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Adlai E. Stevenson

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IS IT TIME TO REFORM THE REFORMS?

ADLAI E. STEVENSON*

Forty years ago the economy and military power of the United States were dominant. From a position of economic, political and military preeminence the United States led the post-war rebuilding both of nations and the world's institutions for trade, money, development, and peace. The world experienced political stability and economic growth. America’s authority was transcendent.

Changes were taking place. The colonial era ended. New nations, with rising expectations, took seats in the United Nations. The old industrial nations and the newly industrialized nations of Southeast Asia closed the economic gap with the United States leaving most of the new nations far behind, their expectations cruelly disappointed.

The internationalization of the marketplace led to the huge capital and trade flows outside the control of governments and the world institutions set up after World War II. Trade in services, intellectual property rights, export subsidies, and industrial targeting were economic phenomena for which the rules of trade were not designed. Moreover, the capital flows—many times the volume of the trade flows—shot about the world with the speed of electricity, destabilizing exchange rates, creating new instabilities and uncertainties. The United States could not maintain the value of the dollar, and it was unlinked from gold. For the first time in over four hundred years the world experienced something akin to monetary anarchy. The money supply was beyond any control. The world no longer had a reliable unit of exchange or reserve currency.

Our modern age also saw the advent of a pluralistic, interdependent, unstable nuclear world. Technology brought hopes and despair. Man went to the moon. Age-old scourges such as small pox, polio, and tuberculosis were banished from the earth—even a new scourge appeared, known as AIDS. Science was opening up possibilities—and peril—for human welfare unimagined when I was in law school thirty years ago.

* Partner, Mayer, Brown & Platt, Chicago; former U.S. Senator (D-IL). This text is adapted from an address given to the Notre Dame Community, March 2, 1988, as part of the Thomas J. White Center Lecture Series.
Some nations adapted to these changes, most notably nations of East Asia. Resources and economic activity, which had shifted over centuries from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, were shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific. America was slow to adapt. We lost markets abroad and at home. American foreign policy didn't adapt very well either. The policy of containment was transplanted from Europe, where it worked, to Southeast Asia, where it didn't. Asia was always a blind spot, even in the early post-war years when the fears of communism blinded the United States to forces of reform and nationalism in China.

America offered little response to the instabilities, interdependencies, and opportunities of the new era other than modest efforts to coordinate national economies and control strategic arms. Nations which don't respond to challenge decline, as the eminent historian, Arnold Toynbee, observed and was at some pains to prove.

Economic statistics can illustrate the decline. The United States now spends about one hundred and sixty billion dollars a year more than it produces, which represents last year's merchandise trade deficit. To cover this deficit, the United States borrows from abroad. Three years ago the United States was the world's largest creditor; now it is the world's largest debtor, owing more than three hundred and fifty billion dollars to foreigners. This debt is for excessive consumption, for leveraged buyouts, stock buybacks, mergers and acquisitions. It is for the government's farm subsidies and military procurement. The investments in increased productivity which once characterized American debt—and which are still the only way to get out of debt without declining living standards—are anemic. Government spending on commercial research and development, the country's physical infrastructure, and education are all declining as a percentage of gross national product (GNP). Some twenty percent of American eighteen-year olds are functionally illiterate; one-quarter of high school students drop out. This is no way to respond to the challenge of foreign competition in a post-industrial age.

The United States dollar measures the decline. Our economy, like Great Britain's, was built with a sound currency. A weak dollar increases the cost of the world's goods and services. It puts our assets on the block for sale to foreigners. (forty percent of the commercial property in downtown Los Angeles is already in foreign hands.) And even with a depreciated dollar, United States manufacturers fail to increase their
exports. Many go on losing market shares abroad and exporting their factories to other nations.

Economic statistics seem brittle and impersonal. They can be misleading. But behind them is an economy—and an economy is organic, an expression of human energy and activity, of a country's vitality.

Measures of United States political influence and authority in the world are more subjective, more difficult to quantify. The international community has voiced its political dissent. Recently, representatives of Latin America to the Organization of American States voted to seat General Noriega's representative. For some countries it was safer to vote with Noriega than with the United States. Our influence in the court of world opinion, the United Nations, has declined in the last few years, at least as measured by votes in the Security Council and General Assembly. Thirty years ago the U.S.S.R. was the lonely dissenter. Increasingly it is the United States. Ironically, Mikhail Gorbachev may have learned more from the successful American experience than some of our leaders have learned from the failed Russian experience. Some American leaders even adopt Russian methods, to the point of waging a war of liberation in Nicaragua, a policy virtually no other nation supports.

