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Future Tense: Iowa Looks Ahead

Road to Perdition

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Road to Perdition: Presidential Campaign 2011- 2012



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If one looked at *Time* magazine's feature pieces and weekly columns covering Campaign 2012, ads and money dominated the news magazine's cover-age that fall. The weekly news magazine had trouble finding just the right snappy phrase to headline its coverage of the 2012 elections:

- "The Man with the Plan" (Karl Rove) vs. "The Limits of People Power" (Obama's online fund-raising, 8/13/12)
- "State of the Race" (10/1/12)
- "Obama 2012: Neither Kinder nor Gentler" (9/10/12)
- "One Nation Subsidized" (aspects of daily life enhanced by federal funds, 9/17/120)
- "Fast Flip-flops" (9/24/12)
- "The Paul Ryan Effect" (10/22/12)
- and my favorite "The Air War" (as listed in the table of contents) a.k.a. "Ad Nauseam" (as titled in the article of 9/24/12).

Little wonder at *Time*'s difficulties in framing the electionⁱ. Both Obama and Romney were approaching \$1 billion each in fund-raising as October arrived. Each already had spent over a quarter-billion dollars on ads by then, and both were ready to flood the remaining battleground states—Florida, Virginia, Ohio, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Nevada, Iowa, New Hampshire, Michigan, and Wisconsin (listed based upon the amount of money spent)—with thousands upon thousands of back-to-back primetime ads. SuperPACs spent even more than the candidate campaigns through the summer and early fall, though the single entity that had broadcast the most ads by early October was the Obama campaign (barackobama.com)—over 400,000 and not yet to the big October push (Mad money, 10/14/12; cf. 2012 money, 10/15/12).

Going into the last month of Campaign 2012, 83% of the Obama ads were negative, but, not to be outdone, the Romney team had coughed up 90% of its advertising dollars for attacks. Creating equal consternation among citizens was the fact that of the dollars spent by outside groups for advertising presidential candidates, 13.4% of the Democratic-supportive money and a staggering 55.6% of the GOP money came from so-called "social welfare [501(c)(4)] organizations" that need not disclose their contributors (Overby, 10/15/12).

Nausea is an apt metaphor for capturing how we will remember this presidential election, and, for that matter, the high profile Senate and

House contests as well. I, though, would go farther. The primary title for this paper—“Road to Perdition”—encapsulates the feelings about American national politics that a host of political commentators expressed throughout 2011 and 2012. For me, the Republicans’ primary battle brought to mind the 2002 Tom Hanks film of that name, set in the world of Midwestern gangster life and plotted in a way that evoked Senecan or so-called “blood” and “revenge” tragedies. Moreover, the post-primary/caucus campaign, terminated with Rick Santorum’s April 10 withdrawal from the GOP contests, drove the country even farther down the road to perdition. Our political world darkened, taking on characteristics of John Milton’s imaginary in “Paradise Lost” (n.d.):

Him the Almighty Power
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms.
(ll. 44-49)

...

Yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible. . . .
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes at all, but torture without end
Still urges, and a fiery deluge, fed
With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed.

(ll. 62-63, 65-69)

These two visions of the road to perdition provide a pair of brackets within which, I would argue, Campaign 2011-2012 was situated. The film’s exaggerated emphasis on murder and revenge provides a poetic parallel to the actions of candidates and their supporting constituencies during the 2012 election primary/caucus season. And the poem’s emplotting of Satan’s journey to and habitation in a state of spiritual ruination and condemnation is nearly isomorphic to the crumbling of the American electoral process and the public’s sense of its political despair. In a short article I can only sketch the outlines of these arguments, but that might suffice for a pre-election assessment.

