The New REPUBLIC

Published on *The New Republic* (http://www.tnr.com)

The Mirage

The long and tragical history of post-partisanship, from Washington to Obama.

- Sean Wilentz
- October 26, 2011 | 1:05 pm

I.

The American dream of politics without conflict, and of politics without political parties, has a history as old as American politics. Anyone carried along on the political currents since 2008, however, might be forgiven for thinking that the dream is something new—and that a transformative era was finally at hand, in which the old politics of intense partisan conflict, based on misunderstanding, miscommunication, and misanthropy, could be curbed if not ended. After the presidency of George W. Bush, one of the most partisan administrations in our history, Barack Obama promised a new era of post-partisanship. He had arrived on the national stage, after all, with his speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004 proclaiming that there was "not a liberal America and a conservative America—there's the United States of America." As president, Obama would not only reach across the aisle, listen to the Republicans, and credit their good ideas, but also demonstrate that the division between the parties was exaggerated if not false, as many Americans, younger voters above all, fervently believed. Divisive and hot-tempered partisanship would give way to healing and temperate leadership, not least by means of Obama's eloquence, rational policies, and good faith.

Yet after his first year in office, the Gallup poll registered that Obama was the most polarizing president in his first year in its recorded history. After Obama's second year, Gallup found that he was the most polarizing in his second year. The parties were more divided, and partisanship was more ferocious, than

ever. And subsequent debates over extending the Bush tax cuts and raising the nation's debt ceiling have affirmed and deepened the partisan divide as never before.

There are many reasons for this phenomenon, not least the radical transformation of the Republican Party over the last four decades. Clearly, though, the promise that parties and partisanship would soon be diminished, let alone overcome, has been revealed to be an illusion. That illusion was certainly nurtured by wishfulness, but it sprang also from ignorance about the roots of this strand of American political history: the politics of post-partisanship, a politics that flourished in different ways under different names at various points in the nineteenth century and dates back to the nation's founding. The rage for a modern post-partisanship also ignored the historical reality that partisanship, although often manipulated and abused, has also been Americans' most effective vehicle for democratic social and political reform.

HISTORIANS ARE well aware of the antagonism to political parties that ran deep in Anglo-American political culture through the era of the American Revolution. Yet the prevalence of anti-party ideas before 1800 did not mean that early America was an idyll of impartiality and selflessness. Factional intrigues and battles, fought with sophisticated electioneering techniques, appeared throughout the colonies, most famously in the battles between the Proprietary and Quaker parties during the 1740s and 1750s in Pennsylvania, in which Benjamin Franklin cut his political teeth. In America as in Britain, anti-party statements as often as not amounted to cant—efforts, as Richard Hofstadter described them, by "partisan writers and political leaders who [were] actually appealing to a general distrust of the idea of party" in order to assail their opponents. Such anti-party partisanship motivated Lord Bolingbroke, the great British advocate of anti-party politics in the 1730s. And it lay behind the most important anti-party statement by the most important anti-partisan spokesman of the early American republic.

President George Washington's Farewell Address of 1796 would prove to be a *locus classicus* of American anti-party thought, but its historical context suggests a more political story. Soon after the new government established by the Federal Constitution gathered in New York in 1789, sharp divisions appeared in Congress, particularly over Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton's fiscal proposals. In 1792, James Madison, the head of the congressional opposition, published several anonymous and highly partisan newspaper essays, including "A Candid State of Parties," which cut through anti-party conceits. Two parties were "natural to most political societies," Madison wrote, and two parties now existed in America: an anti-Republican Party aligned with the rich and influential that controlled national power; and his own Republican Party, which represented the great majority but was out of power due to the wealth and stratagems of its opponents. Madison could not tell which party would ultimately prevail, but he was reasonably confident that the conflict would not end anytime soon.

The ensuing four years, strained further by bitter debates over foreign policy, saw the rise and fall of the so-called Democratic Republican societies, followed by the formation of formal party machinery dedicated to electing former Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson to the presidency. Beginning in 1795, Washington started dropping hints that he would not accept re-election. He privately informed his anointed successor, Vice President John Adams, of his decision the following March; and by summer Jefferson's supporters had geared up for a tough campaign. But Washington publicly stepped aside only in September, with his

Farewell Address. So the great address, co-authored with Alexander Hamilton, and commonly viewed as an Olympian statement about uniting in the national cause, was in fact deeply political—"a signal," Fisher Ames, the conservative Federalist leader from Massachusetts, called it, "like dropping a hat, for the party racers to start." It was also the latest highly partisan appeal delivered as an attack on partisanship and on the low demagogues who fomented it.

