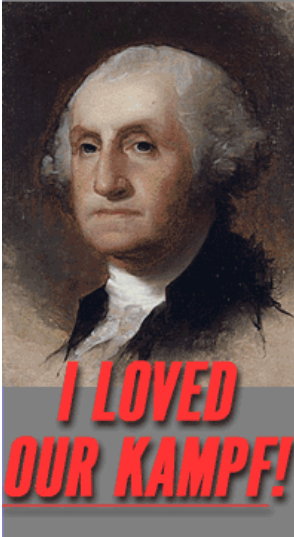


"I CANNOT
TELL A LIE,
BUT NOT
EVERYBODY
IS SO HONEST.
FOR EXAMPLE,
THE POLTROONS
INSISTING
THAT

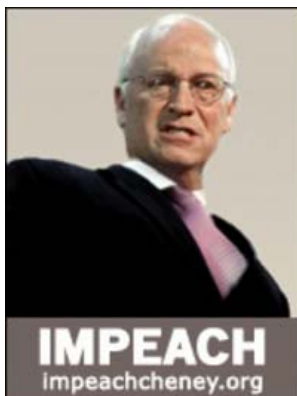


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September 05, 2007

Democrats And The Iron Law Of Institutions

Read this if you're driven insane by the Democrats.

John Caruso of a Distant Ocean is pissed off [at Medea Benjamin](#):

Medea Benjamin [complains](#) that Nancy Pelosi makes time to meet with Democratic coffee klatches and "high-dollar donors" but won't meet with activists from Benjamin's CODEPINK. My response:

The Democrats generally (and Nancy Pelosi in particular) learned that they could ignore people like CODEPINK generally (and Medea Benjamin in particular) in 2004, when progressives made it eminently clear that they would vote for a Democrat who was [as bad as \(or worse than\) George Bush](#) on the most crucial issues--especially Iraq...

So if Nancy Pelosi won't meet with you now, Medea, it's because she knows that there's absolutely no need for her to do so. **You can sputter all you want about how "Pelosi has alienated CODEPINK and most of the peace movement" and how "disillusioned" you are, but you've already proven that in the only place that Democrats care about what you do--the voting booth--you're willing to sacrifice your principles and give them your support...**

Let me gently suggest that John, in his understandable frustration, is not perceiving this situation clearly. What he's overlooking is that the Democrats operate according to the **Iron Law of Institutions**. The Iron Law of Institutions is: the people who control institutions care first and foremost about *their power within the institution* rather than the *power of the institution itself*. Thus, they would rather the institution "fail" while they remain in power *within the institution* than for the institution to "succeed" if that requires them to lose power *within the institution*.

This is true for *all human institutions*, from elementary schools up to the United States of America. If history shows anything, it's that this cannot be changed. What can be done, sometimes, is to force the people running institutions to align their own interests with those of the institution itself and its members.

I'll get to back momentarily to today's Democrats, but first it's useful to look at how the Iron Law plays out in other cases. At the country level, Saddam Hussein is an extreme example: during his thirty years in power, he made choices that led to the obliteration of Iraq—not because there was nothing else he could have done, but because choices that would have strengthened Iraq would have made *him* less individually powerful *within Iraq*. And this is a constant occurrence in the history of dictators. When Stalin purged many of the Red Army's most competent officers in the late thirties it made the Soviet Union itself far weaker—in particular, more vulnerable to a Nazi invasion—but what mattered to Stalin was eliminating internal rivals to his power. The same dynamic is displayed in less virulent form with Bush and Cheney: whenever they've had to choose between sharing power with others within a stronger America, and holding more power within a weaker America, they've chosen the latter.

Probably the best writing about this at the political party level was done by [the late Walter Karp](#). Karp points out in [Buried Alive](#) that before the 1972 elections there was a huge influx of new people and energy into the Democratic party from the anti-war and civil rights movements. This was enough to get McGovern nominated. But here's what happened then, as Karp describes it:

Under the Same Sun
 Empire Notes
 Mollie's Restricted View
 David Swanson
 Norman Solomon
 Jeff Cohen
 Consortium News
 Strictly Normal
 Machination
 Hart Fox

ACTUAL FUNNY

Trillion Hitler Brains in Body of
 RoboGodzilla
 Dirk Voetberg
 Mimi Smartypants
 Dooce
 Rachel Arieff
 Jesus' General



