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The Death of Hope in a Two-Party System

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We've become a desperate people.

The 2004 election found us anxiously seeking someone to help us move beyond our fears of terrorists, and facing increasingly expensive health care, outsourced jobs, and a lack of flu shots. We hoped for something better.

"I was surprised that Kerry didn't claim that there had been more hurricanes during the Bush administration than during any other administration."

Most limited their political choices to the Republican and Democratic parties and reduced the issues to a few manageable ones to help make a decision, whether it was abortion, the environment, national security, or the economy. We all know the outcome we desire—good jobs, a strong economy, security to pursue happiness. However, many issues seem to border on intractability as to their solution. We often work at disatisfying jobs to pay the mortgage and support our families. We're not really sure what it takes to make a strong economy, getting lost in discussion of Alan Greenspan, inflation, interest rates, and companies whose strategy to survive includes off-shoring our jobs. Certainly happiness is hard to come by when we are constantly fooled as to what would actually make us happy.

The media, with few exceptions, offered us little hope in finding answers. During the Democratic convention, a news commentator contrasted Al and Tipper Gore's kiss on stage with their kiss during the 2000 convention. Commentary during the Republican convention was no better. One commentator noted that the release of Republican balloons was better executed than the Democratic balloons. Then there was the endless discussion of who was the better debater.

So for the 2004 election year, I condensed my issues to one—character. We vote for candidates whose views resonate within us, but ultimately we are voting for people who, we hope, will make decisions that align with our own views, who represent our own values. Decisions come from character.

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From the fall of 2003 through the summer of 2004, I tried to ignore anything a politician said during election year, assuming that a typical candidate will say anything to get elected. However, as November, 2004, drew near, I decided to try a different tack and take a look at what sort of character the two main candidates (and their parties) exhibited while trying for election or re-election. After all, to make at least the first cut, a candidate ought to exemplify a character I admire.

Both John Kerry and George W's web sites emphasized hope in their rallying cries. John Kerry's was *"Hope is on the Way."* George W's was *"Build a Safer World and a More Hopeful America."* Let's take a look at what sort of hope our two major political parties offered as exhibited on their respective web sites in 2004.

John Kerry and the Democrats offered the following on their web site:

- "W Stands for Wrong."
- "Wrong choices and the wrong direction."
- "Wrong for the Economy."
- "Because of George Bush's wrong choices, this country is continuing to ship good jobs overseas."
- "Wrong for Education. Schools do not have the resources they need and George Bush is not working to make reform succeed while children are losing out."
- "Wrong on Homeland Security. Our intelligence services remain fragmented; our borders and ports are full of holes; our chemical plants are vulnerable to attack."
- "John Kerry will ensure that there are sufficient vaccine supplies to protect the American people from a major flu outbreak... They will strengthen our nation's ability to develop, produce, and distribute safe flu vaccines by putting America's ingenuity to work."

George W. and the Republicans attacked Kerry with the "*Kerry's flip flop of the day*" (with an archive, of course) and the "*John Kerry Flip Flop Olympics*", both of which were regularly updated. Words such as *terrorists*, *nuisance*, *gambling*, and *prostitution*, were associated with Kerry, not so much as an attack on his character, but supposedly to help us out on our next word-association test. Another headline was *John Kerry: the raw deal. John Kerry has been on the wrong side of every national security issue for the past 20 years*. Then there was *Policy Memo: Kerry's Economic Proposals Fall Short*.

"Decisions come from character."

The tactic employed by both parties was "Vote for me because the other guy is a poor choice." This was faulty reasoning. It doesn't follow that because one choice is bad, the other is better, unless one succumbs to the cynicism of voting for the lesser of two evils. However, voting for the lesser of two evils still leaves you with evil.

Surely both Bush and Kerry have made at least a few good decisions if only by accident.

Interestingly enough, liberal NPR offered a fairly unbiased analysis of Bush called *Rating Bush on Keeping Campaign Promises*, and found that Bush had kept several campaign promises made during the 2000 election, including the "No Child Left Behind" law, lower taxes, and at least a short-term fix for Medicare. But neither candidate would ever admit that his opponent had kept a campaign promise. It didn't fit with getting elected at all costs.

Each candidate, especially Kerry, wanted to blame the other for everything from 911 to a lack of flu shots. I was surprised that Kerry didn't claim that there had been more hurricanes during the Bush administration than during any other administration.

To blame one political party, let alone one person, as Kerry did, for a loss of jobs or a poor economy was ludicrous. As was taking credit for a strong job market. I'm no economist (took naps instead of going to microeconomics class in college), but the economy at any point in time is the result of many administrations. Yet both parties claimed credit when the economy did well and affixed blame to the other guy when it didn't.

The examples offered to us by Democrats and Republicans were not meant to encourage and lift each other out of our fear, but to promote ourselves at the expense of others. The goal was to polarize voters, so that they would make a binary choice. Third-party

candidates, such as Ralph Nader in 2000 and 2004, were viewed as “spoilers” who either helped or hindered Democrats or Republicans. Bush and Kerry and their respective parties may have been polar opposites, but the world they inhabited was so very small that the distance between their political beliefs was also small.

I’ve always believed that one shouldn’t promote oneself at the expense of others. Some may say “Well, Peter, you’re quite naive when it comes to politics.” Yep. I am. I like to think that a candidate worthy of my vote is also worthy of my admiration. Character ought to count for something, and neither Republican nor Democratic candidate possessed a character I admired.

Of course, a good character is not enough, it’s only the beginning. We human beings are flawed. The trick is not to let those flaws overshadow a good character, and not to let strengths become weaknesses. But neither major party candidate passed even the first prerequisite.

Character evolves over many experiences, over many challenges to it. To encourage someone to make up his mind based on any one incident denies everyone the unique human quality of learning from mistakes in thoughtful ways.

“Bush and Kerry and their respective parties may be polar opposites, but the world they inhabited was so very small that the distance between their political beliefs was also small.”

Given the behavior of the Republican and Democratic candidates in 2004, is this how we find hope? Hope for what? Do we find hope by attacking others? Do we find hope by telling half-truths? Do we find hope by only recognizing our own accomplishments while disparaging the deeds of others? I hope not.

Hope is a desire for something better. Evolving a “better” reality requires action.

So I’m basically fed up with the weak candidates offered by both Democrats and Republicans, candidates who continue to propagate the small world in which they both dwell. Promoting ourselves by attacking others. Taking credit when things go well while blaming others when they don’t. Telling half-truths for personal gain. These are not behaviors that I admire. These are not behaviors that I would encourage in my friends, children, co-workers, or even strangers. However, such behaviors thrive in the narrow view of Democrats and Republicans. By voting for such candidates, we doom ourselves to their smaller worldview. In such a world, hope dies —not because it eventually evolves a better reality, but because it cannot grow the roots of action in such a small container.

We have become desperate not because we’ve lost hope, but because we no longer see anything beyond it.



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What if Lincoln Threw a Party and No One Came?

16 August 2004

Washington, April 5, 1861

Dear Sir,

As I detect something of ill-omen amongst us, I humbly invite you to a party.

How shall we perform it? According to my own plan and with the assistance of the caterer's plan. Where shall it be performed? Fort Sumptor, Charleston, South Carolina. When shall it be performed? On April 12, 1861, at a time of your choosing.

I shall plan a party for us, so far as practicable, unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means, or in some authoritative manner, direct the contrary as to the desirability of such festivities. I fear that support for such festivities as I propose is waning.

I have placed you at the head of my invitation list. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons.

Clearly I have shown my purpose and intent. Should you not claim to be at least equal in prowess, and immediately act upon my invitation?

Yours,

A. Lincoln

Montgomery, Ala, 7 April 1861

My Dear Sir and Fellow Kentuckian,

I have to thank you for your interesting invitation to your upcoming party at Fort Sumter and the ensuing festivities. However, I regret that my country shall be unable to attend.