Washington's address never explicitly mentioned Jefferson or his supporters, but its unvarnished attack on organized political opposition was plainly directed against them. As if replying to Madison's "Candid State of Parties," Washington stated that parties were not "natural" but "artificial" and intolerable—"of fatal tendency," and wholly illegitimate. Led by "artful and enterprising" men, and determined to impose despotism atop the ruins of liberty, parties would distract "the constituted authorities" from serenely producing "consistent and wholesome plans digested by common councils and modified by mutual interests." All of which implied that support of the Jeffersonian opposition was tantamount to breaking the law.

In an organic, well-ordered society, Washington contended, there supposedly existed a natural harmony of interests which, after reasonable deliberation by the delegated authorities, produced at least an agreeable concord, if not a perfect unanimity, on political matters. "For the *mass* of our citizens," Washington wrote to the Virginia Federalist John Marshall the year following his address, "require no more than to understand a question to decide it properly." Outside of elections, ordinary citizens ought not to express themselves in any organized manner on the issues of the day, but should instead leave government to the wisdom of their elected governors. "After all," George Cabot, the esteemed Massachusetts Federalist, observed in 1795, "where is the boasted advantage of a representation system ... if the resort to popular meetings is necessary?" The opposition party's basic aim, supposedly, was to disrupt that tranquil order and create conflicts that would not otherwise occur—or, as the Farewell Address put it, "render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection." Out of those artificial conflicts, power-hungry demagogues would crush public liberty and assume dictatorial powers.

Jefferson lost by a whisker in 1796, but his narrow victory in 1800-1801 marked a stunning defeat for the organic, anti-partisan conception of politics. The anti-party animus did not suddenly evaporate, of course. Jefferson's famous "postpartisan" declaration in his inaugural address—"We are all republicans, we are all federalists"—directly appealed to the old anti-party presumptions. Yet Jefferson's appeal was also a ploy, which he had designed to win over the more moderate Federalists and conquer his opponents by dividing them. The Federalists were not deceived. Some had faith that the besotted electorate would come to its senses after the certain chaos of Jeffersonian rule and restore disinterested patriots such as themselves to power. Other Federalists, though, abandoned the idea that organized politics should cease between elections. "We must consider whether it be possible for us to succeed," Alexander Hamilton observed in 1802, "without, in some degree, employing the weapons which have been employed against us."

During the decade after Jefferson's election, Federalists emulated the Jeffersonians by creating their own caucuses, county and ward committees, benevolent societies, and party newspapers (including, in 1802, Hamilton's own New York *Evening Post*). They also adjusted their rhetoric, embracing some of the

majoritarian vocabulary of democratic politics. “We must court popular favor,” the ultra-conservative Fisher Ames remarked in 1801.

But the Federalists’ new majoritarianism merely inverted Jeffersonian rhetoric and rehashed the patrician anti-partisan avowal in Washington’s Farewell Address. The Jeffersonians’ “democracy,” the Federalists argued, was in fact an aristocracy, imposed on honest farmers, merchants, mechanics, and the rest of the decent majority by self-serving adventurers who stirred up the mob in order to upset the harmonious natural order of things. The worst thing about politics, the Federalists contended, was politicians, described by one New Hampshire newspaper as “*Office-holders, Office-seekers, Pimps* ... this Host of worse than Egyptian locusts, now preying upon the very Vitals of the public [who] must *starve* or *steal* or *cheat*.” The Federalists sometimes sounded as if they had embraced what Madison had called, in 1792, the cause of the plebeian many against the wealthy and privileged few. But now the Federalists articulated the cause of the many not against wealth and privilege, but against the new class of clever, grubby Jeffersonian politicians. They—the politicians and, by extension, democratic politics—were the real problem as far as the Federalists were concerned.

