



Aspenia

Idea Il centro dell'America

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La bipartisanship degli errori (or, Two wrongs don't make a right)

by Eric B. Schnurer

The 2006 elections represent in many ways the political equivalent of Dr. Johnson's description of second marriages: the triumph of hope over experience. The Democrats did very little to convince Americans that they offered anything new. They studiously avoided any sort of agenda, much less any notion of how better to deal with Iraq, banking from the beginning on the (apparently successful) notion that cascading frustration with Republican shortcomings would be sufficient to induce enough voters simply to hope for better. These elections represent a clear call for a change in the country's direction – but they offer little idea of what that new direction ought to be, as no-one has really offered one.

Both parties remain wedded to out-of-date agendas: the Democrats obviously trapped in the Great Society at home and the Vietnam era abroad, Republicans stuck on rolling back the 20th Century domestically while refighting the Cold War against Islamic fundamentalism instead of Communism. As Thomas Kuhn observed in *THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS*, ideologies continue to be propped up long after the facts contradict them – until at last they collapse. Our entire notion of the public sector needs an overhaul: Today, governments – like just about everything else in the 21st Century – increasingly must compete in an evolving marketplace for their services against new types of competitors. But these new realities have barely entered the political debate, which may help explain why the public – which knows which way the wind is blowing long before the politicians do – finds the choice between what the parties offer less than compelling. In each of the three main areas into which public policy is generally divided – economic, social, and foreign policy – the underlying realities of government have changed in ways that render *both* parties' ideologies largely obsolete.

Economic Policy: From Cop to Co-Op

Changing technology has rendered most seemingly “natural” monopolies – such as telecommunications and electricity – no longer defensible. The same is happening to government services: The fastest growing industry in the United States today is education, including at the elementary and secondary levels – formerly the near-exclusive province of the state. Public safety has increasingly been taken over by the private sector and private firms are expanding in such areas as tax collection, waging war, and even interrogating enemy prisoners and terrorist suspects.

But this increased competition isn't one-way: Even as government is decreasingly *regulating* the market for its citizens, it is increasingly *entering* the market on behalf of its consumers. Bulk-purchasing of prescription drugs and health insurance have replaced both regulation and public entitlements as the progressive solution on health care. The one Democratic idea in this area involving old-fashioned government regulation is to *repeal* it, ending the drug companies' use of the government to enforce market segmentation by allowing re-importation of drugs from Canada. Government purchasing power is being used to leverage objectives from wage and labor standards to safer guns, rather than legislating them. Democrats do not seem to notice that, in all this, they are replacing the notion of government as cop with government as co-op. (Meanwhile, it is the Republicans who fight for government dictates, in areas from bankruptcy to copyright, that employ the full power of the state to carry out the modern fencing of the commons.)

More and more, people will be able to decide how much – and which – government they will “buy.” This will put increasing pressure on government to perform. But if government rises to the challenge, it will put increasing pressure on the private sector to do so, as well. Could government actually win a fair fight with the private sector? Consider Social Security, perhaps the most popular and successful US government program ever: Almost all Democrats today want to keep Social Security exactly as it is, as if its design were set out in Leviticus for all generations. The Bush Administration has a vaguely-defined desire to convert all Social Security to a system of “private accounts,” whereby individuals would take control of the money the government currently sets aside in their names and invest it through the private sector. Unlike most Democrats (or, for that matter, most Americans, according to the polls), I like the idea of converting a portion of Social Security to a system of privately-controlled accounts. But if such a system of private accounts ever is introduced, there should be one proviso: Americans should be able to *choose* to leave the money exactly where it is – with the federal government, which “charges” a money management fee a small fraction of those in the private sector, safely invested in Treasury bills: For the basic retirement security most Americans want, the government program would be by far the best choice. But why not give them that choice – instead of mandating it, as liberals would, or taking it away, as conservatives would? A competitive government

program would force private businesses to cut their fees and offer consumers better risk/reward choices. Today, however, neither party would hear of this.

Social Policy: The Carrot and the Stick

Liberals and conservatives in the US today perhaps can be defined best by their approach to the use of coercion in order to promote social or moral objectives: Liberals rarely view punishment as “solving” anything, preferring to recognize the assistance many people need in order to overcome their antisocial behavior. Conservatives, on the other hand, see such coddling as unproductive at best: “Spare the rod, spoil the child.”

Research and experience across a wide range of fields indicates, however, that they’re both wrong. Take, for instance, crime: The vast majority of crime in America is drug-driven or drug-related. Locking people up may work in theory, but it turns out to do little in reality: Our prisons are among the best places to obtain illegal drugs. More importantly, drug addiction is, by definition, not easily overcome. Threatening addicts doesn’t seem to work very well. What *does* appear to work is incentives combined with coercion. Few people kick their drug habits without treatment programs, including psychological counseling and other sorts of “aftercare.” But numerous studies and programs have found that treatment is more likely to be effective if coupled with coercion. One might suppose that individuals who volunteer for treatment programs would be more likely to succeed because they are self-selecting for motivation; it turns out that this is false: Those who are *forced* into treatment programs (usually with the threat of significant jail time if they do not participate and succeed) have a higher success rate than those who enter voluntarily. Once successfully “detoxified,” drug abusers need continued support, such as counseling, productive work so they can support themselves lawfully and, usually, assistance in finding it. But they also need continued coercion: Those trying to beat a drug habit – like other bad habits – generally fall “off the wagon” several times before attaining sustainable success. Sure, they deserve our compassion and help in doing so – but they also need sanctions for failing in order to succeed.