I have in my possession a letter from my fellow Southerner, Robert Anderson, wherein he states his grave concerns about the

outcome of the party proposed at Fort Sumter and recommends against the use of Fox Catering Service, whose catering plan he deems as impractical. Mr. Anderson even goes so far as to question the choice of location to be too provocative to the surrounding neighborhood in Charleston. I shall, of course, immediately forward Mr. Anderson's letter to you.

As to your clearly shown purpose and intent, my sight is not sufficiently penetrating to discover such hidden merit, if it exists, to my accepting such an invitation at this time.

Notwithstanding the reports that such a party would, should I accept, help galvanise popular Northern opinion and immediately gain moral support for further festivities between your country and mine, the fact is that nothing has been done to remove the obligation of rejection of attendance.

In lieu of selecting another caterer, and in the interest of diplomacy between our respective countries, I have instructed Mr. Beauregard to give immediate assistance to Fort Sumter until such assistance is deemed no longer necessary.

I deeply regret that our lack of attendance might weaken your plans for further festivities that you have planned between your country and mine.

Sincerely,

Jefferson Davis

This correspondence between Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, of course, never took place. In effect, the South did accept Lincoln's invitation to the party at Fort Sumter and so began the second war of secession. But what if Lincoln threw a party at Fort Sumter and no one came? It is my contention that Lincoln's power base would have ebbed and his Whig ambitions for a powerful centralized government would have been frustrated.

A Tenuous Power Base

In 1860, Lincoln was elected President with a majority of electoral votes, but not the majority of popular votes, if one considers the opposition in aggregate. As you might expect, free-state support was stronger than support from the slave states. Even so, the margin of popular free-state votes in Lincoln's favor was only about 250,000 over the aggregate opposition, thus denying Lincoln and the new Republican Party a clear public mandate.

Lincoln was elected on several issues that appealed to many Northern voters, but created fragmented public support at best. The platform, in general, did not include issues of slavery or secession:

"They [Republican Party] chose several issues to focus on, downplaying divisive questions of slavery and abolitionism, and emphasizing economics, particularly the tariff in Pennsylvania and internal improvements, like a Pacific railroad. They also ran against corruption in Buchanan's administration, which tainted some Douglas Democrats as well." (*valley.vcdh.virginia.edu*)

Did the Republicans downplay the "divisive questions of slavery and abolitionism" because they were trying to win over Southern voters or because such issues could have cost them Northern voters who were in favor of peaceful secession? Lincoln's own ambivalence on the issues of slavery and the right of secession, which bordered on duplicity, like the Republican platform of 1860,

was shrewd. Such a tactic could very well have served both purposes.

“The root cause of the Second War of Secession was not slavery. It was not about the right of secession. It was not even caused by Lincoln's desperate need for establishing a power base. It was caused by both Northern and Southern loss of faith in the Constitution to resolve issues of the balance of power within the government and the governed.”

Lincoln found little solidarity even in his own cabinet. Not only did members of his cabinet question his executive ability, at least one, Secretary of State William H. Seward, thought the best course of action regarding the impending Southern secession was to avoid conflict. Southern states which seceded would come back to the Union of their own accord:

“He [Seward] believed that the Union could be saved without a war, and that a policy of delay would prevent the secession of the border states, which in turn would gradually coax their more southern neighbors back into their proper relations with the Federal government. In informal conferences with commissioners from the seceded states he assured them that Fort Sumter should be speedily evacuated.” (*26.1911encyclopedia.org*)

In General Winfield Scott, Seward found support for his pre-April 10, 1861 ideas of voluntary reconciliation in the deep South. Although Scott initially advocated immediate resupply of Fort Sumter under Buchanan, a change of administrations found a change in his position:

“After Lincoln's inauguration, however, Scott shifted course and subscribed to Seward's position that avoiding conflict would hold the eight non-secessionist slaveholding states in the Union and inspire the deep South to return.” (*www.tulane.edu/~latner*)

General Scott even went so far as to send a memo describing his position to Lincoln, which, of course, fell on deaf ears. Avoiding conflict did not fit with Lincoln's plans for power.