Siding with the many compelled some Federalists to drop their high-flown Burkean rhetoric about the swinish multitude in favor of more calibrated attacks on the dregs of society. But the more candid Federalists knew the game that they were playing and said so, at least in private. Some still used the terms “mob” and “people” interchangeably in their correspondence. And Fisher Ames, the stiff-necked conservative who now courted the voters’ favor, had little respect for those voters, and viewed them as merely a means to regain power—thereby encouraging, for his own ends, the kind of demagoguery that the Federalists accused the Jeffersonians of deploying. “Their love and hate, their hopes and fears are only to be addressed,” Ames told an associate. “Logic is not worth chopping.” The Federalists held on to their expectation that, once they had snatched fickle popular favor away from the Jeffersonians, they would return as the nation’s natural, disinterested rulers and eliminate sordid, divisive political parties.

II.

THE FEDERALISTS never overcame the elitist “monocratic” reputation fixed on them by the Jeffersonians in the 1790s. The decline and collapse of the Federalists in the War of 1812 persuaded Jeffersonians that national unity could now be proclaimed on a truly Republican basis. The shoe was on the other foot—and many Republican leaders now proclaimed that political parties were anathema to American government. “Equally gratifying is it to witness the increased harmony of opinion which pervades our Union,” President James Monroe declared at his first inaugural in 1817. Eight years later Monroe’s successor, John Quincy Adams, remarked that the country had uprooted the “baneful weed of party strife.” The so-called Era of Good Feelings had apparently created precisely the sort of unity that Washington had once proclaimed, but on entirely Jeffersonian and not Federalist terms.

Yet many Jeffersonians suspected that the new harmony was a dangerous delusion. Jefferson himself, who said contradictory things about parties during his presidency as it served his purposes, eventually settled down to the idea that, as he told Lafayette in 1823, “In truth the parties of whig and tory are those of nature.” He was dismayed by the policy, initiated by Monroe and continued under Adams, known as

“amalgamation,” of appointing to positions of responsibility men deemed virtuous and talented regardless of their political views or affiliations. “The common division of whig and tory, or according to our denominations of republican and federal ... is the most salutary of all divisions,” Jefferson wrote to William Short in 1825, “and ought therefore to be fostered, instead of being amalgamated.”

Fostering the divisions between Republican and Federal—redrawing the old party lines—became the chief object of New York’s machine politician Martin Van Buren and the neo-Jeffersonians who designed and built the Jacksonian Democratic Party in the late 1820s. In part, Van Buren and the Jacksonians wanted to expel the crypto-Federalist heresies about concentrated financial and political power, which they believed were creeping back under Monroe and, especially, Adams. In part, they wanted to stem a precipitous decline in popular interest in elections that had begun after the war, and halt a proliferation of fierce personal factions, which, Van Buren wrote, had overrun the country and “moved the bitter waters of political agitation to their lowest depths.” And in part, following the Missouri Compromise crisis in 1819 and 1820, they wanted to remove issues concerning slavery and its expansion from national debates and prevent the rise of parties arrayed on portentous sectional lines.

THE JACKSONIANS’ DESIGN for a national party—a disciplined, even quasi-military organization that demanded the subordination of personal views and interests for the good of the whole—was far more sophisticated and comprehensive than the Jeffersonians’ organizations had been. With their direct, continuing involvement of ordinary citizens, the Jacksonians were also more democratic than the Jeffersonians. Still, there were some remarkable similarities between the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian parties. The Jeffersonians—the aging Jefferson not alone among them—at least groped after an idea of a permanent opposition party as a benefit to themselves as well as the nation. And the Jacksonians, no less than their predecessors, believed that they were the leaders of a natural national majority. Above all, the Jacksonian partisan rationale stemmed from their belief that conflict and not consensus was the natural order of politics, a fundamental Madisonian idea. In that conflict, they insisted, the many needed the party as a political instrument to prevent what Van Buren called “the establishment of a moneyed oligarchy, the most selfish and monopolizing of all depositories of political power.”

Even more striking than these continuities, though, is how the Jacksonians’ various opponents recycled the anti-party, anti-politician arguments of an earlier day. Whig spokesmen cited Washington’s Farewell Address, and especially its strictures against parties, like holy writ. They singled out Monroe’s administration for praise as the nation’s “one period of comparative repose ... when all parties were apparently blended in a common mass.” They celebrated Adams’s beleaguered anti-party administration as heaven-sent, “pure as the Angels that stood by the right hand of the throne of God.” And they attacked the Jacksonians almost exactly as the Federalists had attacked the Jeffersonians: as the progenitors of a new aristocracy of corrupt politicians and officeholders who flattered the masses and, with party patronage, bribed loyalty out of men at every level of society—“from the President to the chiefs of office under him, from them to his subordinates, and from the subordinates to their shoeblacks,” one Whig newspaper declared.

