
POLITICAL BRIEF

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AMERICA AS POST-PARTISAN?

BY
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The last Sunday in February, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced that he was in his **post-partisan phase**. Somehow, I was fascinated. I had just finished reading a series of books on America's revolutionary period, and I tried to contrast the early Federalist period with post-partisanship. The early Federalist period was, after all, pre-partisan, in a manner of speaking. The concept of post-partisanship started me on a virtual kaleidoscope of thoughts. Thoughts about the beginnings of the American revolution, constitutional developments, concepts of Federalism, Adams' preferences for monarchical republicanism, Jeffersonian democracy a/k/a Democratic-Republicanism, Jacksonian democracy, and on and on....

What does it mean: post-partisan phase? Governor Schwarzenegger says that a public servant who places the needs of constituents over the needs of the party is in a post-partisan phase. It's not a bad concept.

Schwarzenegger got some criticism for his pronouncement of his post-partisan phase. It's a good way to walk away from George Bush, pundits said. Easily distance yourself from a singularly unpopular president without becoming the dreaded Democrat. But Schwarzenegger didn't coin the phrase post-partisan. Actually, his cousin by marriage, John-John did, almost 15 years ago in the first issue of his magazine, *George*. John-John's critics suggested that *George* was contemptuous of partisanship because it was contemptuous of politics, while John-John argued that his aim was to make politics accessible, with the hope that popular interest and involvement in the political process would follow. Funny, isn't it? *George* – for George, as in George Washington, father of our country, and the only true pre-partisan president.

Whatever you think of Schwarzenegger, there is really nothing wrong with serving constituents rather than serving the party. In fact, it has a noble ring to it. Challenging partisanship may be the issue of the future. General (Ret.) and former Secretary Colin Powell, a highly respected member of the second President Bush's first cabinet, historically behaved as non-partisan. In fact, when he was toying with the idea for standing for election to the presidency himself, he advocated a reconsideration of America's incredibly strong two-party system.

Secretary Powell's criticism of the two-party system may have legs. His analysis is that our very strong and very partisan two-party system requires us to link certain issues to other issues, when probably the majority of us do not truly toe the party line on all issues. Example: Why does a fiscal conservative typically align himself with a party that opposes a woman's right to an abortion? Why can't a hawk also support beneficent social programs? The fact is that the majority of us may not even comprehend the underlying philosophical backbone of the party to which we pledge our allegiance. The majority of us know the sound bite stuff, but do we ever inquire into the underlying philosophical backbone of the party with which we tend to associate, much less inquire into where and why these parties stand the way they do on particular issues.

Unlike Governor Schwarzenegger, who is now invested in listening to the command of his constituency rather than the command of his party, Secretary Powell advocates that

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constituents listen to their brains and plug in rational thinking, and not be tied to a label – be it Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative. The truth is that post-partisanship demands thoughtful action, both from politicians, parties and the voting public.

If we begin at the beginning, we may wonder how we ever ended up with partisanship in the first place. There is no doubt that in a democratic system, public decisions by politicians and voters should be made on the merits of the policies rather than on the merits of the advocates. Some political theorists argue that partisanship fundamentally damages the political process.

Those of us who are of a certain age may perceive that partisanship has exploded geometrically in the last two decades, although we may not be sure why. It could be the result of sound bites which feed us merely the appetizer of issues and not the main course. It could be the tradition of strongly partisan newspapers which developed in the United States in the 19th Century, followed by a rash of strongly partisan news broadcasting companies in the 20th. And then came the World Wide Web – filled with unassailable doctrinaire colloquy, much of it without redeeming social value, validity or viability. Perhaps the more recent explosion of partisanship may be derived from Newt – filled with hubris, no doubt – but he did deliver on the Contract with America. Or Nancy – although she delivered on her first 100 hours, too.