Gustav Fox, whose Fort Sumter resupply plan Lincoln exploited to begin the war, blamed Seward for frustrating his request for the use of the ship, the Powhatan:

“Fox blamed the expedition's failure on Secretary of State Seward. He claimed that Seward's “treachery” deprived him of the Powhatan.” (*www.tulane.edu/~latner*)

This is not to say that the South found an ally in Seward. Seward's motivations were strictly political. Frustrated at losing the Republican nomination to Lincoln, Seward believed that he was the more qualified executive while politically assigning Lincoln the role of figurehead. However, in 1850, when Seward embodied the radical abolitionist thinking of the Whig party, he showed faith in the Constitution to resolve a secession crisis:

“...but, whenever it [secession] shall come, it will bring forth a higher illustration than has ever yet been given of the excellence of the democratic system; for then it will be seen how calmly, how firmly, how nobly, a great people can act in preserving their Constitution...” (*www.skidmore.edu/~tkuroda*)

However, once war began, Seward became a powerful enforcer of Lincoln's methods. As we shall see, faith in the Constitution was a casualty on both sides during the secession crisis of 1861.

Northern public sentiment at the beginning of 1861 regarding Southern secession was mixed. While some may have argued in its

favor based on Constitutional ideals, many others were often more economically motivated to let Southern states peacefully go their own way. Several Northern states felt economically burdened by the Fugitive Slave Act.

Once the war started, many Northerners showed great concern for Constitutional abuses by the newly elected executive branch of the government. Staunch Republicans and Abolitionists worked fervently as early as May, 1861, to dethrone Lincoln in the next election.

A Need for Absolute Power

Whig ambitions for "internal improvements" inspired by Henry Clay had been consistently frustrated during the thirty years before 1861. The checks and balances that our Founding Fathers integrated into government proved to be an effective impediment to Whig political ideals. What was needed was an executive branch with unprecedented power.

What was needed was a dictator.

Many Southern historians have declared Lincoln to be a dictator. Ample evidence for such a conclusion can be found during the Second War of Secession. But did Lincoln consider himself a dictator? On 26 January 1863, in a letter to Major General Joseph Hooker, pleading for military victories, Lincoln wrote:

"I have heard, in such way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator... Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship." (www.swcivilwar.com)

Even if many historians see Lincoln as a dictator, he did not assume that role until after the battle at Fort Sumter. The war gave Lincoln the excuse to exercise extreme measures to build his power base.

As a proponent of strong central government, Lincoln would have found sympathizers in many of our Founding Fathers. The role of the federal government versus states rights was vigorously debated even as the Constitution was drafted. In a 6 April 1787 letter to George Washington, James Madison advocated a national veto on legislative acts of the States:

"Over and above this positive power, a negative in all cases whatsoever on the legislative acts of the States, as heretofore exercised by the Kingly prerogative, appears to me to be absolutely necessary, and to be the least possible encroachment on the State jurisdictions." (press-pubs.uchicago.edu)

Madison was, in particular, referring to matters of trade, taxation of imports and exports, and "the law of nations". However, he went on to write:

"Might not the national prerogative here suggested be found sufficiently disinterested for the decision of local questions of policy, whilst it would itself be sufficiently restrained from the pursuit of interests adverse to those of the whole Society?"

In a 9 June 1787 letter to Thomas Jefferson, Edward Carrington also advocated the sovereignty of federal government over state governments:

"Indeed I am certain that nothing less than what will give the foederal sovereignty a compleat controul over the state Governments will be thought worthy of discussion." (*press-pubs.uchicago.edu*)

I don't believe that any of our Founding Fathers would have approved of a dictator in the executive branch, especially given that branch's dominance in domestic politics (as opposed to world politics). However, Lincoln didn't assume the role of dictator until after Fort Sumter and the ensuing war. Southern states more than willingly obliged. Lincoln needed the secession of Southern states to fulfill his ambitions of bringing Henry Clay's political vision to fruition. By remaining in the Union, Southern representatives could have thwarted his plans. By letting Southern states peacefully leave the Union of their own accord, he risked losing an agrarian economic base, something that the fledgling Northern industrialism couldn't yet do without. But by forcing the seceding states back into the Union under his own rules, Lincoln was promised unconditional political and economic control of the reunited States. The war also gave Lincoln the opportunity to exercise absolute executive power, thus silencing a growing opposition in the North. But what of the Bill of Rights? That particular annoying impediment to complete executive power would fall by the wayside during martial law.

Northern Secession Sentiments Before and During the War

As the army in the Union dwindled, soon to be replaced by conscripted Union citizens and immigrants, riots broke out in Chicago:

"The Times [Chicago] had gone beyond any print, North or South, in its opposition to the war and its devotion to the interests of the rebellion." (*Quoted in Rhodes "History of the United States" by L.C.Minor: www.crownrights.com.*)

L.C. Minor goes on to quote Rhodes as saying that such antiwar sentiment "was beginning to spread over the whole North." It should be noted that Rhodes often painted Lincoln in a sympathetic light, yet even he was not blind to the cross purposes of the Constitution and Lincoln's tactics. L.C. Minor's essay gives much more compelling detailed evidence for the erosion of Northern support for Lincoln's policies than I can here.

Another example of Yankee secession sentiment is from the Detroit Free Press:

"[A]n attempt to subjugate the seceded States, even if successful, could produce nothing but evil--evil unmitigated in character and appalling in extent." (Detroit Free Press, February 19, 1861, in Thomas DiLorenzo, "Yankee Confederates," *Secession, State and Liberty*, p. 152 (*www.lewrockwell.com*))

Before Fort Sumter, Northern support for armed aggression against the secessionists of 1861 was mixed at best. While some Northerners believed, perhaps altruistically, in the right of secession, others were motivated by less than Constitutional reasons. Some simply wanted out from under the Fugitive Slave Act while assuming that peaceful profitable trade would continue with the South.

Don't Tread on Me

Some historians offer the view that Americans are not willing to fight until provoked:

"Americans have long and proudly considered themselves a peaceable people, who repel aggression but do not initiate war. When compelled to fight, however, Americans claim the high moral ground of defending freedom against aggressors." (*www.tulane.edu/~latner*)

This view is certainly defensible when viewing pre- and post-1861 American history. In "The Declaration of Independence", frustrated colonists wrote: "Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury." Our ancestral colonists felt that their life, liberty, and happiness had been attacked. By 1812, amid growing tensions between France and Great Britain, the fledgling United States found itself in a defensive position. Between 1810 and 1812, Britain attacked the USS Chesapeake, seized numerous US ships, and 10,000 American citizens had been captured to man British war ships. But even then, Federalists argued against a declaration of War. In 1846, continual Mexican harassment of Americans in Mexican-held territories led to a declaration of war against Mexico.

Numerous examples of "Don't Tread on Me" can be found after 1865 as the United States began to define itself as an emerging empire in world politics. The Spanish-American war didn't ignite in 1898 until the U.S.S. Maine exploded and sank (an accident that was used as a hasty excuse) in a harbor in Havana, Cuba.

Flexing the United States' new found nautical muscle, Theodore Roosevelt sent the "Great White Fleet" around the world in 1908 as a defensive display of power. Interestingly enough, Roosevelt found inspiration in his uncle, James Dunwoody Bulloch, a high-ranking officer in the Confederate Navy.

On April 2, 1917, as a prelude to a declaration of war against Germany, President Woodrow Wilson wrote in a speech to the joint houses of Congress:

"Whereas the Imperial German Government has committed repeated acts of war against the Government and the people of the United States of America..." (www.firstworldwar.com)

Events that led to such drastic action included the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915, and emerging evidence that Germany might help Mexico reclaim parts of Texas and Arizona.

