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LIBERAL INTELLIGENCE

AUGUST 2004

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THE AMERICAN PROSPECT



"[Clinton] used the book to explain his career as he actually saw it, with all the sentimentality, anger, affection, frustration, pride, and at times relentless self-examination that make up his elusive character." PAGE 67

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America Reinvents

Think back to last summer. George W. Bush's approval ratings stood near 60 percent. Iraq, a "mission" the president had famously declared "accomplished" aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* that May, was no paradise, but it was also not yet the political

disaster it later became.

Democratic candidates, portrayed by the media as knock kneed Barney Fifes, drawing straws to determine which one would face the unhappy chore of heading out into the noonday sun to duel the great gunslinger, scampered across America, brandishing credentials and smiles to audiences that, in the summer of 2003, were neither particularly large nor hopeful. One of those candidates, a senator from Massachusetts, seemed so distant a contender that the obligatory paragraph devoted to him in a round-up story invariably went something like this one, from *The New York Times*: "Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts had a second difficult night at a televised Democratic forum. As had occurred at a debate in South Carolina in May, he struggled with a hoarse, scratchy voice, a distraction from what his aides had hoped would be a commanding performance."

What a difference a year makes.

The campaign-related articles and essays in this special issue of *The American Prospect* reflect the changes of the past year. The optimism now prevalent in progressive circles stems not only—or even chiefly—from President Bush's recent bad fortune. After all, such is the ineluctable power of the office that some of his bad fortune is also the world's, and we don't wish that; a paradoxical and hollow optimism that would be.

Rather, it stems also from a growing sense that Americans are worked up, and that they're worked up in defense of some old values—honest government, policy making based on fact rather than ideological assertion, a public sector that is the private sector's counterweight rather than its handmaiden—that had seemed for a time to have fallen out of favor. This issue of the *Prospect* is about the possibility of a new progressivism, and the movements that sustain it (see Garance Franke Ruta's piece on the new generation of African American leadership, and Tara McKelvey's on the endlessly inventive group MoveOn.org). It roots around in the past for clues about how we got where we are. The acclaimed novelist Francisco Goldman shows us, through the eyes of José

Martí, the uncanny relevance to today of the whisker-close election of 1884; and Richard Byrne delivers a provocative rethinking and defense of Lyndon Baines Johnson, arguing that the low esteem in which he's currently held by liberals says far more about the ways in which contemporary liberalism misuses its history than it does about Johnson himself.

And the future: Thomas Oliphant, the journalist who's known Kerry longer and better than any other in America—indeed, who was at Kerry's side as the veteran delivered his famous anti-war testimony before the Senate Foreign

Relations Committee in 1971—explains as only he could how Kerry got to this point, and what we can expect of him in the event he is elected. Are we presumptuous to wonder, as Harold Meyerson, Clay Risen, and Laura Secor do, how a President Kerry would, respectively, deal with Congress, use executive power, and fight the war on terrorism? We think not. And we have asked a group of distinguished thinkers and advocates—including John Podesta, Sean Wilentz, Deborah Tannen, Zbigniew

Brzezinski, James MacGregor Burns, Jan Schakowsky, and Christopher Edley—how they would advise a President Kerry to reinvigorate progressive values in the public sphere. The speculation constitutes neither prediction nor endorsement; rather, it reflects a growing sense that America might be ready again, after four years during which day was called night and anyone who objected to the redesignation was dismissed as frivolous (or worse), for actual ideas, agendas, and—most of all—evidence.

Strange things have happened to this country these last four years. A great national tragedy, one that affected us all and took no note of matters like party identification, was first appropriated for partisan ends here at home, and later used as justification for an act of aggression whose logic led to a scandal, Abu Ghraib, that has brought our nation unqualified disgrace. But America always rethinks, reinvents, renews. This issue is about rethinking, reinvention, and renewal. In other words, it's about the America that has been—and can be.

—MICHAEL TOMASKY

**A year ago, Bush
and his movement
seemed invincible.
What a difference
a year makes.**

has begun to mobilize this election year in a continuing campaign to enact a progressive agenda.

