoherence may be passing.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn discovered in the extreme conditions of the Soviet Gulag that the line dividing good from evil does not distinguish one class or group of people from another but rather runs right down the middle of every human heart. One might say similarly that, for now, the line dividing “traditional values” from a secular and progressive vision of America does not polarize the American public as much as it polarizes the opinions and sensibilities of the typical American. Whether this polarization can much longer be contained within the American soul and prevented from defining American politics is an open question.