ILK

A Liberal Dose
 A Lovely Promise
 abb1
 Adam Kotsko
 Against the War on Terror
 Agitprop
 Alan Bock
 Angry Arab News Service
 Angry Bear
 Annalysis
 Antiwar.com Eblo
 Arthur Silber's Once Upon a Time
 Arvin Hill's Carnival of Horror
 Avedon Carol
 Baghdad Burning
 Billmon

As soon as McGovern was nominated, party leaders began systematically slurring and belittling him, while the trade union chieftains refused to endorse him on the pretense that this mild Mr. Pliant was a being wild and dangerous. A congressional investigation of Watergate was put off for several months to deprive McGovern's candidacy of its benefits. As an indiscreet Chicago ward heeler predicted in the fall of 1972, McGovern is "gonna lose because we're gonna make sure he's gonna lose"...So deftly did party leaders "cut the top of the ticket" that while Richard Nixon won in a "landslide," the Democrats gained two Senate seats.

Could McGovern have won if he'd been fully supported by the status quo powers with the Democratic party? Impossible to say. But they didn't want to take any chances: they preferred to make sure he lost the election, because his winning it would have meant newcomers would dilute their power *within the party*. That's the Iron Law of Institutions in action.

In *The Politics of War* Karp examines a similar situation in the election of 1912. The incumbent was William H. Taft, a Republican. However, he was extremely unpopular both nationally and with the progressive movement within the Republican party. First the National Progressive Republican League (essentially a party within the party, like the [Progressive Democrats of America](#) today) backed [Robert La Follette](#). They eventually deserted him for Teddy Roosevelt, because he seemed more likely to wrest the nomination away from Taft. Karp writes:

If a presidential nomination were decided by the sentiments of a party's rank and file, Roosevelt would have won the nomination by a landslide. Of the 388 convention delegates chosen by popular vote, Taft won a mere 71, or less than 20 percent. If a presidential nomination were decided by money, Roosevelt again would have won. He had the preponderance of money on his side. If a presidential nomination were dictated by the party leaders' desire to win the general election, they would have nominated Roosevelt themselves. The Republican oligarchy, however, was fighting for its life. Compared to the prospect of losing power within the party, rank-and-file sentiment meant little. Winning in November meant least of all. The oligarchy was determined to renominate Taft, a certain loser, solely to keep control of the party. "When we get back in four years," explained a machine senator from Indiana, "instead of the damned insurgents, we will have the machine."

So what does this mean for John Caruso's (and everyone's) frustration with the Democrats today? A lot of things, such as:

1. The voting booth is by no means "the only place that Democrats care about what you do." In fact, from their perspective, by the time you get to the general election much of the game is over. Withholding your November vote from candidates they like but you don't will, at most, make them a little sad. Often they'd prefer it, if that's the price of keeping you out of their hair the rest of the time. That's why they don't try to appeal to the ~50% of Americans who don't vote.
2. If you want to motivate powerful Democrats, attempt to threaten *their power within the party*, not the well-being of the party overall. Of course, this is easier said than done, particularly because much of the power within the party is (as Karp would put it) an unelected Democratic oligarchy. For instance, Pelosi's status as Speaker can be challenged straightforwardly. Getting at the source of the party oligarchy's power, which is money and institutions outside of electoral politics, is much more difficult.
3. Any serious attempt to transform the Democratic party would include a conscious attempt to change its culture, into one that celebrates different people: organizers rather than elected officials and donors. Culture only seems like a weak reed. It's in fact the most powerful motivation people have. If people are celebrated for acting for the good of the whole rather than just themselves, they'll act for the good of the whole. Likewise, a better culture would humble the "leaders," to discourage those with individualistic motivations from seeking the positions. A Democratic party that worked would require Charles Schumer and Steny Hoyer and anyone who donated over \$5000 a year to clean the Capitol toilets.
4. If you don't believe the Democratic party is redeemable, don't get your hopes up that another party would end up being much better. Any other party would also be subject to the Iron Law of Institutions. It thus would be quickly just as dreadful as the Democrats...unless people put in the same amount of work as would be required to clean out the Democrats' Augean stables.

