

LXXXVIII – A Rational Choice For November 2nd

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By Butler Shaffer

I can recall no time during my years on this planet when a presidential election has had less significance than this one. I know this statement flies in the face of the hyperbolic rhetoric engaged in, by Republicratic party drum-beaters, as they induce you to part company with your innate intelligence by joining the chuckleheads in a mad dash to the voting booths. The little stickers that read "I voted" — worn so proudly by those wishing to confirm their allegiance to the system that is destroying their lives — reminds me of the "kick me" signs teenagers used to tape onto the backs of their fellow students.

This year marks my fortieth anniversary of not voting. Most of my colleagues attribute my non-participation to "apathy" or "protest," neither of which explains my refusal to dance the lemming two-step. I don't vote for the same reason I don't rob banks or molest children: it is not the way I choose to live my life. I am not "apathetic" about not victimizing others: to the contrary, I insist upon such a trait. My entire sense of being is incompatible with coercing others. I can no more hide my ambitions over your life or property within the secret confines of a voting booth than I could confront my neighbor with a gun and demand his money. Voting is nothing more than a periodic public affirmation in the faith of systematic violence as a social system.

The state lives on the fears it has generated, for fear mobilizes collective thinking and action. This is the meaning of Randolph Bourne's oft-quoted observation that "war is the health of the state." But fear has a way of feeding back upon itself in ways not always related to specific concerns. Warfare, inflation, increased taxation, immigration policies, corporate-state self-serving machinations, health-care costs, terrorism, crime rates, the failure of government schools, police-state practices, and other forms of social conflict, are just some of the outward manifestations of politically-induced fear. But such fears metastasize into undercurrents of unfocused anxiety that arise as desperation.

It is this sense of formless apprehension that underlies much of this year's election. I suspect that many people have become implicitly aware — even as they refuse to openly admit it to themselves — that the society in which they live doesn't work well anymore. They are not yet prepared to consider that the social structures they have been conditioned to think of as timeless and immutable are collapsing; and that new systems of social organization — grounded in peace and liberty — must be found. Faith in the dying regime must be reaffirmed, and voting becomes the most visible, collective expression of political piety.

Even many critics of the state, men and women who deem themselves "libertarians," have a difficult time transcending the mindset that social change arises through collective political action. Perhaps a few lessons in physics will disabuse such people of the belief that state power can be reduced — or even eliminated — by the pouring of more human energy into the political system!

Such is the frustration that attends the terminal condition of political systems. Few are any longer convinced that the state can produce golden ages or great societies or workers' paradises, but they dare not renounce their faith in an open fashion, and so content themselves with participation in the voting ritual. But look at what this year's presidential campaign has become: not the uniting of people around a grand new social vision, but opposition to the other party's candidate! Democrats continue to mouth the phrase "anybody but Bush," while the Republicans focus upon the shortcomings of John Kerry instead of the alleged virtues of George Bush.

There is a sadistic quality to the political establishment's selection of these wretched candidates as their front-men in this election. The established order cares not which man prevails, as its policies will be advanced with either. There is "bipartisan support" — a phrase reflective of the one-party system in America — by Bush and Kerry for continuation of the war in Iraq (and, perhaps, its extension to other nations); for the Patriot Act, with its police-state implications; and for further enlarging the size and powers of the federal government. While the Iraq war is foremost in the minds of most Americans, these two men have carefully skirted that issue, preferring to focus on the Vietnam War, and their respective roles therein.

While the political establishment will be satisfied with either Bush or Kerry in office, it will be even more pleased with a large voter turnout that would create the impression of a reinvigorated support for statism. But the establishment wants the expression of choices confined to its two entries in this race: third party candidates (or what should more accurately be referred to as second party offerings) are to be discouraged — by the media, televised debates, and ballot access — because the establishment does not control these parties. The concerted effort to keep alternative political parties out of the process confirms the observation that, if voting could change the system it wouldn't be legal.

I suspect that, come next Tuesday, the voting booths will be filled with men and women who are so thoroughly conditioned in externally-directed, politically-structured thinking and behavior that they can conceive of no other way in which their lives and the rest of society could be organized. To such people, the phrase "anybody but Bush" could as easily be expressed as "any authority over my life but myself."

A politically-dominated society squeezes the humanity and spirit out of most of its members. Perhaps the saddest manifestation of this is to be found in the continued willingness of men and women to revere the forms and participate in the rituals that have

demoralized their lives. The political process produces men and women who sleep, but do not dream; people whose visions of the future are little more than recycled memories.

Still, there is some hope that might emerge from next Tuesday's national circus. Whether Bush or Kerry wins will be completely irrelevant to the quality of your life for the next four years, so you might consider abandoning any illusions to the contrary. The only significant message that could emerge from this election is if vast numbers of eligible voters refuse to participate in the spectacle. To paraphrase Charlotte Keyes, suppose they gave an election, and no one came? If American soldiers in Iraq can muster the courage to refuse to go on suicide missions, can the rest of us find the boldness to refuse to participate in the quadrennial rites that place these young people in such dangers? What if we began to understand the voting process as an integral part of a suicide mission undertaken on behalf of a system that is destroying our lives? Would not the sight of empty voting booths signify a real change in America, informing the political establishment that it no longer commands either our respect or our fears?

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