
Prologue

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In discussing whether this year's presidential election should be considered "pivotal," any number of the forty-four symposium participants in this special Summer-Fall issue of *American Experiment Quarterly* point to the 1932 race between Herbert Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the archetype of such a critical contest. History's subsequent judgment certainly has been clear: Roosevelt's victory led to fundamental changes and shifts in American life, politically and otherwise. But did everyone, seventy-two years ago, assume that would prove to be the case if Roosevelt were to prevail? Not exactly.

The great British historian Paul Johnson, for example, in his classic *Modern Times*, notes how Walter Lippmann, in early 1932, described Roosevelt as a "highly impressionable person without a firm grasp of public affairs and without very strong convictions . . . not the dangerous enemy of anything. . . . He is a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be president." *The New York Times* concluded that there wasn't a single "wild nostrum" or "disturbing proposal" in

Roosevelt's plans. And the *New Republic* ridiculed those plans as a "puny answer to the challenge of the times."

While the two candidates loudly contended that the gulf between their respective policies was vast, Johnson argues that it was really "all baloney," as Hoover and Roosevelt, in fact, agreed with each other measurably more than their "bellicose" rhetoric suggested. Johnson writes that while the two men differed on particulars for defeating the Depression, they largely agreed on the main route for doing so—or at least they did during the four months between November 1932 and March 1933 when Roosevelt was finally sworn in. Both the incoming and outgoing presidents during the interregnum agreed that action was "urgent," according to Johnson. But save for details, they each envisioned that urgency as entailing "more of the same"—which is to say, more of what Hoover was already doing.

My own view is that the differences between George W. Bush and John Kerry are sufficiently big so that this year's election *might* prove to be a pivotal one. I'm thinking here primarily of Bush's more aggressive ideas about

fighting terror; his tastes in appointing judges; his more-rooted views on cultural issues such as marriage; his devotion to expanding public space for civically respectful religious expression; and his enthusiasm for giving men and women an opportunity to invest a portion of the Social Security dollars as they see fit. In each instance I agree robustly with him. But to whether 2004, over time, truly will prove to be pivotal in the way 1932 eventually did, or as Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980 did, I commend the opening and closing sentences of **Frederick M. Hess's** symposium contribution. "It's hard to tell whether any election is pivotal except in retrospect. While this is an immense cop-out, it's also the truth." And then: "Because so much of any election turns on domestic and international events beyond the president's control, it's the rare election that reveals its significance until it's in the rearview mirror. So, it's hard for me to see this election as pivotal; but ask me again in twenty years."

As for the other forty-three participants, many are willing to draw more definitive conclusions, even if hesitantly. **Marvin Olasky**, for example, "reluctantly" concludes that this November's election is pivotal "because two decidedly different views of America's role in the world confront us."

I have no doubt that a President Kerry could talk a good game, but does he understand that there is evil in the world that we must stand up against? Or does he think that those who hate America, Christianity, and Judaism can be massaged into polite-

ness? Even if John Kerry suddenly displays vision rather than equivocation, the pressures on the Democratic side toward accommodation and appeasement are so great that it would take a stubborn Andrew Jackson or Harry Truman to resist them – and with Kerry, the buck seems to stop in Paris, Berlin, and Beacon Hill, or at least Turtle Bay.

Shall we say that **Arvonne Fraser** disagrees with Olasky on the respective merits of the two contenders?

From my Farmer-Laborite father and my own experience in politics, I've learned that every election is important, but some are pivotal. This is one of them. On November 2, every citizen eligible to vote must decide between two distinct opposites—the go-it-alone, individualistic, and paternalistic approach or the collaborative approach. The first is simplistic and sometimes contradictory; the second—collaboration—is more complex and responsible.

It's not hard to tell that **Bill Frenzel** has spent a lot of years as a serious practitioner and student of American politics. America's "wonderful" system of government, he writes, "guarantees a sort of inertia, a policy drag, in our complicated political and economic society."

