President of All the People

Michael Novak
PRESIDENT OF ALL THE PEOPLE†

MICHAEL NOVAK*

I. THE PRESIDENT AS KING.

You have asked me to address the role of the president of the United States as king, obliged to represent and to speak for all the people. There is a lot of meaning packed into that term "represent all the people." A king is not just a manager, the head of an administration; not even a prime minister, in the European fashion; or just a "representative" in the way a U.S. congressman is. Being president is simultaneously being both prime minister and king. The president embodies the history of his people, their aspirations, their ideals, the better angels of their nature, and it is these that he is held to, judged by, and loved by or demeaned. Who sees the king of England (or the Queen) sees Shakespeare and Dryden, Arthur and Sir Gawain, Richard the Lionhearted and other kings, and all the wars and victories and defeats, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Winston Churchill, the glory and the pomp of all of England. That is what is meant by majesty.

In an analogous way, when the president of the United States walks into a room, not only power but also memory enters with him, the ghosts of Jefferson and Lincoln, of both the Roosevelts, and of General Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan and Clinton walk behind him. The presidents of the United States tower in the imagination of our people far higher than any purely literary characters. I think ours may be the only nation in which six or seven presidents walk taller through the landscape of our minds than any character in our literature. Clinton Rossiter, the historian, put it well:

We, too, the enlightened Americans, feel the need of myth and mystery in national life—of magic parchments like the Declaration of Independence, of shrines like Plymouth and the Alamo, of Slogans . . . of hymns . . . of heroics . . . of heroes . . . . And who fashioned the myth? Who are the most satisfying of our folk heroes? With whom is associ-

† Virtually all of this text was delivered as the Keynote address for the Seventh Annual Texas A&M Conference on Presidential Rhetoric on March 1, 2002.

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ated a wonderful web of slogans and shrines and heroics? The answer, plainly, is the six Presidents [George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson] I have pointed out most proudly. Each is an authentic folk hero, each symbol of some virtue or dream especially dear to Americans. Together they make up almost half of the company of American giants, for who except Christopher Columbus, Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Boone, Robert E. Lee, and Thomas A. Edison in real life, Deerslayer and Ragged Dick in fiction, and Paul Bunyan and the Lonesome Cowboy in myth can challenge them for immortality?¹

I am not a professional analyst of rhetoric, only an amateur observer, but I think you will agree that the memories and symbols a speaker evokes by coming into our presence already affect what we will hear, and how we hear whatever words are spoken. When our president speaks for a storied nation such as this Republic, these United States, he speaks with a resonance no other voice within this nation musters. The Speaker of the House is dwarfed by comparison, as is the Senate Leader. In America, majesty is all the president’s. And so is the attention of the press. Anything he says is likely to be chewed upon for weeks, or years, by editorialists, columnists, and commentators without end. A single word of his—“Evil Empire”—can set off an explosion that circles round the world.

Will an example be out of place? An after-dinner story? A colleague of mine sat at a table in Russia some months after the fall of the Soviet Union, when, after dinner, the Russian General beside him announced in a loud and sudden way, “You know what caused the downfall of the Soviet Union?” The General brought his fist down on the wooden table. “It was your president, when he said those words, ‘the Evil Empire.’ At first it was a shock,” the General continued, “but then we looked around at one another. It was! It was!” He slammed his fist again, and turned away to pour another vodka.

But oh! Do any of you remember the derision heaped on Reagan in our press, when he said those words? How many plaintive wails I remember, among the paler set of the liberal elite, disgusted at those words, contemptuous of Reagan.

A single word from a president can send ripples round the world—can cause an empire to unravel, and to disintegrate.

Another word of great power was "Star Wars." Americans saw on the news one night video clips of a missile streaking across the sky at a speeding missile and exploding it. It seemed impossible, a bullet interrupting a bullet, at enormous distances. Some were furious about the idea. They said it really couldn’t be done, not reliably—that it would be an enormous waste of money.

The Soviets could not be sure. They could not tell which was the propaganda: the boast that it could be done, or the possibly faked protests that it couldn’t be. Which was the cover story, and which was real? The announcement by the president that the United States would launch a political struggle that, twenty years later, is with us still.