That word *decline* has an air of misleading inevitability about it. The country is going through a kind of mid-life crisis. It has all the advantages of capital, technology, the world's most productive work force, the largest market, and most inventive people. It is a magnet for human beings the world over seeking the chance to be free and productive—a magnet for the world's economic and human capital. America could engage this world, pull it out of its slump. But we don't.

Many of our leaders blame the world as if it were a vast, menacing conspiracy. They vow to get "tough" with unfair foreign trade partners. But, when foreign nations bring down trade barriers, our competitors often get there first. According to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Europe and America are the worst offenders against the rules of free trade.

American politicians complain about foreign subsidies of industry, but they subsidize one industry and another with an abandon known in few other nations.

American politicians blame foreigners for not stimulating their economies. But the foreigners, especially the Japanese,
come closer to honoring their economic commitments than Americans do.

American politicians complain that other nations don't bear their share of defense spending. Yet, those nations never asked us to raise defense spending from 4.6 percent of GNP in 1979 to almost seven percent in the 1980s. This spending is our choice, not theirs. Nations in decline relieve their anxieties with military expenditures. But the expenditures drain resources, human and material, from productive investments, diminishing the economic base upon which rests authority and security. Militarism is both a cause and result of decline. History has shown that it's not a constructive way to engage the world, and, at the same time, it's not an irreversible choice.

Different spirits have always contended for America's soul. The founders had an ideal, as Lincoln observed at Gettysburg, that America was an experience of importance to all mankind. Its authority would come by its example. The other spirit was xenophobic and imperious, assuming that money and military might represented authority. America achieved its authority in the world with the Lincolnian strain. Yet we are losing this authority with an unnatural reliance on raw military power, Mr. Reagan's homilies about the virtues of democracy and free enterprise notwithstanding.

This mid-life crisis coincides with systemic changes in our politics—a discontinuity in our historical experience. We are not the victims of fate. We are the victims of our politics. And our politics we can change.

The founders embodied the Greek ideal of enlightened, virtuous citizens. They were patricians whose virtues included a high order of literacy and a capacity for statesmanship not widely shared then, or since. They were worldly men, and by the time of the constitutional convention, chastened by some experience with democracy. They hedged their bet on a form of democracy. Neither the president nor senators were elected directly by the public. The president was to be chosen by electors; the senators, by state legislatures. Interestingly, not all members of the public were enfranchised. The vagaries of public opinion were kept at some distance; the government itself was balanced nicely in order to thwart excesses by any branch of government. Thus, the framers protected the government's virtue, in part by excluding people the founders thought unqualified for participation. The politics of exclusion promoted virtue.
Change occurred in the intervening years. The structure of the federal government underwent reforms and reflected the ideal of direct popular participation, an ideal much advanced by the populists of the late nineteenth century. Voting illustrated this populism at the most basic level. The franchise was made universal for all of eighteen years and more. The president and senators came to be chosen directly. The social Darwinism of the late nineteenth century died a deserved death.

At a deeper level, values changed. The emphasis on individual rights, a part of our Anglo-Saxon juridical and political party rules, were reformed in the name of equal opportunity to make party conventions and committees half women, half men—never mind merit or the people’s choice. In government, affirmative action was not enough to redress past injustices. The government set aside contracts for women and minorities in the face of those with superior claims based on merit. The civil rights legislation of the 1960s was overdue; but this was anti-civil libertarian. Rights of Americans came to depend on gender and race.

A fit of reform and democratization followed the political excesses of the Vietnam and Watergate era. Congress enacted the War Powers Act to prevent inadvertent involvement in war. In fact, Congress merely institutionalized the means by which it sanctioned war.

Campaign finance reforms intended to get the money out of politics, and the people in. Unfortunately, the money rushed in; the people were pushed out. Citizens were effectively disfranchised; special interests were enfranchised through political action committees. Sunshine laws were adopted to let the people in. The doors of Congress were opened, but the lobbyists entered. Budget reforms were adopted to control the budget deficit; the budget got out of control. Ethics laws were adopted to establish higher levels of ethical behavior. In earlier days the slush fund was of doubtful propriety. Now it is regulated.

The methods of government became the ends of government. Politicians, by then insecure, their traditional bases in party organization and discipline gone, were looking for mechanisms that could produce decisions with little discomfort for anyone, including themselves. All this took place in the name of reform and democracy and public participation.