The drag provides good insulation against drastic policy changes. Changes made probably won't be graceful, but they are unlikely to be extreme. . . . A single election can't change our world very much, and certainly is unlikely to bring it down.

He continues this way, however:

[E]ven if change is gradual, or marginal, elections are how Americans make it, or resist it. If the election is the only pivot we have, the fact that it is a small one does not make the election less pivotal. If small, hedged bets are what the system allows, they are the ones we must make. The elections are the only game in town.

Then there are some—even on the right—who don't think it will make much of a difference which first couple gets to live in the White House come late January. **Heather Mac Donald**, for example, offers bladed points like these:

Let's see: President Bush is spending like a drunken sailor; his Transportation Department has been suing airlines for discriminating against Muslim passengers after 9/11; his attorney general continues to sic judges on police departments in the name of combating "racial profiling"; and the latest justification for the war on Iraq—saving the Iraqis from a brutal dictator—comes right out of the Holbrooke-Albright foreign policy playbook that candidate Bush had vowed to close. . . . So no, I don't believe this is a pivotal election.

Next to the war on terror, one of the issues cited most frequently by contributors is the makeup of the judiciary. Which candidate would do a better (or decidedly inferior and dangerous) job of nominating federal judges, including men and women to the Supreme Court?

"This election," believes **Clint Bolick**, "matters less for the presidency or Congress than it does for the third branch." The president sworn in next

January "almost certainly will choose at least two, and as many as four, members of the U.S. Supreme Court (plus roughly one-quarter of lower federal court judges). Those appointments will mark the course of American jurisprudence for decades." Though the current high court, Bolick writes, has leaned left in recent years, it remains the "proudest domestic legacy of the Reagan years" and that "Bush's worst appointee likely would be better than Kerry's best."

Keeping with this theme, **Dwight Rabuse** writes: "The presidential candidates may talk about them only in code, but abortion, school choice, gay marriage, states' rights, and the other so-called social issues are at the heart of the political and cultural divide between red and blue states. Presidents will have little direct control over the outcome of these and other issues, but the judges they appoint will." Rabuse (a lawyer and conservative talk show host) says that "voters do understand, or soon will, that a Kerry Supreme Court justice and a George Bush justice are very different creatures."

One of the most interesting essays on social and cultural questions, broadly defined, is by **Jean Bethke Elshain**. "Do you, as a citizen," she asks,

believe that moral issues lie at the heart of political life, or do you believe that moral questions can and should be severed from politics? Senator Kerry espouses, often in a rather cloudy way, the separatist posture; President Bush endorses what I will call the integrationist approach. Kerry is comfortable, indeed quite matter-of-fact, stating: "I oppose x, y,

or z (fill in the blank) *personally*, but I endorse it *publicly* because my private beliefs shouldn't determine my *political* stance . . ."

Given this bifurcation of moral belief and policy, it should, I suppose, come as no surprise when Senator Kerry tells us that the stem cell debate has nothing to do with morality—only with science and medicine. Only a strong prejudice against bringing religiously derived ethical principles to bear on public issues can explain Kerry's insistence that the American people "need a president who believes in science." What on earth does this mean? Is science now to be placed in a special category beyond challenge? . . . Uncritical belief in science—as every student of political history knows—is a very dangerous thing."

One more major theme needs to be noted, as it dovetails perfectly (overlaps, really) with another *AEQ* symposium that involved precisely forty-four writers last winter, "They Beat the Hell Out of Each Other Up There: Civility in Minnesota (and National) Politics." **Dean Elton Johnson** frames it this way this time around: "Perhaps the only thing more pivotal than the upcoming election is what our national leadership will do in the next four years to bring our people together." **Stephen B. Young** says: "We have a politics of tit for tat, the pettiness of which cannot be overplayed." And **Tim Penny** deplores today's campaigns writing, "The two major parties (and their associated interest groups) seem more interested in 'big lies' than in big

ideas." And: "Bringing Americans together and moving the nation forward will be more difficult in the aftermath of an election that does more to make us angry than to make us proud."