I want to give a final example. In 1988, I was a visiting Professor in the Welch Chair at the University of Notre Dame, sitting down to lunch in the faculty dining room with five professor friends I hadn’t seen for years. Since it was an election year, and since I had just arrived from Washington, conversation turned to the Dukakis-Bush campaign. One man said it was a campaign without a single passionate issue. I said I thought there was such an issue. He said, "Which?" I said, "The pledge of allegiance." My colleagues became inflamed: "But that’s not a serious issue!" Another said: "A childish gesture." A third said: "It’s coercion. A Nazi salute. It’s imposing the Gestapo on schoolchildren." "It’s certainly an issue that arouses passion," I said. It was also an issue that divided Democrats profoundly. The American people supported the pledge overwhelmingly; the intellectuals and Governor Dukakis did not.

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The historian Henry Jones Ford wrote in 1898 that the American people had found a way to fulfill an ancient dream of the human race, "an elective kingship." A king wins the allegiance of the nation’s notables and accepts the tumultuous plaudits of the freemen. But a king by election rather than by birth, although his term is limited, gains the comforting knowledge that the people not merely acquiesce in him but, according to law, have chosen him. Countries with "elective kingships" choose their kings.

Expatiating on this concept in 1867, Attorney General Stanbery argued before the Supreme Court:

Undoubtedly so far as the mere individual man is concerned there is a great difference between the President and a King; but so far as the office is concerned—so far as the great executive office of this government is concerned—I deny that there is a particle less dignity belong-
ing to the office of President than to the office of King of Great Britain or of any other potentate on the face of the earth. He represents the majesty of the law and of the people as fully and as essentially, and with the same dignity, as does any absolute monarch or the head of any independent government in the world.\(^2\)

More recently, the historian Wilfred E. Binkley described how very like an ancient potentate or classic monarch even the most populist of American presidents, Andrew Jackson, was treated by cheering throngs as he rode triumphantly through stodgy, staid New England in 1833:

The acclaim with which President Andrew Jackson was greeted by the populace heralded a revival of the symbolism of the presidency. His journey to New England in 1833 illustrates the point. Entering Philadelphia on a white charger, provided for the occasion, the aging warrior accepted the obeisances of the crowds for five hours as they filled streets, windows, and roofs, and the reception continued for four days and nights. From New York City Jackson wrote, “I have bowed to upward of two hundred thousand people today.” His passage through Connecticut was a continuous ovation. “Across Rhode Island cannon boomed from town to town as if New England were a battle line,” and receptions overlapped each other. In Boston he was “received with all the show of honor which we paid to Lafayette,” wrote an astonished citizen. And Harvard outdid itself in conferring upon Jackson the degree Doctor of Laws.\(^3\)

In all these ways, the president of the United States—whether he be a valiant war hero or a cad—is given great power over the symbolic lives of American citizens. If he is a man they strongly disagree with, even despise, then for as long as he remains in office the mere sight of him poisons their feelings about the office. They may even find themselves thinking, sometimes, that they would rather leave the country. On the contrary, if he represents ideas they share, or an image of the nation that lifts their hearts and ennobles them, his very presence inspires in them great sentiments of patriotism and perhaps, as well, brave and noble actions. Few other figures in the land besides the president have such capacity to inspire or to depress.

\(^2\) Id. at 20.

\(^3\) Id. at 22; see generally WILFRED E. BINKLEY, PRESIDENT AND CONGRESS (1962); WILFRED E. BINKLEY, THE MAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE: HIS POWERS AND DUTIES 19 (1958).
The office of the Presidency, at least the kingly, symbolic side of that office, gives the man who fills that office extraordinary powers to attract and to repel. Given the centrality of his position, furthermore, his presence is virtually inescapable, and most citizens find their lives symbolically affected by him, even if they pay as little attention as they can. Even a very bland and unexciting presidency may affect them by lending that same tone to all his years in office. By contrast, for example, President Clinton's time in office may not always have been something one really wanted one's children to be looking at, but it did not lack excitement.