In 1952 the Democratic presidential candidate entered not one primary or caucus. He was a popular choice; he was also the choice of the politicians. The first candidates of the
reformed parties were Nixon and McGovern. In the 1952 and
1956 campaigns the Democratic candidate bought half-hour
blocks of time on national television to deliver eloquent
addresses to enthusiastic, partisan audiences. He laid out his
vision of a "New America" and planted the seeds of the great
society and new frontier.

Presidential campaigns of the past led to a new freedom, a
new deal, a fair deal, a new frontier, a great society—each a
label for a burst of political energy that would move the coun-
try and elevate hopes, before the reaction which always set in.
The campaigns—and more to the point—the presidents they
produced—aroused fierce support, fierce opposition, and
higher levels of public involvement.

President Carter's program was labeled the "New Founda-
tion." He got it wrong. We didn't need a foundation. We
needed an inspiration. Now presidential candidates compete
for thirty-second news bites on news programs which have
become a form of public entertainment. The news bites are fit
best for clichés and the projection of images.

The candidates are reduced to raising money from interest
groups for television and the mercenaries, known as campaign
consultants, while barnstorming from stand to stand, as if they
were candidates for sheriff, in a mindless endurance contest in
which the fittest for the office are reluctant to enter—knowing it
is a contest difficult to survive with principles and dignity intact.
It is not a process which encourages either the preparation or
explication of ideas, let alone some eloquence and inspiration.
The premeditated, prepared statement is of the past. Debates
are no longer debates. Some twenty-eight so far were media
events known as "cattle shows."

Conventions were once conventions, brawling, smoke-fil-
led halls in which deals were cut, issues debated, and where
passions ran high. Forty years ago the South marched out of
the Democratic convention—but the Democrats stood fast—for
civil rights. They won the principle—and the election. Now
delegates by the thousands wave American flags on cue for te-
levision. They do little more than ratify decisions of a few thou-
sand partisans in distant places like Iowa and New Hampshire.
And what is the significance of those decisions? That's where
the money runs out if a candidate does not win the few thou-
sand votes required by the media. It winnows out the candi-
dates because it can't cover them all.

This is not a process conducive to a candidate's cerebra-
tion—or the people's confidence. By the time the ordeal is
over, a successful candidate is exhausted and unprepared for the office he should occupy with program and administration ready. James Madison would have had second thoughts. Wise men fear the compromises, the impossibility of communicating all but images and simplistic propositions. They would prefer to exhort multitudes to some high level of common endeavor than play games with Dan Rather on television.

Changes wrought in the name of equal opportunity, public participation, more confidence in government have produced the opposite. The young of America, having never known confidence in government, let alone inspiration, are the first to drop out, abdicate political responsibility. Some subscribe to a Rambo-like adventurism in the world, the imperial strain, and their own self-interest at home.

Politics always has been, as someone once put it, a gizzard where the grit and gravel of society collect. Politics could be dirty—in large cities, during the gilded age, during the regimes of Harding and Grant. It ain't "bean bag," as Mr. Dooley said. But American politics produced extraordinary debates, civic vitality, if not virtue, and on the whole a statesmanship which rose to the challenge and at times was inspired. Lincoln may have been the first of his genus, the American statesman, a politician, a self-taught man of the prairies, with gifts of will and grace little short of sublime. The American people in those days came on foot and by wagon to hear the candidates debate. The Lincoln-Douglas debates on the extension of slavery into the territories took three hours each. Webster could address enthralled audiences for hours on end discussing the American system, the national bank, trade protection, nullification. (One after-dinner speech took five hours which was overdoing it a bit even then.) These were politicians—unreformed politicians. Politics, for all the public skepticism, was an honorable calling. And the people were part of their politics, more so than after those reforms intended to include them.

The reforms of the 1970s reflect a simplistic notion that democratic government should mirror public values and opinions. Democracy, Bernard Shaw observed, is just a device for giving us what we deserve. But the political process now reflects poorly our opinions—and does little to inform them. Ideally, democracy produces better than we deserve. A campaign is more than a device for winning. It is a device for informing the electorate. A politician owes the public his opinion and his conscience. And government, as Oliver Wendell Holmes reminded us, is a "powerful teacher" for good or evil.
It is a teacher by example. It must be better, more humane, and wiser than we are.

Seventy years ago an American president could still lay claim to the Greek ideal. "It is for this," Woodrow Wilson said, that we love democracy: for the emphasis it puts on character; for its tendency to exalt the purposes of the average man to some high level of endeavor; for its just principles of common assent in matters in which all are concerned; for its ideals of duty and its sense of brotherhood.