There is more than a little to be said on behalf of these strictures. But it's also useful to keep in mind what **Steve Hayward** says in his essay: "Every election seems to get nastier, and no doubt this is true in the ordinary sense." But, he adds, "only our nostalgia blinds us to the fact that, even in wartime, we have often been harshly disunited." For a particularly ugly example, he quotes from Roosevelt's State of the Union address in 1944.

One of the great American industrialists of our day—a man who has rendered yeoman service to his country in this crisis—recently emphasized the grave dangers of "rightist reaction" in this nation. All clear-thinking businessmen share his concern. Indeed, if such reaction should develop—if history were to repeat itself and we were to return to the so-called "normalcy" of the 1920s—then it is certain that even though we shall have conquered our enemies on the battlefields abroad, we shall have yielded to the spirit of fascism here at home"

To Roosevelt's credit, I guess, he only talked about the "spirit" of fascism in his speech; he didn't actually call anyone a flat-out, goose-stepping fascist. Updating such things, thank goodness that no one has ever called George W. Bush a Nazi, or likened him to Hitler, or anything fascistic and hateful like that.

My great thanks to the nearly four dozen contributors, from both Minnesota and around the country, to “The 2004 Elections: Are They as Pivotal as the Candidates Say?” If I were to reduce their rich and complex essays to two overly simple sentences, they might read: This year’s presidential election may or not meet the high test of a “pivotal” election as defined by scholars, one in which the political earth shakes seismically and new coalitions and arrangements emerge enduringly. But at the very least, it’s a critically important election, as these are critically demanding days for the United States and the world.

I should add that while nearly all contributors focused on the presidential race, they also were invited to write about other contests if they chose. See for example, **Frank Berman’s** welcome column about legislative elections and their bearing on the University of Minnesota.

This issue of *AEQ* continues with oral essays from two American Experiment Luncheon Forums: “Northern Exposure: Why Canada’s Health Care System is No Rx for America,” by **Sally C. Pipes**; and “How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life,” by **Peter Robinson**.

Ms. Pipes, a Canadian by birth, is president and CEO of the Pacific Research Institute in San Francisco. After recalling P. J. O’Rourke’s observation that, “If you think health care is expensive now, wait until it’s free,” she went on to argue like this in March:

My health care message today is a most important one, one that not

many Americans have heard but need to hear. The Canadian single-payer system offers only a false promise for what ails governments, patients, and doctors. Today, after thirty years of government intervention, the system suffers from long waiting times for critical procedures, lack of access to current technology, increasing costs to taxpayers and patients, and a brain drain of doctors who head south for better working conditions and more money.

It has taken us much too long to publish Peter Robinson’s insightful and fond tribute to Ronald Reagan, which he shared with a center audience a year ago in September. But especially given Mr. Reagan’s death in June, it’s important to run it now. Mr. Robinson served as a speechwriter for the president, and his presentation drew on his best-selling 2003 book by the same name as his forum title. He opened this way:

On February 6, 2001, my nine-year-old daughter happened to wander into the room during a television segment marking Ronald Reagan’s ninetieth birthday. She watched for a moment and then she turned to me and asked, “Dad, is that the president you worked for?” What answer could I give her? I wanted my daughter to recognize that the world she inhabited was freer and more prosperous because of that old, old man on television. But I also wanted her to grasp my personal debt to him, to understand all that he taught me—how to work and to take it easy, how to think and how to use words, how to be a good husband, how to approach life

itself. I needed to tell my children how Ronald Reagan changed my life.

We conclude, as usual, with several terrific columns on recent events in American education by my old boss at the U.S. Department of Education, **Chester E. Finn Jr.** Likewise as usual, I welcome your comments on the always pithy things he has to say, as well as anything else that strikes either your fancy or heartburn in these pages.

Be well, my friends. And, with deepest respect for all good men and women running for office, might I also say: Vote well, too, cherishing the right to do so. ■