The presidency gave Clinton great symbolic power to polarize judgments nationwide—for him or against him—compared to any power he would have had, say, as a law professor in Little Rock (the owner of an El Camino with lawn turf in its truck bed), or even as a Governor of Arkansas. What he was and said and did as president not only rubbed off on the country; it has been ineluctably added to the associations that the White House from now on will always have. It has altered the image that Americans now have of the nation.

Woodrow Wilson explained in 1907 how this symbolic power, inherent in the presidency, which no president can avoid, may be translated into pragmatic power and real effects in a great variety of ways:

His is the only national voice in affairs. Let him once win the admiration and confidence of the country, and no other single force can withstand him, no combination of forces will easily overpower him. His position takes the imagination of the country. He is the representative of no constituency, but of the whole of the people. He may be both the leader of his party and the leader of the nation, or he may be one or the other. If he leads the nation, his party can hardly resist him. His office is anything he has the sagacity and force to make it. Some of our Presidents have deliberately held themselves off from using the full power they might legitimately have used, because of conscientious scruples, because they were more theorists than statesmen . . . . The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can.

His is the vital place of action in the system, whether he accept it as such or not, and the office is the measure of the man—of his wisdom as well as of his force. Electing a President, we elect the chief symbol-maker of the land, and empower him in the kingdom of our imagi-
nations as well as in the executive office where he supervises armies, budgets, and appointments.\textsuperscript{4}

The elective kingship, let us recall, has two sources for its symbolic power. One is conferred by election in accord with law. The president is the tribune of all the people, elected by a legal majority—\textit{not}, it is necessary to add in 2001, a merely popular majority. The majority must be formed by small states as well as large, by rural areas as well as densely populated cities. Once elected, he is president not only of a legal majority but also of the minority; he is president of all.

The second source of his symbolic power is that he represents the history and aspirations of the nation. Ideas always need to be incarnated—enfleshed, embodied in a single person—if human beings are to grasp them in a down-to-earth way, and to apply them to themselves. Ideals must be embodied in one person, living one life, making one set of choices (\textit{these} choices, not \textit{those})—one human agent visible to all.

That is why students learn best from examples and cases. That's why listeners like stories, brief narratives, and parables. So also, politically, people need one person to point to, as if to say, "He represents our history and meaning," or "He speaks for the United States." Our nation has that person in the president. Standing behind his shoulder are the others that held that office: Kennedy, Eisenhower, Truman, Franklin Roosevelt, and on back to Wilson, Teddy Roosevelt, Lincoln, Jefferson, Adams and Washington. Our Presidency bears a noble lineage, more stellar than any other office in the land, more lustrous than any line in private life.

\section*{II. All the People}

In order to become president, the two vying candidates must compete to obtain the support of a legal majority of voters who see in the one or the other "one of us." Each of the candidates must struggle to build a majority—in order to be able to represent the American people in some broader way, better than the other does. In a close election such as that of the year 2000—and there have been several such in our history—the difference between the two may appear to be marginal. But huge divergences may lie beneath these appearances, like the part of the iceberg that is hidden under water. Thus, in the election of 2000, Albert Gore won the popular vote, but George W. Bush

\textsuperscript{4} Novak, \textit{supra} note 1, at 27 (quoting Woodrow Wilson, \textit{Constitutional Government in the United States} (1908) (emphasis added)).
won thirty states to Gore's twenty, and 2,434 counties to Gore's 677. Gore won the cities, university towns and Indian reservations; on the vast sea of red representing the counties won by Bush, the Gore counties, however dense they may be in population, seem like small blue islands. Thus, behind the closeness of the 271-267 electoral vote lie political differences as huge as those between urban and rural cultures.

In the American system, nonetheless, the victor benefits soon after the election from being, in fact and by law, president of all the people. To that extent, he has a public open to his message and his deeds, and willing to give him a chance. He may be able to turn his narrow victory into a powerful majority, by making good use of that opportunity. Of course, if things go sour, the benefit swings to his opposition, who will use that edge in trying to win the next election.

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As a person always deeply interested in presidential elections, excited by the hurly-burly, pace and sweat of the quadrennial competition, I have over the years sought out opportunities to participate, whether as a journalist, speech writer, adviser, or friendly kibitzer. I have traveled for days with many different candidates and spent the year of 1972 concluding eight or nine weeks on the campaign plane with the Democratic vice-presidential candidate. I have helped out two or three other candidates every weekend during primary seasons.