The GOP Primary-Caucus Period

In the great blood or revenge tragedies of ancient Greece, an act of affront, dishonor, accident, or purposive murder set off a chain of subsequent acts of violence, usually involving the killing of associates or especially family members of antagonists. Seneca the Younger’s *Medea* and Aeschylus’, Sophocles’, and Euripides’ plays about the House of Atreus (featuring his sons Menelaus and Agamemnon as well as Agamemnon’s children Iphigeneia, Electra, and Orestes) lay out visions of cheating, banishment, slaughter and sacrifice of children, patricide, derangement, and finally the ritual purification and Athena’s forgiveness of Orestes. Many of those same elements are present in the film *Road to*

Perdition. Michael Sullivan Sr. (Tom Hanks) is a mob enforcer for John Rooney (Paul Newman), an Irish boss during the Al Capone reign. Rooney raised Michael, an orphan, and loved him more than his own son Connor (Daniel Craig). When Michael and Connor go meet with an unhappy employee, Michael's son Michael Jr. sneaks along and sees the meeting. Connor in a fit kills the employee. Michael Jr. is sworn to secrecy, but not wanting witnesses, Connors kills Michael's wife and younger son, thinking he has killed Michael Jr. Then comes a complicated blood bath of revenge, ending only when Michael Sr. and Connor are dead. Among the principals, only the narrator, Michael Jr., survives.

Now consider the 2011-12 primary-caucus period. The GOP was badly fragmented constitutionally, ideologically, and morally. The 2010 bi-election had seemingly empowered the Tea Party activists, with anti-government, anti-social services, and anti-compromise planks in their platform. The 2010 successes hardened many dividing walls between segments of the base. "Obamacare" was to be pulled down on constitutional grounds—an attack in particular on policy justifications drawn from the interstate commerce clause. Centralized education, welfare, social security, and health programs were to be de-certified and instead be operationalized by state and local governments.

The Party of "No" seemed to believe that the GOP could win the White House and both legislative chambers by affirming only what it was against. Tea Partiers regularly recited questions that worked as litmus tests for "true Conservatives." The remnants of the faith-based party members still pushed the red hot buttons of abortion and gay marriage at rallies—an alternative definition of "conservative." The libertarian fringe, championed by Texas Rep. Ron Raul, hewed away at the tax code, the Federal Reserve System, war and the military budget, and the social welfarism of the national government. "Deregulation!" was its battle cry.

In such a situation, the GOP was set up for a 2011-12 blood bath. A total of twenty-seven televised debates were held, running from 5 May 2011 to 3 March 2012. The longer they ran, the sharper the *ad hominem* attacks. Over-exposure ground down arguments to catch phrases, and candidates would rise only to be shot down. Tim Pawlenty, Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, Herman Cain, Jon Huntsman, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum each took turns rising to the top or near-top of opinion surveys, only to fall in a swirl of disillusion, indiscretion, or de-funding. Ron Paul could stay the course in spite of his lack of electoral success by switching his ground troops to attacks, not only in primaries or caucuses, but in state by state party conventions, working Paul-inspired planks into platformsⁱⁱ. The GOP hopefuls were chewed up by the garbage-grinding machine that was the debates commitment. Even the winner, Mitt Romney, was savaged. By May 2012, Obama had a 35-point advantage in polls asking about the candidates' comparative likability (Politico, 2012).

And then there was the advertising. By the time Santorum quit the campaign in April 2012, Mitt Romney had spent about \$90 million on his campaigning and ads, with his SuperPAC Restore Our Future spending another \$48 million. Some of that already was spent in pursuit of the

President, especially by the party and SuperPAC, but Romney was forced to keep up the attacks on his primary/caucus opponents through all of the first quarter of 2012. Those ads, as well as the stump speeches he and the rest of the wannabes were giving, grew increasing dark and hateful. In 2008, only 6% of GOP campaign advertising during the primaries/caucuses was negative; in 2012, more than half were (Study, 2012).

And so, overly long, over-heated candidate debates, hyper-financed internecine negative ads, and vitriolic stump speeches in an interminable campaign focused, finally, on the killing-off of all GOP competitors save the least ideologically-committed party champion, Mitt Romney. He was a man who talked the talk of the ideologues, but had lived out a political career alien to them.

Even as the election nears, only 57% of surveyed Republicans and 45% of independents are very or fairly satisfied with the GOP standard bearer. He is the last one standing, yes, but has produced the least party satisfaction since George H.W. Bush ran in 1992 (Pew, 2012). The GOP has played out a blood tragedy.