When Kerry is elected, some will say that Bush's firm adherence to principles led to the incumbent's defeat, that progressives need a cautious approach to change. But Bush has failed, not because of the way he pursued his vision, but because the vision itself is flawed. If progressives move forward with optimism and self-confidence, using our principles to address the aspirations of the vast majority of Americans, we will consolidate a progressive base for the next generation. ■

JAN SCHAKOWSKY is the U.S. representative for Illinois' 9th Congressional District.

The Courage to Lead

A resurgent movement awaits its organizer in chief.

BY JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS

AS PRESIDENT, JOHN KERRY WOULD INHERIT THE MOST formidable grass-roots force in recent American history. Born in the rising populism of last year's frenetic primaries, this force has generated its own cobblestone leadership. What will Kerry do with these exuberant leaders dispersed across country and city? What will they do with *him*?

To hold this vibrant force, he must plan for the long run—if Kerry hopes to put through his legislative program, to win the midterm congressional elections of 2006, and to carry the Democratic Party to victory in 2008. But maintaining his personal following will not in itself be enough to sustain his strong personal leadership. In too many presidential campaigns, the candidate assembles an ad hoc team that fails to strengthen the institutional Democratic Party. Kerry must merge his campaign volunteers and professionals with the rank and file and ongoing organization of the Democratic Party.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt tried to build a reorganized and revitalized democracy, but he failed in the face of entrenched southern power and the distractions of impending world war. To complete this giant task, Kerry would need to be more than a broker. He must rise above the usual give-and-take interest-group liberalism of the Democratic Party. The checks and balances of the American constitutional system, the regional fragmentation of the polity, and our relatively weak parties require an effective president to be a skilled broker and transactional leader. But that brand of brokerage, by itself, will not overcome the systemic bias against progressive action—it never has. Like other great leaders, President Kerry must first provide transforming ideas attuned to the great liberal proclamations, from the Declaration of Independence to the "Four Freedoms."

Oratory will not be enough in itself, though. President Kerry must offer leadership of the highest order—creative, comprehensive, continuing. After years of delayed business under Democratic as well as Republican presidents, there

must be outcomes, products, real change. These are what the great force Kerry has mobilized will want and can crucially help supply. As an organization Democrat, I have worked with grass-roots people for decades, but I have never seen such a mobilization of the liberal potential—independents as well as turned-off Democrats and an amazing number of disenchanted Republicans—as I have seen over the last 12 months. These are mainly policy-minded people dedicated to action, results, real change.

So if this resurgent force has much to offer Kerry, he would have even more to offer it. Its members will want a committed and constant leadership to complete the unfulfilled promise of the Carter and Clinton presidencies. The activists have waited a long time. They know that another spasm of reform—another Hundred Days—will not be enough. Nor will a strategy of centrism. President Kerry must offer strong and continuous leadership, year after year, to finally come to grips with the long list of delayed and inadequate programs for health, environment, minimum wages, jobs, and—above all—the relief of poverty at home and abroad. Catching up on unfinished business will take more than a year or two, or presidential term. It might take a decade or two—the work of the Greatest Generation yet.

There is an even more crucial demand that this rising force would make of a President Kerry: not to forsake reform and programs for war making. Opponents of Iraq would hope that in this campaign, perhaps with George W. Bush by his side, John Kerry would turn to his television audience, look its members in the eye, and promise, "I will never—never—lie the American people into an unnecessary war." ■

JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS, co-author of *George Washington* and author of the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom*, is a professor of government, emeritus, at Williams College.

We the Government

Repairing the rift between citizen and state

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

WHEN WE RECALL THE NOW-FAMOUS INCANTATION, "ASK not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country," we focus on its content: John F. Kennedy invited Americans to become active participants in, rather than passive recipients of, American democracy. But the word that stands out for me is the personal pronoun "your." How different JFK's message would have been had he exhorted Americans to ask what they can do for "the" country. In the word "your" resides the personal connection between citizens and nation that has broken down, replaced by an adversarial stance of citizens toward their government.

Presidential historian Robert Dallek cites a comment someone made to Eleanor Roosevelt after FDR's death: "I miss the way your husband used to speak to me about my

government.” Here, too, the personal pronouns leaped out at me: “my” government, hearing him speak “to me.” In their eagerness to turn voters against the party of Roosevelt and Kennedy—the party that gave Americans services such as Social Security and Medicare that the other party now claims to protect while clandestinely striving to erode—Republicans have defined a new enemy: “the government.” The sense of unity that followed the September 11 attacks by a literal enemy has been dissolved as Republicans encourage Americans to see their own government as a metaphorical enemy. Like an autoimmune disease, this metaphoric battle turns the body politic’s protective forces against the body itself.

Rather than regarding the government as ours—a source of services that better citizens’ lives—many Americans now see the services the government provides as their due, while regarding the government that provides those services as an enemy force. The illogic of this stance was eloquently expressed in Bill Clinton’s remarks on the 30th anniversary of Medicare in 1995: “We had people all over America coming up to me, or the first lady, or to Senator [Ted] Kennedy, saying, ‘Don’t let the government mess with my Medicare.’” Again, the parts of speech tell all: The personal “my” (“my Medicare”) reveals the closeness these speakers feel toward the service the government provides, while the impersonal “the” (“the government”) evinces how distant, disconnected, and distrustful they feel toward the source of that treasured service.

How could John Kerry as president repair this internal rift and restore a sense of connection between citizens and their government? One way is to attend to the smallest parts of speech. He should refer to himself as “your president” and talk of “your” government or “ours.” He must avoid the temptation to leap on the bandwagon that Republicans have built by claiming that he, too, will get government off your backs. It’s an easy way to hitch a ride, but it undermines Democratic leaders’ ability to get the credit their party deserves for having created the programs voters now see as part of the landscape, and to garner citizen support for future programs.

Effective presidents have embraced new communications technologies. Roosevelt’s fireside chats made brilliant use of radio, a technology that brought the public voice of a political leader into people’s homes, the most private of spaces. With television, not only a voice but a physical persona enters the home, sits down to dinner, becomes a member of the family. Ronald Reagan exploited these aspects of TV to become a “great communicator.” He was not a great orator, nor was he great at communicating information. But he was superb at communicating the illusion that he was speaking directly to each listener—“to me.” Ironically, he used this skill to avoid communicating, in the sense of addressing an issue. With his famous “there you go again” quip, he sidestepped the substance of Jimmy Carter’s criticism. The good-natured image became the substance of what Reagan communicated.

Kerry and other candidates have exploited Internet technology for fund raising; organizations such as MoveOn.org use the Web to create communities of physically distant but likeminded individuals. When Kerry announced his vice-presidential choice in e-mails to his core supporters, he made them feel included, part of his community.

The Internet likewise can be used to restore bonds between citizens and their government. E-mail offers perhaps the most intimate connection of any technology. Many people who would never talk about personal matters face to face are able to do so in e-mail or instant messaging, which they experience as akin to personal correspondence or to writing in a diary. And this technology is the one that young people—sadly, among the most disaffected from government—are most comfortable with. It pervades their daily lives in a way that even television never could.

To understand the effect of public policies on people’s lives, citizens need to hear personal stories. How about a chance to meet, each week, an individual whose life was affected—for better or for worse—by decisions made by particular judges or the Supreme Court; by a particular act or policy enacted with Democratic support or allowed to lapse by a Republican Congress; by a civic action of their own, such as unionizing their workplace? How about regular online town halls, in which the president answers questions put to him by citizens over the Internet? In this way, those who log on and participate—yes, not listen but participate—can begin to experience themselves as part of a community that includes their government.

Restoring a sense of intimate connection between citizens and their government is essential to heal the corrosive divisiveness that contributes to the crippling vulnerability so many Americans now feel. And it is essential to ensure that their government can continue to provide services and protection rather than becoming their actual enemy, as, in the hands of Republican administrations, it has in fact become. ■

DEBORAH TANNEN is a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University.

**People often speak
of “my” Medicare;
they should also be
taught to refer to
“our” government.**

The Breakfast Crowd

Mr. President, speak directly to ordinary people.

BY CHELLIE PINGREE

I HAVE TWO WORDS FOR OUR NEXT PRESIDENT: NO EXCUSES. You will be facing an angry country frustrated by the serious challenges we confront and hungry for a leader who will actually get things done.

I am from a small town in Maine, where I occasionally join in an early-morning breakfast with a few longtime friends. One builds houses, one is the plumber, there is a