The great lesson I gleaned from these vivid experiences is how profound and moving are the divergences among American audiences, not only in social class and in prevailing occupation (an audience chiefly of farmers here, of steelworkers there, of financial managers on one occasion, a housewives' coffee klatsch on another), and not only in physical surroundings, but also in cultural community and cultural history—that is to say, in ethnicity.

Let me give an example. On one particular day in the campaign of 1972, in Pittsburgh I think it was, our first campaign meeting was with black ministers and black organizations, and one of their important priorities was affirmative action; they were passionately for it, and for them it meant (call it whatever you will) quotas—they did not trust promises, they kept their eye on the numbers. They saw affirmative action as a way of getting blacks in, where before they had been kept out. We rushed from that meeting to the building unions, electric workers and plumbers. Most of these men were Italians, Slavs, and Irish, and they were opposed to affirmative action. All around them they had
experienced quotas, keeping them out, and the only inheritance they had to pass on to their sons and nephews was a place in the union, an apprenticeship, a chance at a good job. They didn’t want the government driving their kids out of the only field of opportunity they could count on. At noon, our scheduled event was with a Jewish women’s group at a luncheon, and here we faced a still different test. Jews in Pittsburgh had had a lot of experience with secret quotas keeping Jews out, and their only hope, as they saw it, was a system based on individual talent and performance, not numbers. In mid-afternoon, we were at a fairly “wasp’y” country club, and here the well-heeled crowd was pretty much in favor of affirmative action—seemed like a nice idea to them. It was no skin off their nose, not at all a threat that they would lose anything at all. People lower down would pay for it. (The phrase “limousine liberals” points to something real, all right.)

So there we were, before that day began, trying to figure out how to answer the question if it came up, as certainly it would (and did) in every one of these events—and the only thing we could really do in each of them was try to show that we understood everybody’s experience and everybody’s reasons for thinking as they do. (A campaign is not any easy place to tell voters to look at opposing points of view. Voters already think you are playing games with them.) And there we were, at the end of the day, wondering if we had contradicted ourselves. Even though we had tried to be quite consistent, we worried that the press would write stories that would upset half these audiences. The campaign position was clear: we were in favor of affirmative action, but not quotas. We were as sympathetic as we could be in all four directions that day (and even more directions on other days) while repeating the campaign mantra, designed to give everybody a little and to get nobody too angry: Affirmative action, but not quotas.

Of course, in practice, it’s always quotas—the courts will judge results by the numbers. But we had a conspiracy with the press never to say that. Others in the campaign probably thought we were sticking to principle all the way—affirmative action, but not numerical quotas. But I had to help put the different talking points in words, and life had taught me some of the ways these words actually worked on the ground. So I felt a bit of fraud involved in what we were doing. But it was the best we could do and still “move the country forward.”

I didn’t, at that time, allow myself to look into a neo-conservative alternative head-on, namely, that affirmative action as a system of group preferences is socially destruct-
tive, and damaging even to the confidence of those awarded position by it. Neo-conservatives believe in taking affirmative steps to reach everyone, seeking our talent wherever it is, especially among the poor (which is where most neo-cons grew up) because talent is always in short supply; and they believe in open competition, based on merit, not privilege, because that worked in their case, face-to-face with people a lot more privileged than they. But I wasn’t ready to argue in those days that a system of helping everybody to develop their own talents—affirmative steps to reach everyone—and competition based on merit is more satisfying both to individuals and to groups, and causes less group friction. For me in 1972, that would have been “a step backwards”—that is, too conservative for me. I never imagined that there are two rival conceptions of affirmative action, one conservative, one liberal. But 1972 was for me a learning year, a watershed year.