Although the Whigs certainly organized to defeat their opponents, and even formed what they called a party, they claimed, as one Whig publicist contended, that there was "a great difference between taking a *part*, and being a *party* man." So, they asserted, they were a post-partisan party. The Jacksonian partisans, by contrast, formed what a resolution by New York's Whigs called "a conspiracy, which seeks to promote the interests of the few at the expense of the many." The many, for the Whigs as for the Federalists, were the honorable, upstanding farmers, merchants, and mechanics. The few, as one Ohio Whig newspaper explained, consisted of "the organized corps of office holders," their judgments subordinated to their political superiors, their livelihoods gained from the perquisites, emoluments, and corruption of their patronage-fueled party tyranny. In place of the selfish few, the Whigs would substitute natural aristocrats whose qualifications were "of the highest order and most arduous attainment," free from the imperative to "express the will of 'the party' whether it be their own individual will or not." As one writer for the *American Whig Review* put it, "Intelligence and virtue, must also, as a matter of fact, maintain the controlling interest in spite of universal suffrage."

This elitist tone never completely disappeared from the Whigs' appeals, especially in the circles that wrote for and read the *American Whig Review*. But so long as both their theory and their practice of patrician anti-partisan politics dominated, the Whigs would remain, as the New York politico Thurlow Weed remarked in 1834, "doomed to fight merely to be beaten." Weed was one of the younger emerging Whig leaders—and later the boss—of New York State politics who, with his ally William Henry Seward, understood that his party needed to learn the political lessons of the Federalists' failure. And so, in the late 1830s and early 1840s, a more hard-headed cadre of New School Whigs, including Weed, built local, state, and national party organizations that at least approximated the Democratic ones, dropped their air of lofty distinction, and donned and mounted down-home election trappings in the triumphant "Log Cabin" presidential campaign of 1840.

As the Whigs made their peace with partisanship, the anti-partisan impetus turned up more empathically elsewhere on the political scene. Northern nativist groups attacked political parties as evil instruments to mobilize alien Catholics for subversion of the republic. Radical abolitionists, committed to moral suasion instead of political campaigning, berated electoral politics as hopelessly immoral. The abolitionist's duty, William Lloyd Garrison wrote in 1840, was "to convert men of all parties," and "to make abolitionists of partisans, and not partisans of abolitionists." After the Whig Party collapsed due to sectional antagonisms in 1854, nativism briefly flared as a national anti-party party, the Know Nothings, only to be itself overwhelmed by the crisis over slavery. Instead, the anti-slavery Republican Party—which was very much a political party—became the sectional alternative to the pro-South Democrats. Among its leaders was a consummate partisan politician, the former New School Whig Abraham Lincoln.

A more elaborate version of anti-party politics in the 1830s and 1840s emerged from the opposite pole from Garrisonian abolitionism. John C. Calhoun had risen to national office by mastering the peculiar political culture of South Carolina, guided by an older, aristocratic style of managing personal and intra-state factions. The emergence of party Northern "spoilsmen" such as Van Buren-men who allegedly hungered for the spoils of office—disgusted Calhoun. But the rise of the Democratic Party loomed more dangerously in the 1830s and after, when Calhoun turned to defending slavery against what he saw as

Yankee assaults and developed his theory of the concurrent majority. The doctrine, which assured that political minorities could thwart the will of national majorities, would foreclose the possibility that a national party could be captured by anti-slavery Northerners and turned against the South's peculiar institution.

Calhoun's theory turned on his contempt for, and fear of, political parties and patronage—and democracy. Calhoun singled out the parties as the instruments whereby spoilsmen might enhance federal power and especially the power of the executive to attack slavery head on. He also feared that demagogic party leaders would stir up other conflicts that would rip apart the social fabric. The check of a concurrent majority, by allowing the South in effect a veto of federal laws, would stifle party formation and artificial strife, encourage the election of enlightened men to office, and usher in a truly ordered and fraternal republic. "Instead of faction, strife, and struggle," Calhoun wrote, "there would be patriotism, nationality, harmony, and a struggle only for supremacy in promoting the common good of the whole." Washington and Monroe were both slaveholders, but Calhoun had turned their vision of non-partisan unity and good feelings toward a defense of slavery that neither Virginian had ever imagined.

