

LIII – What's in an Election?

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By Butler Shaffer

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I have received a number of e-mails — as well as responses from my students and one of my colleagues — concerning the ballot exercise of which I wrote in my previous article. In identifying two hypothetical candidates, not by name but by policies for which they stood, most readers and students were surprised to discover that the first candidate was a composite of the American "founding fathers," while the latter represented Adolf Hitler. From more than a few I received the following complaint: "if you had told us that the second candidate believed in locking up and killing racial and ethnic minorities, we would have known it was Hitler and wouldn't have voted for him." To such people, the entire exercise amounted to nothing more than a clever trick on my part.

It is easy for us to recognize — and to reject — viciousness when it is presented to us in an explicit manner. If Americans, today, were asked: "are you in favor of having the United States bomb and invade a nation that had nothing to do with the events of 9/11, and kill or maim tens of thousands of their innocent civilians, all because we are outraged at what a handful of suicidal terrorists did to the World Trade Center?," I suspect that not even the Fox News crowd would answer "yes." The nature of the atrocity would be so apparent as to shock the sense of decency of most people.

Most of the problems we encounter in our politicized world derive from our failure to comprehend what is implicit in policies which, on their face, sound so worthy of our support. For those of you who have not read my previous article, I invite you to do so, and to consider the programs supported by candidate B (Hitler). Who wouldn't be in favor of eliminating cancer, or promoting healthful foods and forms of living, or protecting the environment? Who, in other words, is against having the world become a safer and healthier place in which to live? It is little wonder that, at least in previous years, 75% of those who participated in this exercise chose candidate B.

The 19th century French economist and philosopher, Frdric Bastiat, wrote an essay titled "That Which Is Seen, That Which Is Not Seen," in which he explored the relationship between the explicit and the implicit consequences of governmental policies. Political systems feed on the apparent lack of correlation between an action and its effects. Like alcoholics or habitual drug users, those addicted to political practices insist upon the illusion that what one does in the present, or in an isolated environment, will bear no long-term or

generalized hardships. Thus, millions of people are willing to impose the costs of present government programs upon unborn generations, in what has become a cycle of child abuse about which it is "politically incorrect" to comment!

I suspect that had Adolf Hitler announced, prior to his coming to power in 1933, that he intended to incarcerate and murder Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and communists, and that he would institute an SS-enforced reign of terror upon the rest of the German population, most Germans, like my students and readers, would have rejected his candidacy. But his explicit appeal was to those values that most people could openly embrace, and which — as the results of my hypothetical voting exercise confirms — reflect the "politically correct" sentimentality of a troubled and confused world.

When men and women adopt an idealized image of the world, and are prepared to sanitize and safeguard it from all sorts of imperfections and unwholesome conditions, it becomes a simple matter to define people and their lifestyles or interests as "diseases" to be eradicated by state action. Indeed, a Nazi thinker, Alfred Rosenberg, regarded Jews as a bacteria that infected German society. As the present American government begins to define for our consumption a new set of enemies — the "terrorists" — should we not become sensitive to the lessons of recent history?

Our present society is awash with well-intentioned but dangerous men and women with all kinds of coercively-enforced proposals for making the world "better." Such people, whom the late Alan Watts described as "wanting to scrub the universe," have turned the media into a platform for announcing the latest experiment in social sterilization. Tobacco companies and smokers must be targeted for state action; as must those who allow their children to eat in "fast-food" restaurants, get too much exposure to the sun, or remain in an unattended car. Motorcyclists who won't wear helmets; pet owners who mistreat their pets; or people who engage in discriminatory, offensive, sexist, or other forms of politically incorrect thought, speech, or conduct, must also be regulated. Obesity is to become a governmental "problem" to be addressed through legislation, taking its place alongside drug and alcohol "abuse." Nor can SUV owners, people who talk on cell-phones, or motorists who are "distracted" by any kind of conduct, be left out of efforts to decontaminate society of behavioral "impurities."

The radical environmentalists who are willing to destroy property or kill those whose visions of nature do not conform to their own, should remember that Hitler, himself, was an avid environmentalist; that Nazism was, as one writer describes it, "a religion of nature." He also strongly opposed the use of animals in medical research; favored restrictions on the use of pesticides, asbestos, and radiation; and was a vegetarian and advocate of organic farming.

Do you wonder why Hitler keeps winning in my classroom elections?