Valid political decision-making has its basis in good, unbiased information and independent political analysis. In an age of partisanship such as ours, where does one find good, unbiased information on which to render independent political analysis, and where does one find independent political analysis to consider over a good cup of morning java? I don't know. And the follow-up question is a frightening one: Do Americans think anymore?

The American presidency was born in a pre-partisan era. George Washington was, while nominally a Federalist, certainly not a party person. He was, in fact, the glue that was holding the colonies together during his first term. There is ample evidence pre-partisan America was born of George Washington and his leadership. Whether it was his self-consciousness that he was not as well educated or as well read as many of his contemporaries, or whether it was the distinguished, silent and regal personal style that characterized his military and political leadership, his actions provided little fodder for criticism until late in his second term and his leadership was that of a quiet and non-partisan man.

Americans had a reverence for the Father of their country. He was almost immune from criticism. John Adams, his vice-president, often jealously quipped that the essence of the revolution, remembered through the centuries, would be that “Dr. Franklin’s electrical rod smote the earth and out sprung General Washington” but, in fact, he also held the publicly non-partisan Washington in high esteem.

Historians have frequently looked to Federalist No. 10 for the proposition that the founding fathers intended America’s government to be non-partisan. James Madison criticized political parties as having interests which were adverse to the rights of some citizens and to the general welfare of the nation, preferring – at least during the period that The Federalist Papers were being authored – a non-partisan form of government. (Later he and Monroe became the ultimate partisan Republicans.) And the first Washington administration and the first few sessions of the US Congress were truly non-partisan.

Adams himself, our second president, meant to be non-partisan. He felt that he was independent. Yes, he was a Federalist, but during the first Washington administration, there was not a rooted party system. Everyone was more or less a Federalist then. But politically, Adams understood – and *said* -- that no society could be truly egalitarian and in his political and social life he addressed that fact. Such is the law of unintended consequences. Adams’ position on the absence of egalitarianism in a successful democracy inadvertently demanded a response from Jefferson.

Jefferson, the ultimate egalitarian, sniffed disdainfully at Adams’ attitude about the masses, believing that the people never erred, although their elected leaders might. Thus,

Jefferson and his colleagues (and particularly Madison and Monroe) became the Republicans. And thus, party politics in America was born.

While this is certainly a simplistic overview, historians are clear that the very early years of the American experience were not partisan ones. And many would argue that partisanship developed only because the Federalists believed that the Republicans were about to hi-jack the ultimate result of the revolution while Republicans believed *vice versa*. But it didn't take long for America to become quite a partisan society. A brief review of newsprint from the first decade of the 19th Century will evince editorials and news stories of which Newt and Nancy would be justifiably proud.

There are non-partisan nations in this world of ours, although clearly America is not one. And these nations are not simply dictatorships. There are, after all, extant non-partisan democracies. Our neighbor to the north exercises non-partisan democracy in some of its provinces. Until the middle of the 20th Century, Canadian ballots did not reveal political affiliations. Currently, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have non-partisan democracies where the voters elect individuals to represent them in the territorial assemblies without reference to political parties. And Toronto, with a population of approximately 3 million people, runs its government with a non-partisan, directly elected city council.

Nebraska uses a non-partisan system for electing its legislature, although its Governor is elected on a partisan basis. And Mississippi's and many other states' judicial elections are non-partisan.

But non-partisan and post-partisan are different.

Non-partisan politics and post-partisan politics are different. Non-partisan politics places the emphasis on the political positions of the individual who is standing for office. Post-partisan politics places the emphasis on the needs of the individuals who form the constituency. The people instead of the party....the people instead of the platform.

Those of us of a certain age who can remember Newt can probably also remember a pre-partisan Mississippi. We were Democrats or we were Dixie-crats or we were Mississippi Freedom Democrats, but we were not Republicans. We have evolved.

Let's look ahead to the ultimate outcome, the ultimate evolution of our enlightened political system. Any post-partisans out there?

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