Battle Hymn of a Republic (2,134 words)

For years the dominant trope in American political discourse has been the Red-Blue divide. Indeed its very ubiquity is the first clue to diversionary intent. Why? If the media is hammering something home it’s time to check the mailbox for the foreclosure notice because nothing they tell you with numbing repetition bears repeating. If it did, you could use it against them. Why ever would they be so helpful?

Tenth-grade civics class does a bang-up job of enshrining the two-party system as an all-but natural formation within the American body politic. Nice little indoctrination there, fellahs. But really, knock out an Era of Good Feeling and a smattering of third-party dalliances and that just about nails the donkey and the elephant. The party leadership’s aims are informed by the people ‘down below’ who claim the party as their own. Grassroots loyalty is maintained by delivering on shared objectives. Organizational coherence ensues. This v*erticalized conveyor* is entirely consistent with how one might expect a democratic nation to conduct its political business.

However in America, always more republican than democratic anyway (lower case, please), the power alignment is increasingly reasserting its horizontal predilection. On top are the powerful, distributed across Republican and Democratic ranks in a manner that conforms mostly to careerist impulse or familial succession (Bayh (D) begets Bayh (D); Bush (R) begets Bush (R); Murkowski (R) begets Murkowski (R), etc.) Beneath the powerful are the powerless, many of whom take to heart, God bless them, the aspirations expressed in the red-blue platforms. Ideological integrity tends to be more of a grassroots preoccupation. While the powerful generally disparage change, celebrate stasis and welcome career advancement, they are more than willing to stage passionate conviction for the cameras. Furthermore, they enjoy applauding the *appearance* of change as it fosters the populist notion –and helps diffuse the populist energy-- directed towards improving the lot of those outside the power edifice. In reality, red-blue is a garnishment balanced on the trough of mass consumption; or, as Marie Antoinette might say, ‘let them eat parsley.’ Of course reactionary change –if that’s not too oxymoronic—suits the conservative powers-that-be just fine. If a century of liberal progress can be rolled back under the aegis of change, then change it is --and more of it! However nothing in this badminton game ever has the shuttlecock leaving the staid, square field of play.

Better to view the Democrats and Republicans then as representing a two-party coalition government. At varying times, one party holds the titular majority in Congress or the Presidency. However the *sturm und drang* that traditionally attends the transfer of power between the two parties vastly exceeds the portentousness of the shift. When will those goofy conventioneers get a clue?

After an especially seductive vertical light-show (i.e. the recent Obama coronation and its attendant rock star vibe),the horizontally-challenged find themselves reacquainting with the system’s strict proviso against transformational change as their man begins his dizzying and inevitable descent back to earth. In short, the propagated myth of change vastly overshot the rigid specs of the sausage machine. We are now officially in the symbol-reentry phase.

As the ideological *non sequiturs* pile up, the most committed doctrinaires are slow to part with their tattered blue kimonos. Smart people are always slow to admit their stupidity. Nonetheless The Valley of Death must be traversed. Here are two whoppers that essentially strip away any remaining hiding places: Obama escalated the Afghanistan conflict and he re-affirmed indefinite detention. Each is an ideological abdication worthy of Bush the Third status. Given these monumental decisions that cling so shamelessly to the status quo, who but the most intellectually dishonest (or politically self-interested) can be struck by anything other than the ideological *uniformity* of the Obama administration *vis a vis* its recent predecessors? Beyond stylistic flourishes and distractive, personal curiosities--today ethnicity, tomorrow, gender-- nothing of substance ever changes. In Obama, the powers-that-be enjoyed symbolic portent with none of the bitter aftertaste. Too bad they’re only allowed one *first* African-American president. Not to worry. Right now, a *Stepford Wife* is being groomed as the next demographic gatecrasher. Before she’s done, Sarah Palin may in fact give Mussolini a run for his money.

I reference fascism (really, republicanism *in extremis*) because it is in the air, just as the masses are boring in on the root scape of their miserable goat: illegal Mexicans. While the teeming masses still teem, they must be courted even as their growing functional obsolescence is becoming disquietingly obvious. The present age of evaporating consumer credit, productivity-driven labor surpluses and shuttered factories is hardly a clarion call for more people. But given that the masses are already *here*, they must be managed. Certainly their collective immensity makes them too populous for easy dispatch.

The point here is that the trend away from democracy and towards republicanism is an inexorable flight back to centralized power. Increasingly during this period, the two parties resemble bureaucratic artifacts of a prior era when ideas enjoyed at least a modicum of sway over undifferentiated power. This republican retro-trend signals that a high-water mark in the enfranchisement of the individual has been reached. That promontory is now being given up. And honestly, who can get excited about individuals anymore? We are awash in them to the global tune of nearly seven billion. Serfdom, a historical term for extraneous humanity (or if that’s too callous, individuals whose economic cost exceeds their economic value), could well become the vogue again. Wealth redistribution might rebalance things. But assuming a reinvigorated middle class, what would they consume and produce to sustain their class on a resource-constrained planet? Perhaps a ruinous world war looms ahead as properly diabolical medicine to cull the herd. The ascendant Orwellian paradox may be ‘less is more.’