Similar results emerge in other areas of crime control. Take, for instance, “boot camps,” which have become more controversial as they have become more an excuse for abuse. In fact, however, research has shown boot camps to be quite effective in straightening out mild-to-moderate offenders – but on one condition: that the boot camp experience include not just coercive punishment components but also serious attempts at aftercare and re-entry services that ensure that the negative lessons learned from the camp experience are in fact translated into positive and lasting improvements. In short, punishment by itself rarely accomplishes much of lasting value – although solicitousness for antisocial behavior rarely does, either. You need both the carrot *and* the stick.

The broader lesson – that traditional conservative and liberal social policies are inadequate in their hermetically-sealed worlds – can be demonstrated by programs to promote marriage among welfare recipients, the one truly new feature of President Bush’s welfare reform agenda. Assuming that marriage does help move families out of poverty, can governments effectively move people into marriage? An evaluation of the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) suggests significant positive impacts on the marital stability of two-parent families – but not without some irony: MFIP accomplished these results by removing limits on the amount either parent could work gainfully – and allowing families to retain higher levels of income – while remaining eligible for welfare. In other words, it provided somewhat more liberal, and less punitive, benefits – in stark contrast to policies that conservative “marriage promotion” advocates like the Bush Administration otherwise embrace. This is consistent, however, with what we have seen in other policy areas: Public policies work best in promoting desirable behaviors not through dogmatic application of either punitive or incentive policies but through a pragmatic combination of both – such as not just making welfare less appealing, but making marriage “pay.”

Foreign Policy: The Virtual State

American politics continue to be plagued by another false dichotomy – between the Bush Administration’s view of the war on terrorism as a traditional war on traditional states and most Democrats’ vision of a struggle that is not a “real” war at all, waged against foes that are not traditional states. These foes harbor pretensions of operating as states – raising armies, waging wars, controlling substantial financial flows, and ultimately lording over the lives of millions of people – but do so through non-territorial, stateless “networks.” This poses a challenge to the state’s claim to the monopoly of force and raises the novel challenge of the “virtual state” – a challenge that does not fit neatly within either party’s current ideological portfolio.

The short-term response, on which there is broad consensus, is to identify, seek out, and destroy terrorists proactively as one would any criminals; to augment our human and technological intelligence assets; to harden our targets and strengthen our defenses; to work through diplomatic, political and economic structures to alleviate poverty and ignorance; and to promote democratic (dare we say “liberal”?) regimes – in other words, to wield all the tools that traditional states traditionally wield.

But even when this occurs, it won’t be the end of individuals who do not view themselves as part of the connected world and wish to attack or change it. What is the state’s long-term response to these challengers?

Ironically, it is to beat virtual states by joining them, as the nation-state is likely to do over the next half-century. In fact, it could be argued that the United States is already well on the way: Most of the world aspires to drink Coca-Cola,

wear Levis, watch Hollywood movies, listen to rock music, act out the lifestyle they represent (a somewhat ironic mix of brand consumerism and self-expression), study and work in our universities and cutting-edge industries, and live – whether at home or abroad – under American values of freedom, democracy, and due process of law. This is true even in the Islamic world, where, to a large extent, the grievances against America are cultural, too – specifically, ideas about gender roles and their cousin, sexuality.

But neither al-Qaeda's continuing jihad nor the worldwide unpopularity of the American government has put a dent in this American juggernaut. Nor is it likely to do so. American culture and values represent successful "products," and as these ideas and ideals are ever-more-broadly dispersed around the world – as global politics, economics, even self-definitions become less about physical ties and more, well, virtual – attacking physical manifestations of nationhood will be less and less meaningful. In strategic terms, this is the opposite of "hardening" our targets – making them more ephemeral and diffuse – but it has the same effect: rendering physical attack pointless, at least in the long term.

Ultimately, then, as the Bush Doctrine itself recognizes, this "war" is about "selling the product" – at which Americans have long excelled, from blue jeans and Coca-Cola to capitalism and democracy. But that makes the Bush Administration's approach to the world somewhat anomalous: What aspect of our values is missing? Morality. If you listen to enough domestic political blather, you would believe this is the conservative's home turf – after all, Republican rhetoric at home about private mores, marriage, sexuality in the media, traditional gender roles, and the superiority of religion over secular science are so tailor-made for consumption by most of the Arab world that we ought to be distributing Republican campaign commercials to al-Jazeera. Yet promoting abroad these socially conservative American values – which, little as liberals and Europeans may like it, actually are as American as apple pie (or, certainly, Hollywood) – largely has been ignored by the Bush Doctrine.

Instead, this Administration has quite brazenly abandoned what many view as America's core moral values. Cheneyism is simply an embrace of the Hobbesian state of nature – as the Athenians so neatly summarized it for the Corinthians, "The strong do as they want and the weak do as they must." Tough and realistic as this might be, it conforms to no religion's definition of "morality" and represents a rejection of America's historic values from the Declaration of Independence, through the Wilsonian idealism of a century ago that the Bush Administration originally professed to emulate, to the remarkably successful post-World War II "Washington Consensus" that made the US the most powerful nation in the history of the world. The rejection of torture, secret proceedings, domestic spying, intolerance of dissent – these are in fact moral values, moral values that have made America the beacon to the world for 230 years, and, despite the current Administration, still do. "Moral values" are ultimately America's greatest strength. But Democrats dare not speak the words. Shame.