Of course, the infamous Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, forced the United States out of isolationism. Shortly thereafter, on December 11, 1941, Germany declared war upon the United States. Later that day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt stated in a message to the Congress:

"Never before has there been a greater challenge to life, liberty and civilization." (www.ne.jp)

The language used in the justifications of our wars is strikingly similar to the language used in our Declaration of Independence. This is not to say that Southerners in 1861 didn't identify with the Colonists of 1776 in feeling that secession was the only solution to their grievances. However, it should be remembered that although our Founding Fathers believed in the Constitutional right of secession, they strongly advised against its application:

"I can scarcely contemplate a more incalculable evil than the breaking of the Union into two or more parts." (*Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 1792: etext.lib.virginia.edu*)

The Constitution (with its checks and balances among the branches of government) and the Bill of Rights were, in part, intended to mitigate the need for secession as a way to resolve political issues between the Federal government and the states while simultaneously protecting individual rights.

I realize that my hasty explanations of "Don't Tread on Me" grossly simplify the causes of American wars. The United States

inherited a culture of manifest destiny from its European ancestors, which, some may argue, is a root cause of many conflicts. Our inevitable rapid expansion across the North American continent invited political and cultural confrontations. One could even argue that the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis & Clark expedition were our first steps toward building an empire, thus identifying Thomas Jefferson as the unwitting progenitor of the American empire.

The point is not whether an American cultural distaste for war is a myth or not. Whatever the root causes of the various American wars up until 1861, it can be argued that American public support for war doesn't cohere until America feels attacked.

Was Lincoln aware of American tendencies to avoid conflict until provoked? Whatever one's opinion of Lincoln's character, stupidity should not be added to it. While no evidence (at least that I've found) explicitly exists for such a conclusion, it should be considered at least an interesting inference. Surely both Northern and Southern citizens would have shared these sentiments since they shared a common political birth and history. Fort Sumter afforded Lincoln an opportunity to simultaneously put both the North and South in the position of defenders.

Was the resupply of Fort Sumter a sucker punch, which the South more than willingly fell for? Certainly Northern support for such a war either solidified or fell victim to Lincoln's draconian tactics. But could Lincoln have applied such methods if the South hadn't fired the first shot? I believe not. Lincoln needed martial law to suspend the Bill of Rights. The South played exactly as Lincoln needed it to play. It enabled him to use his dictatorial tactics to build a political power base that was absent in 1861. If the South had not reacted as such, Lincoln's aspirations for a federal government inspired by Henry Clay very well could have withered on the vine.

A Loss of Faith

Southern reaction to Lincoln's election bordered, at times, on hysteria. However, one Virginian newspaper argued for a moderate Southern response:

"...yet we are rejoiced to know that the elections for Congressmen have resulted in giving us a very safe and decided majority against the Republicans in Congress...[and] they will have the Executive, but will have no other branch of the Government." (*Staunton Spectator, November 13, 1860, Virginia: valley.vcdh.virginia.edu*)

I find this quote (and later ones) from the Staunton Spectator amazing. It shows a strong faith in the Constitution as a way to mitigate the power of one branch of government from dominating the governed. But that faith in a Constitutional balance of power quickly eroded among Southerners.

The term "War Between the States" is a misnomer as is the term "Civil War." It was a war between one country and one or more other countries. Once a state seceded, it gained independence based on the Constitution, but lost its right to pursue that independence within the framework of the Union.

The root cause of the Second War of Secession was not slavery. It was not about the right of secession. It was not even caused by Lincoln's desperate need for establishing a power base. It was caused by both Northern and Southern loss of faith in the Constitution to resolve issues of the balance of power within the government and the governed.

I started this essay with the analogy of a party invitation. To conclude with another analogy, Lincoln was desperate to start a race that the South wanted no part of, and yet he handed the starting gun to the South. The "first shot" fired by the South at Fort Sumter was really the starting gun for Lincoln's race to gain unprecedented executive power from whose effects we are all still

victims to this day.