III.

BY 1860, the principled partisanship of the Republican Party, as practiced by Abraham Lincoln, the master party politician, had fully superseded anti-party abolitionism, and it went on to elect Lincoln to the White House. In the South, Calhoun's reformulation of the idea of politics without parties became one of the cornerstones of the Confederate States of America—the most elaborate attempt at consensual, party-less government in our history. The Confederacy chiefly stood, of course, for what its vice president, the former Whig Alexander Hamilton Stephens, called "the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition." But alongside that "great truth," the Confederacy's architects believed that partisanship and party politics were dangerous vices.

The paradoxes were enormous. The South had shared in the national democratic political developments of the 1820s and after, and Southern votes were largely responsible for bringing Andrew Jackson and his party to power. Thereafter, state and local organizations of Democrats and Whigs arose throughout the region. Within the presumptions of racial slavery, the Southern states produced—for their white male citizenry—some of the most democratic constitutions in the world. "Nowhere in this broad Union but in the slaveholding states," Albert Gallatin Brown, governor of and senator from Mississippi, was able to claim, "is there a living, breathing exemplification of the beautiful sentiment, that all men are equal."

Yet party democracy struck shallower roots in the South than in the North. Calhoun's peculiar quasi-aristocratic South Carolina, always at the forefront of sectional and disunionist politics, had virtually no political parties. But even in the more democratic Southern states, partisan operations and loyalties were less robust than in the North. Party organizations arose in the South later than in the North, and they always tended to be more diffuse. A relatively lower number of competitive elections, a relative lack of government patronage jobs, and drastically lower literacy rates inhibited the spread of party machinery, including a partisan press, that were essential to Jacksonian party operations.

Above all, Southern slave society's ideals of honor, community, disinterested virtue, and harmony (especially on the soundness of slavery) co-existed uneasily with the imperatives of partisan politics. In 1850, a typical article in the *Southern Quarterly Review*, contrasting the South and the North, lambasted "the systematic immoralities of political parties, and the utter shamelessness with which they grasp at power, in the teeth of principle." Instead of obedient partisans and their political bosses, Southern spokesmen would elect and appoint gentlemen of independent mind and judgment who would divest themselves of what another writer for the *Review* called "the degrading livery of party."

The Confederate constitutional convention, which met in Montgomery in February 1861, backed the anti-party fervor with the force of law. Although the delegates largely copied the federal constitution which they had just spurned, they also made key alterations aimed explicitly at inhibiting parties and partisanship. "Let us at the threshold of a new career be wary of undue party spirit and guard against its extravagances," the *New Orleans Picayune* observed as the delegates gathered. The drafters limited the Confederate presidency to a single six-year term with no possibility for re-election, thereby curtailing electioneering as well as democratic accountability. The new Constitution also shifted a good deal of the appropriation power from the Congress to the president, the better to restrict congressional logrolling as well as extravagance, and as one Georgia newspaper observed, "keep the body politic in a healthy condition." As Robert H. Smith of Alabama (later a Confederate congressman) observed in the single most thoughtful explication of the convention's work, the advent of political parties had ruined the Framers' noble system and turned the presidency in particular into an instrument for advancing "not so much for the wisdom and the good of the people as for the triumph of party." Curbing party domination, Smith argued, would help prevent the Confederacy from degenerating into something "much worse than ... a pure democracy ... a mere oligarchy, and that not of intelligence and virtue but of low ambition."

Post-partisan purification, though, bred political torpor in the Confederacy, and, finally, chaos. An Atlanta newspaper mangled Jefferson's inaugural address by declaring that "we are all slaveholders—all Southern states," while it reminded readers, when electing their representatives to the new government, to remember Washington's Farewell Address on the subject of party divisions. Little has been written about those Confederate elections precisely because, absent party organizations and with so much of the voting-age male population in uniform, they were desultory affairs. In a sham election without a campaign or an opposition in November 1861, Southern voters dutifully ratified the provisional government's selection of Jefferson Davis, who had already served as president for ten months, and his sitting vice president, Alexander Stephens. Gubernatorial and state legislature races, as well as the two sets of congressional elections in 1861 and 1863, were marginally livelier, but according to one recent study, they were also badly factionalized, "a crazy quilt of idiosyncratic, almost apolitical contests conducted before a largely apathetic though sometimes angry electorate."