In 1970, I had also spent three months on the road with Sergeant Shriver, former director of the Peace Corps, who was giving speeches at fund raisers and rallies for Democratic congressmen. I think we traveled to thirty-seven states and spoke on behalf of maybe ninety Democratic candidates. We visited every kind of neighborhood and stopped in scores of different ethnic settlements. I learned to pay attention to fine differences, and to observe patterns of speech I had never noticed before. In some areas, for instance, it is better to speak of “Hispanics,” but in others that would be taken very badly; “Latinos” is better some places, “Chicanos” in others, and “Cubanos” in still others. Some American blacks from the Bahamas or other Caribbean cultures like you to notice, gently, that they are not from the same culture as Northern blacks or blacks from the American South. It was also wise to recognize, if you met any of them, which blacks had been “free men of color” from the early 1800s, because that meant a great deal to them. In other words, thinking merely in racial terms, in terms of color, was to ignore some person’s individual culture and upbringing and to diminish an important part of their identity. It was to treat other people like cardboard figures, identical cut-outs, with no individual souls. There is, I learned, a liberal form of racism. It is rooted in color-consciousness, emphasized at every turn, to the neglect of personal differences.

In the same way, neither “white” nor “European” gets very close to the differences of culture among the forty or so leading national groups on the European Continent, steeped in centuries of rivalry and diversity, and delighting in their own lan-
guages, customs, manners, and foods. More bloody wars have been fought within races, along ethnic lines, than between races. Indeed, "race" is a modern, post-Enlightenment concept. Ethnicity—belongingness to a particular people with a particular culture—is much, much older.

For an audience steeped in a vast knowledge of particular cultures and their distinctive courses through history (as is shown in the topics listed for this conference), there is no need for me to recite the basic principles of scholarship on the diverse cultures of this nation. My aim here is, rather, twofold. The first is to suggest how difficult it is for any one who would be president, coming from one particular ethnic background, to teach himself about the many other different peoples in America, in order to be so sympathetic with many of them as to be able to win their support and loyalty. But that is not a difficult point to grasp.

My second aim is to offer a metaphor for the *Unum* that underlies and flows from the many, the *e Pluribus*, in our national motto. In 1972, I wrote a book called *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, a study of the then much neglected and little studied Southern and Eastern Europeans in America, such as the Italians, Armenians and Greeks of the South, and the Slavs, Hungarians, Finns and other peoples of Eastern Europe. I stressed "unmeltable," because my inquiries showed that after three or four generations in America persons of such stock still seemed to be notably different from their neighbors in their aptitudes and interests, tastes and habits, sometimes religion and mores. Their voting patterns, shopping preferences, educational trajectories, occupational leanings, and other indicators showed continuing variety.

It is true that Americans of many diverse backgrounds often get along with one another, live as neighbors, go to the same schools, and play on the same athletic teams. It is not true that they often get to know the real differences in one another's cultures in any depth. Most of us are not sure how to bring such things up in conversation; it feels like breaking a *tabu*.

The myth that we ought to lose such differences, and have them all boiled out of us in the "melting pot," is not very realistic. But it does have the effect of making us much less sensitive to small nuances, and much less inquisitive and much less articulate about important matters than we could be. We are remarkably superficial in our interactions with one another. Our children are left in remarkable ignorance about their own family histories, even in cases of intermarriage where the emotional dynamics are dramatically different on the two sides. In some ethnic groups, for example, people tend to shout a lot, and it doesn't mean a
thing. In others, giving way to anger is considered very wrong, so that when even a little anger is shown, others become very nervous and upset. I knew a woman from one of those quiet cultures who married a man from one of the shouting cultures, and it used to make her shudder in fear, until she finally saw it as a cultural difference, with not nearly the meaning she had been giving it.

You will understand, then, that I am among the critics of the image of the melting pot. Nonetheless, I can fully understand why that image once seemed attractive to many citizens, even including some immigrants. Further, I much appreciate many of the really good things done in its name—for instance, the serious and hardworking public schools that many of us remember from our youth and have read about in the biographies of others a generation earlier. These schools truly did well by many immigrants, working us very hard and pounding excellent disciplines into us. In my day, they were still heavily Protestant schools; we started every day with the “Our Father” said in the Protestant way, the pledge of allegiance, and on some occasions a brief Bible reading, almost always from the Psalms of David.