The 2012 General Election Campaign

Especially since the post-1968 party reforms following the Democratic convention debacle in Chicago, the American presidential campaigning system has steadily evolved. By 2012, the evolution took the country to a point where Milton's lines,

“From those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible”

captures for many citizens the state of the union. I would not be too far outside popular sentiment to say that we have witnessed in 2011-2012 not simply a blood tragedy but the quashing of citizen control over the centralized electoral system, and are dwelling “in adamant chains and penal fire.” How the electorate became positioned in a living hell is a complicated question requiring more space than is available here, but at least I can start into the query.

First, for very good reasons, the United States began re-making its national election machinery in the early '70s. Both parties set up delegate selection systems that stressed starting that process at the precinct level, with balloting that funneled group decisions from the smallest to the largest party gatherings—precinct to county to district to state to national conventions. Space in the national conventions was reserved for “super” delegates such as governors and other party dignitaries, but citizen will was featured in selecting the voices that would speak for parties, their platforms, and their candidates nationally. And for good measure, the financing of candidate organizations was largely removed from party structures; a premium was put on individual contributions to candidates within legislated limits on their contributions, controlled in part by how parties could spend money during elections, and framed by rules for political action committees (PACs) participating in campaigning.

Good reasons for these reforms, yes, but in too many ways they went south. With emphasis placed on candidate fund-raising from the

citizenry, candidates blithely ignored their parties, instead using the mass media (see below) to raise funds and supporters who would pay for campaigning and become delegates at the various party conventions. Parties become all but irrelevant to national presidential electioneering except at convention time. Massive money machines replaced them as the powerful electoral engines. Not only such PACs as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the AFL/CIO but also SuperPACs such as American Crossroads and Priorities USA Action raised millions of dollars—even in seven- or eight-figure amounts from individuals—to do issue advertising that ramped up thinly veiled assaults of the other party’s candidates (OpenSecrets.org, n.d.). All of this has resulted in:

- concentrated campaign money, with fund-raising run largely outside party discipline or purview
- PACs and SuperPACs with no accountability, granted personhood (citizenship?) by the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* ruling
- candidates becoming strongly bound to special interests with financial leverage
- bundling (perfected in the 2004 Bush campaign), where small donations are gathered from like-minded or like-situated people into large piles of cash
- a system justified by equating campaign marketing with “free speech” and hence effectively unregulated

Millions upon million of dollars thus flow into the hands of campaigns, issue-centered entities whose contributors are revealed but not otherwise controlled, and social welfare organizations who can offer the public advice on voting but whose contributors need not be made public (Overby, 2012). Now, Obama is a candidate who has raised significant amounts of money through small contributions, largely through electronic contacts with individuals, yet still the money he’s gathered to promote and defend himself will not equal that arrayed against him by the GOP, its candidates, and its friendly PACs/superPACs.

Second, even as obscene amounts of money have been greasing the electoral wheels, electricity has made possible magnificently accentuated pro-motional politics—campaign marketing. The electrification of politics began in 1924, when William Fox (of 20th Century Fox) made a silent film praising the virtues of Calvin Coolidge and when fledgling radio stations broadcast the party conventions (Gronbeck, 2009; 1996). By now, as we’ve passed through the age of television and into the instantaneous connectivity of the digital era, visual politics has been supplemented and at times supplanted by social politics.

CNN orchestrated a primary period debate with questions coming in from the Internet, and running commentary on the presidential and vice-presidential debates was available on Facebook, Twitter, Bluefin Labs, SnappyTV, and other outlets. The third presidential debate generated 8.0 million social media comments, with Twitter carrying 6.5 million of them (Lostremote, 2012). Of course more people (59.2 million) watched it—and that an audience offered the competing spectacles of Monday Night Football and game 7 of the National League Championship Series—but

the importance of social media should not be underestimated because they give us a citizenry personally participating in electoral activity (Huffingtonpost.com, 2012).

Computerization was equally important for its ability to isolate and then directly access voters, not with mass (broadcast) messages, but with microtargeted missives. The Clinton campaign of 1992 may have been the first to use e-mail and listserv distribution of information and marching orders to its workers (Gronbeck, 2009), but by now those distributive uses have been supplemented by data-gathering registration of supporters on candidate websites, links to net-working sites featuring candidates and their families, podcasts, push polling, Sim-Campaigns (simulations allowing candidates to enter demographic, economic, and political information into templates that produce scenarios of voter reactions), and repersonalization (data on individuals downloaded to workers' PDAs for use in making contacts with specific households). (Gronbeck & Wiese, 2005.)