The lack of parties also severely harmed the operation of the Confederate government. With no clear party lines to demarcate friends and adversaries, President Davis had great difficulty in assembling a cabinet that was loyal to him in the least, let alone stable. Due to chronic resignations, the CSA had five secretaries of war, four attorneys general, and three secretaries of state during its brief existence. Although the Copperheads of the Democratic opposition in the North turned fractious and even treasonous, the War

Democrats provided useful though not uncritical help to Lincoln. In the South, by contrast, opposition to Davis had no partisan focus, which led to crises of legitimacy when states rights' purists led by Georgia's Governor Joseph E. Brown and North Carolina's Governor Zebulon Vance refused to comply with directives from Richmond over taxes and conscription.

After Appomattox, Southern apologists turned the disarray of Confederate politics into a ready excuse for the rebellion's defeat. Many ex-Confederates, defending Davis as the hero of the Lost Cause, blamed their defeat on fractious leaders such as Brown and the persistence of divisive partisan habits. Davis's close aide, the unfortunate army commander Braxton Bragg, charged that too many "old, trading politicians and demagogues" (that is, Davis's critics) had occupied themselves by "dividing spoils not yet secured." Yet the enlistment of anti-partisanship as an element of the Southern myth of the Lost Cause was not the largest irony in the history of anti-party politics to emerge out of the Civil War.

IV.

BARELY A DECADE after the Confederacy had put them into practice, the post-partisan principles of Washington's Farewell Address were revived once more—now in the hands of upper-class Northern reformers, based largely in the Republican Party. In 1879, an article in the reform-minded *Atlantic Monthly* noted approvingly that the "ultra-democratic" ideas fostered by the partisan Jeffersonians and Jacksonians were suddenly under siege. "When the war closed," the writer observed, "the last class government in the United States had been swept away by the destruction of the slave power, and men found themselves face to face with a pure democracy from one end of the country to another"—a horrifying sight. No serious reform of the nation's ills would occur, Henry Adams wrote in 1876, "until they are attacked at their source; not until the nation is ready to go back to the early practice of the government and to restore to the constitutional organs those powers which have been torn from them by the party organizations for purposes of party aggrandizement."

Beginning at the end of the 1860s and continuing for the next quarter of a century, these elite reformers formed a loosely knit group that operated under different names: "liberals," "educated men," Liberal Republicans, Mugwumps. Firmly anti-slavery Republicans during the war, they gravitated thereafter to a cluster of beliefs identified with classical liberalism. Laissez-faire, including limited government and free trade, headed the list. Deeply alienated by the activist civil rights policies of President Ulysses S. Grant, they led the démarche of respectable Northern opinion away from Reconstruction. While upholding the political claims of the white South, they derided the radical Southern regimes as fiscally irresponsible and—in the words of one of the reformers' premier journals, E.L. Godkin's *The Nation*—as "a queer aristocracy of color ... with the rich Congo thief on top and the degraded Anglo-Saxon on the bottom." Professing disgust at the scandals of the Grant years, real, imagined, and exaggerated, they seized upon corruption and spoilsmanship as the cardinal sins of the age, and pushed hard for civil service reform. They feared that the resumption and then the growth of mass immigration would strengthen party rule and what The Nation called "the severance of political power from intelligence and property." But the anti-immigration effort achieved little, and so Northern reformers' efforts to restrict party politics and government became all the more pressing.

Some extreme anti-party liberals, such as the New York lawyer Albert Stickney, a friend of Henry Adams, dwelled in a political netherworld and called for the extirpation of political parties. More practical reformers attacked only what one of them called "the abuse of organization, which is stigmatized as 'the machine.'" The chief rationale for such abuse was the hateful concept of strict party loyalty and obeisance to party leaders that had been fundamental to political partisanship since the Jacksonian period. "A reform movement cannot succeed which starts off under the auspices of trading politicians," said the Democrat-turned-anti-slavery-Republican-turned-liberal-Republican Lyman Trumbull in 1872.