Despite these good things, I dislike the image of the melting pot because it is unrealistic and inhumane. Individual cultural histories are unmeltable parts of who we are, each of us unique individuals, born into unique cultural histories of considerable depth and complexity. Yet I still remain uncomfortable with the two most common substitutes for “melting pot,” the “mosaic” and the “salad bowl.” In both of those metaphors, the ingredients—the colored stones, the cut vegetables—are inert, material, cold, and dead. But cultures are not like that. They are alive, and they change. In addition to that, cultures have depth. You can study the history, poetry and literature of one culture all your life and still have things to learn, while running into puzzling lessons that it takes a lot of living to fully understand. “Mosaic” and “salad bowl” have too much fixity in them for my taste, and the salad bowl always leaves me feeling sticky with some sort of creamy dressing.

My preference is for a metaphor taken from the world of music, since music is at least a reality of spirit, alive and flowing, wonderfully complex. Music sets itself melodic and tonal problems, and needs to work these out, strikes discordant notes and clashing chords in search of resolution, and follows warring passages until, sometimes, they settle into harmony. I like music as a metaphor, a symphony especially, because it allows each instrument to be itself, and to do what it can do better than any other, without having to be just like the others. A symphony
allows more than one melodic line to be in action in the same place, and draws on many warring tendencies. A symphony is the best living example of *E Pluribus Unum* that I know. A symphony does not repress passion but draws on it, and often stirs it to new heights, and sometimes calms it, and brings it to rest.

If one of the virtues of a symphony is its exceptional internal unity, the unity of a symphony is not the unity of a variety show. The Balkans are organized like a variety show, whose several separate acts are presented in one program. The Balkans are (or were) a federation of ethnicities (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, etc.) living side by side. By contrast, a symphony is a single composition in which all the parts are ordered by a common arche. The paradoxical unity of a single architecture interweaving many ethnicities, an un-balkanized unity, is a distinctive characteristic of the United States, one nation without internal sameness, yet "one nation indivisible," as well.

A unity without division on the one side or sameness on the other is pretty neat. For example, in becoming a citizen of the United States, no one is required to renounce his culture of origin, only to swear to uphold and to defend the Constitution. On the one hand, our various communities are expected to maintain as much continuity with their cultural roots as they choose. On the other hand, our various cultures are not intended to segregate themselves into geographical areas—X over here, Y over there—nor are they expected to close themselves off in discrete shells, impermeable by others, and unwilling to mingle with others. Rather, as in a symphony, the expectation is that each culture will retain its distinctness and at the same time unite with others in a common social life. The United States of America gives rise, in other words, to a community of communities, a symphony of divergent human cultures. In the life of the human spirit and in the history of human communities, this is a high achievement. It is always, of course, a work in progress, never fully achieved.

In sum, the United States is a symphonic composition, still in process. The resolution hasn't come. There have been some fine hints of it, some anticipations. But we're still in the middle of some major discords and clashing movements, in need eventually of a little soothing. We have some things to work out. We sure do.

III. THE PRESIDENCY AND MULTICULTURALISM

That is why, in the cultural sphere, the office of president is especially important, and why the kingly side of the office comes
to the fore. The presidential office does not have omnipotence as one of its prerogatives. Yet as much as in him lies (or in her, when at last we have a woman president), this nation needs the president to be able to bring the people together and to become spokesman for all. It is, no doubt, too much to imagine a president in the same role as the conductor of a symphony. Still, by giving shape to a nation’s priorities over a four-year span, a president can bring the people together in a common set of tasks. By his knowledge, sensitivities and intuitions, he can give voice to their aspirations and their grievances, and he can lead the nation in directions that are both in accord with the nation’s founding principles and fruitful for all her citizens.

Now, however, in the nation’s third century, the president faces a novel task. For the first time in our history, a substantial number among important elites no longer give credence to some of the nation’s founding principles. Many professors and other intellectuals have come to hold that certain European principles, political and metaphysical, are superior to the original American proposition. Indeed, they hold that the American proposition is a form of false consciousness, masking a structure of racial, class, and gender oppression. If they are professors, such elites take it as their task to raise the consciousness of their students, that is, in significant ways to educe in them a political and metaphysical conversion, teaching them to see reality in a new way.

For simplicity’s sake, we may speak of these as the traditional Tocquevillean interpretation of America and the newer Gramscian project. The Tocquevillean interpretation is rooted in belief in God and in the work of a Providence Who designed world history around the bright red thread of human liberty, in such ways that free men and free women might flourish in the full development of individual talent and personality, for the glory of humankind and, for most Americans, of God. As Tocqueville observed, religion and liberty belong together in American consciousness; few in 1830 imagined that the Republic could endure apart from that religion. By religion, of course, Tocqueville observed, religion and liberty belong together in American consciousness; few in 1830 imagined that the Republic could endure apart from that religion. By religion, of course, Tocqueville observed:

I do not know if all Americans have faith in their religion—for who can read the secrets of the heart?—but I am sure that they think it necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions. That is not the view of one class or party among the citizens, but of the whole nation; it is found in all ranks.

5. See John Fonte, Why There is a Cultural War, Pol’y Rev., Dec. 2000-Jan. 2001, at 1531 (explaining the ideological struggle between the competing Gramscian and Tocquevillean world views in contemporary America).

6. See Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America 290–301 (George Lawrence trans., J.P. Mayer ed., Anchor Books 1969), in which Tocqueville observes:

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queville meant Judaism and Christianity. That is to say, he saw that the priceless value placed upon individual liberty in America is owed to Hebrew metaphysics and Christian faith. No other religion or philosophy endows the individual person with such cosmological importance. On purely Nietzschean or relativist grounds, for example, it is not clear why human liberty is of more value than the changeless habits of a cockroach or the regularities of inanimate things; or why animal rights are less important than human rights. (The problem with animal rights, of course, is getting the animals to observe them.)

The Gramscian project is quite different. Rooted in atheism and a materialistic dialectic, the Gramscian view sees human history as dominated by group conflict between oppressors and the oppressed. For Gramsci, the fundamental unit of analysis is not the individual but the class or the group. Gramsci held that Marx and Lenin were wrong to rest socialism on the mistaken economics of the nineteenth century. The more radical issue is cultural and moral, not economic. The fundamental struggle is to change the false consciousness of human beings who are unaware of the class struggles in which unwittingly they are all engaged. They must be taught to "unmask" the hidden forms of power—of courtesy, deference, cultivated speech and proper accents, and the like—and to bring about a revolving of the wheel, so that the oppressors are brought down, and the oppressed rise to rule. Gramsci has little to say about what the rule of the oppressed will look like. Maybe the oppressed will merely become the new oppressors, so that the dialectic of history can go on taking one turn after another.

To any perceptive observer of life in the United States, it is obvious that, since about 1970, partisans of Gramsci have become leading interpreters of questions of race and gender. Many laws in the United States have been promoted, and a good many of them signed into law, on Gramscian premises. These premises demand the distribution of benefits by group ascription, not by individual merit. They proceed by ratios, numbers, and quotas. In athletic departments, Title IX is such a program, dividing athletic resources by gender, whether so desired by students or not.7

In the rush to achieve equality between men and women in school-sponsored sports, Title IX, a law intended to expand opportunity for women in the classroom and on the playing field, is now being used to restrict opportunity for both men and women. Under the law as it is interpreted today, the pursuit of equality in athletics has become a strict numbers game, with adverse and unintended consequences.
A brief historical comparison may prove illuminating. At the height of the Progressive movement in the 1920s, civil reformers who were determined to break up the power and patronage of city bosses and their political machines hit upon a new method of qualification for public jobs: objective, standardized tests. The standard for public employment, reformers believed, should be what you know, not who you know; how many abilities you have, not how many services you provide to a political machine.

By contrast, today’s Gramscian project rejects these Progressive Era reforms, these “so-called objective tests,” as instruments of class oppression, which protect the interests of those who design the tests and keep out the unwanted. Gramscian analysis, of course, offers no assurances that once the oppressed do away with these objective tests, and take power in the posts formerly held by others, all further oppression will stop. Nor does it offer any assurances that the common good of society will be better served.