Bionic Octopus
 Black Commentator
 Bob's links & rants
 Body and Soul
 Brad DeLong
 Brendan's Killing Time
 BTC News
 Charles Cameron
 Chris Floyd's Empire Burlesque
 Confined Space
 Constructive Anarchy
 Crooks & Liars
 Daily Howler
 Damn the Man
 David Corn
 Dean Baker's Beat the Press
 Deep Blade Journal
 Disciples from the Left
 Dork
 Doug Ireland
 eBeefs
 Eschaton
 European Human Rights Center
 Gainesville Report
 Glen Rangwala
 Head Heeb
 Helena Cobban
 The Hindsight Factor
 House of Labor
 Hugo Zoom
 Hullabaloo
 Imad Khadduri
 Ihsan
 JABBS
 Jake Lowen
 James Wolcott
 Joe Bageant
 John Caruso's Distant Ocean
 Juan Cole
 King of Zembla
 Krimur
 Lady Poverty
 Lawrence of Cyberia
 Liberty & Power
 Limited, Inc.
 lonestaryankee
 Love America, Hate Bush
 Lying Media Bastards
 Matthew Yglesias
 MaxSpeak!
 Muslim Wakeup!
 Nathan Newman
 Newspaper Index
 Oil Wars
 Orcinus
 Orwell's Grave
 peknet
 Phil Carter
 Phronesisaical
 Prose Before Hos
 Ranger Against War
 Rhinocrisy
 Rick Perlstein
 Rob Payne
 Saheli Datta
 Semitism.net
 Shakespeare's Sister
 Shaun Mullen
 SirotaEblo
 Spencer Ackerman
 Spiderweb
 Steve Benen's Carpetbagger Report
 Steve Gilliard
 Straight Not Narrow
 Talking Points Memo
 UFO Breakfast
 Unfair Witness
 Washington Monthly
 War and Piece
 Washington Note
 Who Rules America?
 Your Right Hand Thief

5. Generally speaking, don't expect too much from political parties, and certainly don't expect them to change much in less than a generation. And in any case, keep in mind much of the power in society lies elsewhere.

UPDATE: American Coprophagia [points out](#) another of Karp's favorite stories, which appears in [Indispensable Enemies](#):

It was a Republican state party boss, Senator Boies Penrose of Pennsylvania, who early this century stated with notable candor the basic principle and purpose of present-day party politics. In the face of a powerful state and national resurgence of reform and the sentiments of the majority of the Republican rank and file, Penrose put up a losing slate of stand-pat party hacks. When a fellow Republican accused him of ruining the party, Penrose replied, "Yes, but I'll preside over the ruins."

AND: I've removed an anecdote I was using about Egypt and the 1967 War because of doubts about its accuracy.

Posted by Jonathan Schwarz at September 5, 2007 07:49 PM | [TrackBack](#)

Comments

That was good.

Posted by: buermann at September 5, 2007 08:27 PM

Hear, here -- but what of multi-party political coalitions? There must ways that a nation of 300M can keep politicians from becoming entrenched.

Not that I care. :-)

Posted by: Ted at September 5, 2007 09:28 PM

possibilities:

1. yes.

2. do you have evidence for this, in the television era? it sounds like it could be an incitement to entrenching resistance, e.g., the thing with lieberman backfiring -- a somewhat special situation, i know, without a second repugnant candidate in the race, but, lots of nasty selfish pricks are incumbents unto themselves. i mean metaphorically. you're not just talking about electoral challenges. most of the really skunky people have a multi-year relationship with a horrible industry, for instance.

3. organizers are good. targeted and well-planned spending and regulation are not so good -- less room for favors.

4. my feeling on this is a lot of the old industries are *currently* taking heavy blows to their reputations. before they buy their way out of it, it's a grand opportunity to force a cleanup.

5. we don't have a generation to wait.

Posted by: hapa at September 5, 2007 09:54 PM

I get that you're basically using my posting as a springboard for your own thoughts (hey, man, glad to be of service!), but despite that I'd say you're parsing what I wrote much more closely than it merits. It was mainly a toss-off response to Medea Benjamin's maddening denial, not a detailed analysis.

Also, you may not have clicked through to see the [advice](#) I offered her (regarding the possible outcomes of refusing to support bad Democrats): "Democrats are fully capable of drawing the wrong conclusions from any outcome, because they're institutionally inclined to do so. But the fact is that the strategy that you and others pursued failed spectacularly, just as it has failed in the past and it's guaranteed to fail again in the future. Given a choice between a strategy that's guaranteed to fail and one that has a realistic chance of success, I'd choose the latter." [Click here to see the full text of the advice.](#)