One last note here: the computer revolution has also revitalized "voter contact" (vis-à-vis mass-mediated) messaging, particularly direct mail. Geo-demographics, wherein such human information as SES, race, political preferences, family organizational information, consumption patterns, etc., is mapped geographically, is a base for contacting potential supporters. You are where you live and shop, what you drive and wear, who you read and worship with. Claritas clustering (2009) divides the U.S. into more than a hundred consumption groups, which group behavior and estimates political behavior. Furthermore, individual preference and consumption information helps campaigns select campaign issues with specific appeals to known political triggers for emphasis in mailings (Gronbeck, 2009). Even a "politics of shame," reminding voters simply that they've voted before and it's their duty to vote now, can increase turnout by two or more percent (Issenberg, 2012).

And so the dominant political parties have been virtually reformed right out of presidential campaigns, and financiers threaten to become the king- and queen-makers in the political empire. Voters are identified, sorted, gathered, bundled, and bled by an electoral system threatening to cost \$6 billion in years of presidential contests. Corporate entities and CEOs provide a larger and larger percentage of that money with each passing year. Neoliberalism surely is influencing political outcomes to a far too significant degree.

To Hell and Back?

The road to perdition was the highway down which the 2011-12 GOP hopefuls took their political tours of the states. And Milton's vision of Satan's fall into eternal damnation is where many of us, whether in cynical or frustrated frames of mind, feel the voter has been driven to by the campaign domination of the Rich and Politically Powerful. You can send in your Federal Election Commission-controlled contributions to favorite candidates, and that buys your quiet voice the ear of the campaign. A bit. But contributions beyond your fiscal imagination purchase for corporate entities and persons a platform from which to

shout their demands and enforce their political preferences. “Favorite sons [and daughters]” now are acquired as Prodigal Sons [and Daughters] who are pressured to toe ideological lines. And so you live with “torture without end” and “a fiery deluge, fed / With every-burning sulphur unconsumed.”

Until we de-certify corporations as empowered with “one person, one vote” rights no matter what the size of their political contributions, until we break the equation of free speech and electoral advertising, and until we control cam-paign expenditures through public financing or some other mechanism, the citizenry dwells in hell. If corporations are entitled as persons or citizens, why are they not subjected to the same contributions limits as everyone else? *I* have my influence on a campaign controlled fiscally; *I* can work for it in other ways, but not through gargantuan financial gifts. Why doesn’t the same hold for other entities or the One Percent? Fine, so the mega-wealthy can unite to urge a position on some issue, but why be allowed to name acceptable or unacceptable political candidates in issue ads? Why are riches determiners of political conversation? And, what systemic madness allows a 158-year-old political party to kill off its aspiring leadership through too much money for paid advertising and such excessive free television time that policy debates morph into Thunderdome events?

Until we move toward the equalization of citizen voices in speaking to, repeating, and reacting to the messages of candidates-for-office, we will crash on the Road to Perdition, in a blood bath or state of political damnation. If we, however, react to this election in democracy-affirming ways, campaign 2011-12 could lead to “Paradise Regained” (Milton, n.d.):

So spake the Eternal Father, and all Heaven
Admiring stood a space; then into hymns
Burst forth, and in celestial measures moved,
Circling the throne and singing, while the hand
Sung with the voice, and this the argument:

--

“Victory and triumph to the Son of God,
Now entering his great duel, not of arms,
But to vanquish by wisdom hellish wiles!["”]

(ll. 168-75)

ⁱ *Time* (Crowley 2012) was not afraid of recycling its own cleverness—*ad nauseam* already had been used for an article on campaign ads written by Frank Luntz (2010) two years’ previous. Then the *Denver Post* (2012) picked it up to cover an article by Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2012), co-founder of FactCheck.org.

ⁱⁱ Ron Paul used the state delegation selection process to achieve a plurality of first-ballot voters from Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, and Louisiana. Rick Santorum won via caucus or primary the plurality of delegates to the national convention from Alabama, Kansas, North Dakota, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.

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