Does this mean that everyone who believes in respecting the rest of nature, or who wants to maintain an organic or vegetarian diet, or who opposes experimentation on animals, is a closet Nazi? Obviously not, nor was that the purpose of my voting exercise. There are many activities in which others engage of which you or I may disapprove. The question is whether our displeasure rises to such a level that we are prepared to call upon the state to enforce our behavioral expectations upon others. Are the lives and properties of others to be subject to state preemption upon an insistence that others conform themselves to our peculiar images of how the world should be?

What is implicit in every political system is that the powers of the state will be used to coerce others to behave as those in power want them to, even as to matters of purely personal conduct. Politicized people are like dogs that have never become housebroken, making messes for others to clean up. Those who respect the inviolability of others — which represents the essence of liberty — will content themselves with conducting their lives according to their interests and values, without trespassing on the lives of others.

This is the meaning not only of my classroom voting exercise, but of the "real-world" elections in which so many of us partake as the expression of social responsibility. What does voting represent, if not our participation in the illusion of helping to define the policies and programs that the state should enforce upon our neighbors?

And from whence do these programs — and the candidates who espouse them — arise? Do they arise from within your carefully considered thoughts, or are they simply peddled to you in much the same way as the fads and styles of any age? Do you ever ask yourself, as the 2004 elections begin to loom, who it is that defines the "leading candidates" for your consideration? Do you sit around and discuss such matters with your friends, neighbors, and work associates and then inform the media that, in your opinion, Joe Shlock would be a wonderful candidate for the Senate? Or does the media inform you that Joe Shlock and Sally Forth are the two leading candidates; that the race is too close to call and, therefore, that one should vote for either Shlock or Forth rather than "wasting" your vote on someone else?

It has been amusing watching the gubernatorial recall election going on here in California. The voices that had heretofore condemned the citizenry for not being interested in electoral politics suddenly erupted in indignation when members of the electorate demanded a recall vote, and echoed their disgust when some 135 candidates filed as candidates for governor. But for those who persist in the delusion that their vote means something, how do they go about making a choice among so many candidates?

It didn't take the media long to sift things out. Radio, television, and newspapers began identifying three or four "leading" contenders — those who were considered "safe" for establishment interests — from which California voters were expected to make their choices. The "officially" recognized candidates were the only ones selected to participate in the "official" televised debate. But what about the other 130 or so candidates? They were just as

arbitrarily relegated to the category of "side show freaks," to be dealt with, humorously — if at all — as a kind of change of pace story. This is why I suggested, in an earlier article, that those who believe it worthwhile to vote could select from among these also-rans — my recommendation was the billboard model, Angelyne — a candidate who might be a voter's protest against the implicit dishonesty of politics itself.

Even having a recall election is a small victory for the voices of protest. And now and then a protest candidate wins an election, as witness Jesse Ventura in Minnesota. But the triumph is short-lived, for even a protest winner will end up getting absorbed into the system. The parasitic class will quickly attach itself to the new host, who will find himself or herself too weak and isolated to resist the temptations that accompany power.

In order to put voting in its proper perspective, imagine that you are a prisoner in a state penitentiary. But it's a democratic prison, in which the inmates are allowed, every four years, to select who is to be the warden. The prison system presents you with two choices: candidate A, who promises larger cells and less crowding, and candidate B, who promises better cafeteria food and extended exercise periods. You may vote for either candidate, but implicit in the process is the understanding that you will remain a prisoner. If a fellow inmate decides to run for the job as a "Prison Liberation Front" candidate who promises to tear down the prison walls, his name will not appear on the ballot. Indeed, he will likely be sent to solitary confinement. He will have learned, as will you, the real lesson implicit in every election: no matter who you vote for, the government always gets elected, for if voting could change the system it wouldn't be legal.

As I finished writing this article, I was informed that the federal 9th Circuit Court of Appeals — at the behest of the ACLU — enjoined the October 7th recall election on the grounds that six counties would be using punch-card ballots, which might disenfranchise some voters. You will recall the 2000 presidential election controversy in Florida, wherein Democrats alleged that punch-card ballots were sometimes ineffective, and that a more thorough recount ought to have been held. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a recount, as ordered by the Florida courts, would violate the "equal protection" clause, as it would have applied only to certain counties and not to others, a decision that confirmed the election of George W. Bush.

That punch-card voting may be prone to error is doubtless true, but the same can be said of paper ballot and machine voting. A question that remains unanswered — because unasked — is whether the method of voting is a matter to be determined by the courts or by the legislature. However the issue gets resolved, intelligent voters will doubtless be left with the same sense of political powerlessness felt when they find the courts often setting aside — as "unconstitutional" — referendum measures favored by a majority of voters. To the political establishment, the running of a government is too important a task to be left in the hands of the public!

The Best of Butler Shaffer