He died a broken man. But the ideals for which he died were embraced after another world war. America rose to the challenge forty years ago. And Harry Truman was our president—a product of Missouri's Prendergast machine.

To what high levels of common endeavor are we as a people exalted now? I don't fault the candidates, the politicians. I fault a systemic breakdown—a new political system which makes inspiration impossible, mediocre government the rule—even as the world's challenges are mounting. How should this system be reformed? First, a confession and a defense of that endangered species, the American politician.

I was in the forefront of every fight for reform, starting in the Illinois legislature twenty-three years ago. I was a member of the McGovern commission which reformed party rules in 1969. For ten years I was in the forefront of every fight for reform in Congress. I was first chairman of the Senate Ethics Committee, chairman of the special committee established to reform the organization of the senate. *Mea culpa.* Reform got out of control, went too far, and everything I wanted from reform—integrity, accountability, efficiency, an informed and enthusiastic electorate, a wise and humane government—was negated by reform. Reform undermined the independence of politicians. They became vulnerable and insecure. Reform became a substitute for action.

Now the politicians are trapped by the system—and these reforms. They are victims. They are more honest, hard working, intelligent than they seem on television and in the newspapers, in many respects better than those who preceded them. When the public is granted a chance to see politicians at work, as during the Watergate and Iran-gate proceedings, the public's esteem usually goes up. Otherwise, Congress is held in low esteem. It is a defenseless institution with many discordant voices. This contrasts with a community's perspective. In most congressional districts where the Congressman is best known,
he is held in high esteem. He or she usually wins re-election. This, however, will not continue, nor the quality of government improve, if many of the best continue to drop out or refuse to hear the call.

The country will not go back to the old days, to party and boss rule, nor should it. Besides, some of the reforms were sound. They just went too far. We overreacted. The reforms need to be reformed, balance restored. The excesses of reform must be peeled back to restore the virtues of the old system, but not its weaknesses. After reflection, these are some changes I see.

- Campaign contributions are a source of rampant undue influence in national politics. Presidential candidates have already spent about one hundred million dollars in this campaign. Congressional candidates are spending more than ever, and about half their funds come from PACs. The political action committees which funnel money from special interests into politics should be outlawed. The limits on individual contributions should be raised to enfranchise once again the citizen and compensate for the loss of PAC money.

- Campaign finances should be fully disclosed and in a timely fashion.

- Campaign expenditures should be strictly limited.

- Public financing of primary elections should be repealed. It is a costly way of encouraging a proliferation of candidacies, some of them representative of only the most narrow constituencies. The herd of candidates which ensues overwhelms the media, bewilders the public.

- Ethics laws should be repealed. Personal financial disclosure should be enforced. A simple comprehensive rule of ethical conduct should be established, something like: "Thou shalt do nothing to reflect discredit on your office." That rule is vague enough to keep them guessing and on their toes. Public officeholders are not entitled to due process; they have no constitutional right to their offices. The elaborate rules of ethics now in fashion end up sanctioning by implication all conduct which is not expressly prohibited.

- All primaries and caucuses should be held on two days of each election year, perhaps one in May and one in June, to reduce the length of campaigns and force candidates to address national issues and a national con-
stituency. This would tend to reduce the vagrancy of candidacies. It would tend to cut all members of the people in on the process and give them an equal footing.

- The presidential preferences of delegate candidates should not appear on primary ballots. The diligent voter could find out a delegate's preference; other voters would vote for delegates on their own merits. Delegates would then be representatives of the people, not mere pawns of presidential candidates, some of whom disappear into oblivion before the convention. By this means, conventions might be recreated as institutions for compromise, debate, and serious considerations, and would be more than boring media events. They might again be invigorating political events. Conventions would be conventions. Delegates would be delegates.

These are only a few suggestions. Much depends on the media—on the schools and colleges. But I leave all that to another time and underscore a final point about our system.

Everything hangs on the presidency. The Congress is incapable of producing sound public policy in any kind of systematic, continuous way. That is not opinion; it is historical fact. The Congress only functions with the direction of a strong president. Only the president can speak with a clear voice and help us rise above ourselves, our self interests, for-sake the empire that cannot be, lead the Congress by leading the people.

This great country is home to many who are fit to be president—but the process is weighed against them. The process can be remedied. If it isn't, it will be, as Livy said of Augustan Rome, because "we can neither endure our vices, nor their remedies."