

Are We There Yet?

Introduction to a panel on the meanings of the 2008 presidential election.
Department of Political Science Colloquium
Harry Friedman Room, UHM
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Jim Dator

Barack Hussein Obama is in the White House and as David Alan Grier said, it is time to party like it is 1863!

I suggested to Noe that we have this symposium because, a few weeks ago, I happened to run across what I said at a similar postpartum depression party that we had here on November 8, 2004, of course not knowing who was going to win when I suggested we have this symposium today to sort things out.

The title of my talk in 2004 was "Halfway there." In it I argued that until Democrats stopped being Republican wannabes, the party would continue to lose.

I said, specifically, Quote, "Republicans have redefined themselves very successfully as theocratic fascists. They are no longer even remotely a conservative party, and they are no longer the party of (neoliberal) Big Business. Many true conservatives and neoliberals who initially supported Bush have deserted the party, or would, but there is no place for them to go, and so they voted out of loyalty, inertia, or the willful suspension of disbelief, but not out of support for Bush's policies. Democrats need to create a new popular vision that appeals to neoliberals (in economics) and social liberals (in human rights and lifestyle)." Unquote

I then reminded everyone about what Newt had done from 1980 through 1990 to create a Republican Party that would, as he told me, be the majority party for the rest of his life, and later what the New American Century Project had done to reinvigorate the Republicans during the Clinton era by developing and promulgating a widely popular vision of Imperial America led by that permanent Republican majority.

In contrast, I said, Quote: "Democrats, on the other hand, have not framed an inspiring vision and effective strategy in response to any of this. Instead, they have in essence simply said that they can achieve the Republican's agenda better." "If Democrats care about the future of America and its people, and not just about being in political office, then it is time we develop a compelling new vision to counter that of the Republicans. There are more than enough Americans out there waiting for it." Unquote.

Most of you said then that I was being pretty naïve and stupid to talk like that, and yet that is what happened. Even though by rights Hillary Clinton should have taken the nomination in a walk and then gone down to defeat at the hands of whoever the Republicans nominated, people who wanted a message of hope from the Democrats found their champion in Barack Obama and were successful. Big Business deserted the Republicans and massively supported Obama; many--but by no means all--middle and working class white Americans temporarily ignored their racism and voted for Obama; and young idealists were inspired and turned out in numbers sufficient to give some very crucial states to Obama. A potentially new Democratic Party may have been born, and perhaps a new America with it--there is no doubt this is what most of the world hopes, or fears, has happened.

But I have grave doubts. While the fact of Obama's election is of truly world-shaking importance, I do not see much in his policy statements that give me reason for true hope. And when I consider the severity of the challenges the country is facing and the unwillingness of most American's to take responsibility for their role in causing and correcting them, I get very depressed indeed.

Is my pessimism justified? Are there real reasons for hope?

For that we have gone to no expense in assembling the distinguished panel before you: Charles Lawrence, a renowned scholar and a person of currently popular color; Debbie Halbert, one of our newer faculty members and a thoroughly colorless woman--almost stealth-like, in fact; and long-time UH professor Ira Rohter who represents the old Jewish Curmudgeon Community. He has had a long history of political analysis and activism in Hawaii, and might also speak about the meaning of the election in and for Hawaii.

Chuck, let's start with you: