

AN OPEN LETTER TO CONSERVATIVES AND REPUBLICANS

The very early hours of Wednesday, November 5, 2008, are going to seem eerily, excitingly, frustratingly familiar to anyone in this country who is older than twelve, has an IQ higher than 100, and has ever watched a TV news program, or read a newspaper, or clicked on a news story. The polls in Alaska will close at midnight Eastern Standard Time, and that will bring to a close the casting of ballots that began twenty-four hours earlier in Dixville Notch, New Hampshire, in the first presidential election since 1952 that will feature neither a sitting president nor a sitting vice president as a candidate for the highest office in the land.

And just as was the case in the two preceding presidential elections, we still won't yet know which of the two—or three—major candidates will be the next president.

For once again, probably after all kinds of confusion caused by yet another set of ill-conceived and politicized exit polls that will have Republicans in a panic and Democrats in a state of unrealistic glee, the electoral map will have fallen into place pretty much as it did on the last two Election Days. States along the Pacific Ocean and the North Atlantic will be colored a solid Democratic blue, while the Southwest, the South, and most of the nation's midsection will shout out in vivid Republican red.

The political operatives crowded together at the huge please-God-let-our-team-win parties in Washington—Democrats packing the Old Post Office, Republicans filling the Ronald Reagan Center—will be awash in anxiety as thousands of unreleased balloons hang far over their heads waiting either to be released in joy or to remain suspended in defeat. For the third election in a row, the vote counts in Ohio, Florida, Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire will be inconclusive. Anchormen will be explaining how if the Dems take Florida and Pennsylvania, the Republicans will have to win every other state to record the necessary 270 electoral votes—and then move on to an entirely different set of calculations according to which Republicans need win only Florida and Ohio to get there. After which, a panel made up of blabbermouth pundits, who will be getting punchy and maybe even a tad psycho, will fill some time until the “decision desk” can call another state.

And then, as the tension grows to an almost unbearable level, the toss-up states will begin to tip . . . but which way? Which way?

If you conservatives and Republicans—you Republican thinkers, strategists, politicians, and voters and you conservative activists, intellectuals, and organizers—can come to a meeting of the minds about the seriousness of the threat facing this country in the next election, you can make sure that the balloons drop on you and not on the other guys. You can forestall and prevent the most frightening and disastrous outcome of that early morning. You can guarantee that the candidate you most dread will not be not standing in front of the west face of the U.S. Capitol alongside Chief Justice John Roberts on January 20, 2009. You can prevent that candidate from being the person who will utter the words spoken by only forty-two other Americans in this nation’s history.

Yes, if you do what must be done to ensure that this nation will be safe and secure and economically viable as it enters the second decade of the third millennium, you and your fellow Americans (and the world) will never hear the sentence specified by Article 2, Section 1 of the United States Constitution spoken as follows: "I, Hillary Rodham Clinton, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

You can end the newest American political dynasty aborning. You can make certain that William Jefferson Clinton does not get to move back into the White House and serve as history's first First Gent. Eight years after his ignominious departure from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, amid reports that the White House had been trashed by outgoing staffers and amid general disgust at the extravagant pardons Clinton had been handing out like so many business cards, the man who turned the White House into a fee-for-service hotel and toyed with insecure young women and tortured widows and God knows who else in the nooks and crannies of the West Wing will continue to have to do his wretched business elsewhere.

The flip side of this scenario is also unfortunately true. For if you Republicans don't get real serious real fast, if you don't wise up and settle down and get focused, that *will* be Hillary up there on the podium taking the oath of office from John Roberts. Hillary Rodham Clinton will become the next president of the United States unless you Republicans can find a way to stop her.

And you can.

But to do so, you need to understand just how real the possibility of her victory is and what kind of challenge that poses to you as a party and a movement. You need to come

together in recognition of the threat. You need to avoid the temptation that has begun to afflict members of the party's more ideological branches—the temptation to threaten to break off, to secede, to run third-party protest candidacies. That will only get Hillary elected.

POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL writers are fond of sports analogies, and when they're looking for one, they usually go straight to football or baseball. Neither is the proper metaphor for what happens in elections. The sport providing the closest analogy is golf. Golf is a game played over a series of days in which a contender must not only compete with others but must also overcome his own natural human tendency to fail—to lose focus, get lazy, ease up, worry himself to death, get cocky and overconfident, or become self-destructive. Usually, the golfer who wins a tournament is the one who makes the fewest unforced errors, the one who gets in his own way the least.

And so it is with politics. Elections in America—and in this case I refer only to contested elections, those increasingly rare events where nobody quite knows on Election Day which of the two leading candidates is going to prevail—are almost never *won*. Indeed, the real trick to winning an election in America isn't to win it. The trick is *not to lose it*. In 2000 and 2004, George W. Bush won the presidency in large measure because he made fewer mistakes than Al ("Let me come across as three different people in three different debates") Gore and John ("I voted for the \$87 billion before I voted against it") Kerry.

Now, you can certainly make the case, and I would, that Gore and Kerry made the unforced errors they did because they didn't quite know what they stood for and what message they were trying to get across and so they were superbly well

suited to fuffer and blather and trip on their own shoelaces. You can make the case that it was easy for George W. Bush to stick to his rigidly programmed stump speeches, to say the same thing in the same way for months and months and months without going insane, because he knew at his core what he was running for and why selling his message was the best way to get to Washington (or stay in Washington) and do what he thought he needed to do for the country. Or you can make the case that Bush is a boring, programmed robot, lacking the kind of human frailties that might cause a Gore or a Kerry to screw up charmingly.

Whichever side of the argument you take, Bush's two elections prove that *not losing* is a vital part—maybe *the* vital part—of winning. And now, as 2008 approaches, the Republican Party faces a very complicated task. To stop Hillary Clinton, it has to *not lose* to her. To succeed in this aim, Republicans need to start now. You must avoid fights to the death with one another. You know you want to have them. But you can't tear yourselves apart over them. The cost will simply be too high for the country to bear.

This is not to say that disagreements among Republicans and conservatives over matters of policy and conscience are bad and to be avoided. Far from it. The greatest sign of health in the Republican Party is its growing capacity to house people who share the same rough vision of the nation's direction but who have differing views on how to get there. That rough vision, the Republican vision, can be summed up briefly as this: America is and should be a country that rewards individual achievement and hard work, disdains a culture of preferential treatment and group rights, believes in equality of opportunity rather than the equality of result, upholds traditional values, and is dedicated to securing the nation from foreign threats.

Now, do the Republican Party's politicians act in ways

that are always commensurate with this vision? Of course not. They are politicians first and foremost, and most of them are guilty of the same sins that have corrupted elected officials since the dawn of time—especially the sleazy but legal use of public moneys to buy support from voters, reward friends and donors, punish enemies and rivals, and cement their own place in office forever.

In particular, for many rank-and-file Republicans, life would certainly be simpler if the party—the party of traditional values and individual accomplishment—had proved to be more exacting in its management of the Congress in the years since the GOP took it over in 1994 than the party of Big Government was in the forty years preceding it. But that was not to be. Perhaps even hoping that it could have been so was a dangerous illusion. And so many Republicans and movement conservatives, disdainful of Washington and its tendency to turn Puritan reformers into Epicurean revelers, are currently expressing great distress about the behavior of the Washington party—about the rise of creepy lobbyists, the use of Congressional pork, and the prevalence of cronyism.

God knows it would be nice if you could have politics without politicians, but you can't. Politics is a profession, and in general, people behave in nasty and unseemly ways when it comes to keeping their jobs. Politicians are among the reasons why, in his great essay, the novelist E. M. Forster was able to issue only "two cheers for democracy." So as 2008 looms, Republicans and conservatives should be sadder and wiser about politics—sadder because the ideal of a "Republican Revolution" as promulgated in the 1990s proved to be a fantasy, and wiser because it's always better to look at the world through clear and cold eyes rather than rose-colored glasses. And here's what you see when you look through clear and cold eyes: Sometimes, in politics, the best you can do is to play the

Lesser of Two Evils game. You may have to commit yourself to a candidate who is not the most wonderful person you can think of, a candidate who disappoints you and even angers you in many ways—because it's more important to prevent a result you know will be bad news.

Hillary = Bad News.