

American Crisis Politics: Barack Obama versus Mitt Romney

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Is a constitutional amendment or a real third-party candidate the silver bullet that Americans need next year,

American voters now have a clear view of who they can vote for next year, with Barack Obama as the Democrats' certain candidate and Mitt Romney as the Republicans'. Both candidates offer much the same prescriptions for the multiple crises facing their country — more war and military spending, lower taxes (certainly no big hike for the rich), more bank bailouts, trickle-down economics for the unemployed and the disintegrating environment.

If Barack and Mitt are the best the political elite can come up with, we can only conclude that the entire American ruling class is suffering from acute paranoid schizophrenia — fearing commies-turned-Muslims under their beds, shedding tears over the odd child hit by a stray bullet in, say, Syria, while joyously bombing hapless Afghans, Iraqs and Libyans into the Stone Age, wiping out hundreds of thousands in the process.

Obama said Saturday that the US now must tackle its “greatest challenge as a nation” — rebuilding a weak economy and creating jobs — with the “same urgency and unity that our troops brought to their fight”. More like: with the “same cold-blooded disrespect for human life ...” Is it possible Obama will promote a Swift-like “modest proposal” to unemployment, and exhort Americans to eat their children?

Despite overwhelming evidence that the chaos and destruction the US brings the world has induced only hate and disgust for America and its values, he preened himself for helping murder Gaddafi and for pretending to withdraw US troops from Iraq: “This week, we had two powerful reminders of how we’ve renewed American leadership in the world.”

Of course, there is an explanation for this raving. The chaos is caused by the logic of profit in the economy, and the rhetoric — by the need to control the political process to ensure profit's uninterrupted flow. But Obama's fine rhetoric is not even convincing Americans anymore, as Occupy Wall Street and demonstrations across the country show. As for Congress; just 6 per cent of registered voters think sitting members deserve re-election — the lowest percentage since CBS News Polls began 20 years ago.

What is the poor — literally, at this point — voter to do? There are stirrings, even in the ruling class. Warren Buffett is spreading a chain letter calling on citizens to demand “a constitutional amendment which would make all sitting members of Congress ineligible for re-election anytime there is a deficit of more than 3 per cent of GDP.” If only it were that simple.

As analyst William Cook puts it, “Representatives no longer serve the citizen seeking their consent to govern, they are servants of the corporations and lobbies that control the economic system. Presidents no longer lead, they are the obedient lackeys of their corporate overseers.” If Buffett’s amendment passed, it would merely bring in another crop of time-servers, with no noticeable effect except higher unemployment and more poverty.

Oblivious to the obvious, Libertarian Ron Paul is battling it out with the Mitts in Republican cuckoo-land to slash both the budget deficit *and* taxes. At least Paul wants less war. He is determined to end what he calls the “welfare-warfare state”, undeterred by the plight of the record 46 million Americans on food stamps (whose welfare expenditures are a crucial stimulus to local economies), and the fact that his very own campaign manager in 2008 died of pneumonia in 2011 from lack of medical insurance.

Then there is the perennial Ralph Nader, who is bowing out from a full-scale campaign so far, and working with left Democrats to field primary challengers to Obama in the desperate hope to move him to the left.

What about a third-party/ independent presidential campaign? The Green Party always fields someone, and Nader ran many times in the past as both the Green candidate and as an independent. There is a new such campaign this year — an Internet campaign called Americans Elect, intending to nominate “a competitive, nonpartisan ticket” that “answers directly to voters”. A Republican must team up with a Democrat. Give me a break.

It is impossible for such a dark horse to actually win, given the Republicrat control of the media and corporate financing of elections. However, American third-partiers, or rather non-partiers, have a venerable history in the US. Theodore Roosevelt (Progressive Bull Moose) captured 27 per cent of the vote in 1912, and Progressive Robert La Follette — 27 per cent in 1924. Billionaire Ross Perot created his own Reform Party, running on a confusing mix of balanced budget, war on drugs, gun control, trade protectionism and environmentalism, to gain almost 20 per cent of the vote in 1992.

If, say, the Green candidate miraculously takes off, s/he will at best be a spoiler, like Republican Party-pooper Roosevelt in 1912 (allowing Democrat Woodrow Wilson to win), Ross Perot in 1992 (allowing Democrat Bill Clinton to win) and possibly Nader in 2000, whose 2.74 per cent of the vote might have been the cause of Al Gore’s loss to George W Bush.

Whichever Republicrat takes over in January 2013 will continue the failed policies of yesteryear as the US people continue to sink into poverty. But the end is already in sight, as the American long spring continues to gain momentum, both on the ground and in the ether. I pads can distract from reality, but they are also a powerful tool to fight it, as Egyptians found out this January.

The bottom line is, of course, to dismantle the “reality of corporate control”, as Cook puts it. He rightly argues that “the rights of citizens to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness require the government to ensure these rights”, which means universal health care, freedom from want; in short, a government that serves the people, not the corporations. While this may sound trite, it is the stark truth. “Rights before privilege.”

There is strong US precedent for this. In 1944, shortly before he died, president Franklin Roosevelt presented Congress with a new Bill of Rights, which included “the right to

adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment”, as well as farmers’ and businessmen’s rights “to trade in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition by monopolies”. Of course, Congress being Congress, it dismissed out of hand this parting gift of FDR.

Another stark truth is that real change in America requires the defeat of America in its imperial wars. This uniquely happened in 1975, when the last helicopters carried panicked remnants of the US puppet regime in Saigon to safety. It resulted in a shift towards détente, exposure of CIA black-ops, limits on US promotion of regime-change and assassination, and on the presidential right to launch undeclared war. Alas, this reversal was short-lived. Memories are short. Rhetoric (then, it was the folksy Reagan) and the ease of spinning circles around do-nothing Congress (a truly worthy whipping boy) have brought us to the current impasse.

Obama’s attempts to paint Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya as triumphs of “American leadership” ring hollow as the economy continues to sink under the weight of its military might. In 1944, America was on top of the world, and FDR’s wistful reminder of the dark 1930s was easily brushed aside. His vice president from 1941-44, Henry Wallace, ran as a Progressive Party candidate in 1948 largely on FDR’s wish list, but his third-party campaign of racial equality and socialism was greeted by boycotts and rotten eggs, and netted him only 2.4 per cent of the vote. America’s long journey into the imperial wilderness had begun in earnest.

To resuscitate FDR’s dashed dreams today means acknowledging, even welcoming, defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan, as their peoples throw off their American shackles. Any thought that Libya will save the Yanks’ bacon is a pipedream. The smoke of civil war there will remain in the air for a long time to come, as a constant reminder of the follies of such imperial games.

The American pacifist Gene Sharp, author of *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (2005), is credited with ushering in the so-called Coloured Revolutions in countries as disparate as Yugoslavia and Egypt during the past two decades. Ahmed Maher, one of the founders of the April 6 Youth Movement that sparked the Egyptian revolution, was inspired by Sharp, and is returning the favour by advising “our brothers”, the Occupy Wall Streeters, on Twitter. It is a nice touch that Sharp’s techniques for facing down police states (Congress be damned) are now being turned on the American police state itself, as the “99 per cent” of Americans try to pick up where FDR’s Bill of Rights left off.

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