Whereas democracy strives to take account of all the people, republicanism curses itself for allowing so many to get here in the first place (be it via the birth canal or the Rio Grande.) The ominous question thus becomes: in a post-credit (and thus post-consumer) age, if the working man’s sweat affords diminishing returns and acres of warm bodies are no longer required as bagmen to rationalize Ponzi-mortgage-paper for sale to gullible Chinese, what possible use does the common man serve in the numbers he currently comprises? The grim fact is that the economy doesn’t need quite so many of us as it once did. The grim follow-on fact is that, no longer needing us, and yet for the time stuck with us, the need to control us takes on redoubled urgency. Piling onto this Malthusian vibe are issues such as environmental stress and the finitude of natural resources. For example forty per cent of the world’s copper has been used up. Peak oil theorists argue that we are at or near the apogee of crude oil production after which a precipitous drop-off is assured. People require a lot of the stuff. But that’s exactly what we’re running out of.

As for the milling hordes, presumably they will not stand idly by and accept their existential redundancy without a fight. Nor, one suspects, will they be distracted forevermore by red and blue shell games. Surely the powers-that-be have a culminating project in mind? Some of the Internet’s wild-eyed types claim the New World Order has already settled upon a nice manageable republic of, say, one billion earthlings. Yikes, that’s quite a human haircut. It would however ameliorate a lot of societal and environmental pressures. But we’ll leave that paranoid inquiry for another day, preferably before the Illuminati turn out the lights on that democratic-by-dint-of-distributive-processing scourge, the Internet. For the moment, if people acquiesce to the stylized power-sharing rituals and their interminable run-ups (the election cycle) in America, there is no hope in hell for real change. Clearly, credulousness is wearing thin on all fronts and across all ideological persuasions. So where’s the revolution daddy?

For now, the political credo on both sides of the aisle involves preempting the onset of populist fury with more sound: “Don’t just stand there doing little or nothing. Shout about it.” Sayre’s law, so often used to expose the essential triviality of academic disputes, is no less apt for today’s national political scene: "In any dispute the intensity of feeling is inversely proportional to the value of the stakes at issue.” Power has very little at stake in today’s red-blue America. In part, that’s why the rhetoric has grown so bellicose and ostensibly ‘divisive’.

To belabor one ‘side’ of the rhetorical circus as an example, Fox News is a profit-driven entertainment (read: mass diversionary) complex that derives its sustenance from delivering anti-Democratic diatribes and demonologies to a lucrative niche market. Red meat sells. In a similar vein, Rush Limbaugh makes no bones about his essential identity as an entertainer. At least his candor is refreshing. Jon Stewart and Bill Maher are comedians with a more leftist shtick. That some people mistake their bread and circuses for intellectual citadels is a testament to the skill level of the entertainers, if not the dunderheadedness of the people.

No doubt there is great entertainment value in drawing lurid contrasts between the red guys and the blue guys. But where in the fine print does Obama even come close to Che Guevara? He’s not even FDR (who, it bears recalling, was radical enough in his time that a fascist coup was contemplated.) The consolidation of power in America --a multi-generational, self-correcting, self-perfecting process abetted mightily in the modern age by media control and abundantly displayed in the steady re-trickling-up of national wealth—has managed to narrow the amplitude of even the gyratory head-fake that travels under the bumper sticker, *real change*. With remarkable skill, the system elevates pigs over men, the latter being excluded from entering the gates of the sausage factory altogether. The field of play belongs squarely to swinish aspirants. Oink. Abandon hope (and get a life while you’re at it), all ye who demand a sirloin steak of a sausage factory.

As Sayre’s Law further predicts, the increase in red-blue conformity has precipitated an escalation in inter-party rancor. Every hair is split to reveal a difference where no real difference exists. Older politicians are forever bemoaning the disintegration of collegiality and comity. The intramural bitterness so often exhibited today between and among the powerful is a compensatory attempt to obscure, entirely for public consumption, the utter triumph of the powerful over the powerless. It’s a closed shop. But that doesn’t mean the insiders can’t pretend to fight for the guys on the outside. Politicians channel their constituents’ anger in lieu of delivering substantive change because the latter has been taken off the table by the powers who gratuitously array their handpicked little piggies in battle formation. Gesticulation and theatricality have usurped fundamental change.

Reality cannot be kept at bay forever. As each fresh new ‘change’ candidate devolves into a ‘same as the old boss’ caricature, public cynicism ratchets forward yet another notch. This is why the powers-that-be must be contemplating what comes next. Certainly there is a race on to devise the ultimate soma cocktail of ignorance, complacency and stultifying entertainment. Moreover this proletarian stupor must be perfected before the cynicism wells up into mass unrest.

The industrial revolution begot the hospitality industry. In both instances, the impulse was unabashedly democratic: lots of people addressing the proletarian needs of lots of other people.

The reassertion of republicanism, after a brief flirtation with liberal democratic principles, is an ominous assault on the very notion of *lots of people*. Once upon a time in a world not so long past, the powerful relished lots of people because mass markets, properly served, could redound into unimaginable wealth for a lucky few. Furthermore as Henry Ford intuited, when the wealth is shared, markets enlarge allowing yet more wealth to become possible. Marxist overproduction was averted by enlightened capitalism, but only for a time.

A great wave of plebian credit was extended and parceled out to greater fools around the world, all in an effort to keep the wealth rolling. During this brief flirtation with the masses, certain rights and standards of living were extended as *quid pro quo*’s for production and consumption advances. Democratic ideals seemed on the verge of eclipsing republican prerogatives. Steadily, those same power interests are taking their parties back with torrents of money. Power is reasserting it jealous tradition of concentrating at the top.

Somewhere in Davos, the plutocrats can be heard muttering around their plutocratic table: “There are too many damned people!” The gathering-back-up of political power is but an interim step on the road to something far worse. One wonders, what rough beast –be it opiate or meat cleaver-- have they devised to cull the democratic herd?