There is very little thinking in Gramscian analysis about what life will be like “after the revolution.” The whole point is to have the revolution. There is little analysis of the human weaknesses to which the oppressed will be prone, once they are in the position of the old oppressors, and even less of necessary checks and balances, to prevent new abuses. There is no discussion of methods for ensuring that the relatively few individuals in any society who have true genius and uncommon talents will be discovered and helped to bring their gifts to fruition for the common good. There is little reflection on the stubborn, in-your-face fact that people of high talent are few and precious, and not distributed by quota.

Thus, presidents who have taken office during the past thirty years have faced a country divided in an unprecedented way, by profoundly different philosophies. This is not just a matter of liberals versus conservatives within the same philosophical horizon. This is a conflict between two radically different views of the
world, two different metaphysics. Moreover, the Gramscian project is not simply an "alternative project," to be weighed pragmatically. It moralizes social conflict. It projects social evil onto those it identifies as the oppressors, and it evokes resentment, even hatred, in the breasts of those it identifies as oppressed. It needs hatred and resentment as a source of energy for political action.

Finally, the Gramsci project is led and energized mostly by professors, teachers, and those experts in consciousness training who work for the government and business organizations. That is to say, it is a concerted and aggressive movement, just below the radar of public attention, working diligently to bring about a cultural transformation. It has in students and employees captive audiences on which to work its will. Its influence is spreading.

Let us for the moment assume that everything the Gramscians are doing is for the good. My point here is neither to praise the Gramscian project nor to condemn it, but to call attention to it—and to highlight the problem it is creating for the office of the presidency. The president is the main symbolic voice of the nation, our one office of clear unity, especially in those cases in which he acts as commander in chief of our military forces in times of war, but also when he represents us abroad through the foreign policy of which he is the principal architect. But the president is also an important symbol to young people, and a spokesman for the nation's moral beliefs and aspirations. What will happen if our presidents are Tocquevillean, while a preponderance of our nation's intellectual culture is Gramscian? If the nation is cloven in two by fundamentally incompatible philosophies?

Every president since it first appeared in translation has quoted from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and I suppose no one will offer much resistance to the proposition that the presidents have pretty much seen the American proposition in Tocquevillean terms, as a history of liberty. Lincoln's "New Birth of Freedom" and FDR's "Four Freedoms" are but two prominent markers in that direction. Martin Luther King, Jr., (so far the only American to enter the pantheon of Great Americans on a plane with our greatest presidents) was clearly Tocquevillean as well in his rhetoric: "Free at last! God Almighty, free at last!"

To the extent that the Gramscian project runs smash into the Tocquevillean conception of America, an important part of our culture, formative for the outlook of our children, appears to be heading into a collision with the presidential office. This collision could be averted, of course, if a president simply capitulated to the Gramscian project.
In some ways, it could be said that this is precisely what President Clinton did, except that Clinton was such a master of blowing with rapidly shifting winds that one cannot always be sure just where his true direction lay. President Clinton liked to stay loose with respect to reality; that insight flashed forth from his line, “That depends on what the meaning of is is.” Clinton was willing to take any perspective on is that won him a moment’s affection and support. He hung loose with metaphysics.

Still, it is no doubt fair to say that Clinton came closer, by far, than any other president to being our first Gramscian president, more inclined to espy the goal and measuring rod of politics overseas in avant-garde European thought than in the American founders; more apt to move the United States closer to the model of the social democracies of Europe (on health care, for instance), rather than to urge the social democracies to move toward the novus ordo seclorum that our own founders put up as a light over yonder in the distance, a “shining city on the hill.”

For any president who chooses to interpret the American adventure as a providential opportunity, saved by Divine Providence until these later times, so that the human race might form a new model of government—government of the people, by the people, for the people—a people committed to liberty understood as self-control and self-government—for any such president, the Gramscian project will be a major obstacle, an army fierce in opposition.

In this light, the American presidency is likely to be a heavily embattled post for the foreseeable future, and not only during the current administration. The presidency stands at the crossroads of American culture. The president’s kingly task is to represent us all. His challenge will be to find a language for speaking for all of us, even across a yawning philosophical divide, over the tumult and the shouts of warring factions.

I don’t know about you, but I believe our Republic is in danger. Every president of the future, man or woman, will need prayers of all of us.