Early efforts by reformers to break with orthodoxy and run their own candidates against the party regulars and bosses enjoyed some local successes, but they ended poorly nationwide with Horace Greeley's disastrous Liberal Republican campaign against Grant in 1872. Thereafter the reformers carved out a stance of what they called "independency" within the major parties, applying pressure and establishing themselves as the vital balance of power in politics and government. Henry Adams called them a "party of the centre."

The independents scored what looked like their greatest triumph in national electoral politics in 1884, when defections of the so-called Mugwumps from the Republicans' presidential candidate, the spoilsman James G. Blaine, appeared to tip the election in favor of the conservative Democrat, Grover Cleveland. But Mugwumpery would prove to be the zenith of independent liberalism. By the mid-1890s, the reform impulses of the postwar era had slowed, in part because of the acceptance of some of their ideas (in civil service, currency, and ballot reform), in part because of their failures (in immigration restriction, proportional representation, and tariff reform). Although powerful concerns about parties and the purity of government persisted, especially in the states, national politics focused increasingly on the bewildering dynamics and injustices of a new industrial era. The first national leader of this fresh wave of reformism, Theodore Roosevelt, came out of the ranks of elite liberal reform in New York City; but by the time he reached the White House, Roosevelt had made peace with more conventional forms of partisanship.

In 1884, the young New York assemblyman fought James G. Blaine's nomination but stuck with Blaine and his party in the general election, describing the Mugwumps' high-minded indifference to party loyalty as "not only fantastic but absolutely wrong." He would later call the Mugwumps dangerous elitists who "distrusted the average citizen and shuddered over the 'coarseness' of the professional politicians." Roosevelt also rejected the laissez-faire dogma of the liberals, looking back for inspiration to the democratic nationalism of the Lincoln and Grant era, and insisting that "the sphere of the State's actions may be vastly increased without in any way diminishing the happiness of either the many or the few." Both before and during his presidency, Roosevelt would press for major reforms regulating the new industrial economy, including some that disturbed his more conservative fellow Republicans, in line with what he called "social efficiency." But he would also strike and sustain the requisite alliances with hard-nosed party chieftains—and, once in the White House, he would be the chieftain himself.

If the elite liberal reformers failed to dislodge or even reshape the political parties they so despised, they still had an enormous impact—not simply on the course of anti-partisan politics, but on the place of those politics in American life. Driven by severe class anxieties, incapable in the North of formally excluding the poor and the uneducated from politics, they sought instead to change other rules of the political game. By

founding various independent clubs and quasi-learned societies, they sought to educate the electorate properly. Instead of denouncing parties outright, the elite liberals pioneered the distinct middle- and upper-class political style of "independency" that appeared to be inside the parties but also above politics. This new independent style rejected the old party flim-flam—including a stridently partisan press—in favor of a cooler, more detached politics, free of the old emotional partisanship. It was spiritually more akin to scientific enterprise, or to one of the new corporate bureaucracies, than to the old parties of grog-shop assemblies and crossroads stump speeches. "The voters have been reading, not shouting," the reformist *Minneapolis Journal* claimed, hopefully, in 1892, "but their ballots will be just as numerous and far more intelligent in the aggregate." These high-minded independent politics, a new form of anti-partisanship, would long outlast the liberal reform crusades of the Gilded Age.

V.

I CANNOT HERE do justice to the history of anti-partisan politics from the Progressive era to the present, but tracing some broad trends and developments shows how persistent those politics have been, and how they continue to affect us today. The wholesale attacks on the party system during the Progressive era, often made in the name of "direct democracy," are staple subjects in the history of American politics. Efforts to weaken the party system gained popular support for reforms including direct election of senators and primary contests as supplements to party conventions, as well as initiative, referendum, recall, and other methods of "pure" democracy. Partisan newspapers fell into disfavor, displaced by a self-consciously independent and "objective" press, and by muckraking journalists commissioned by national magazines appealing to a new urban middle class.

The floodtide of the renewed anti-party politics was the Progressive Party campaign of 1912, in which an embittered and schismatic Theodore Roosevelt ran for president. In the historian Barry Karl's words, the campaign was as much "an attack on the whole concept of political parties as it was an effort to create a single party whose doctrinal clarity and moral purity would represent the true interest of the nation as a whole." "We hold with Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln," the Progressives' platform declared, "that the people are the masters of their Constitution."

That the anti-party Progressive Party—the political party to end all political parties—would invoke one of the chief inventors of the first American political party along with perhaps the canniest and most complete of all nineteenth-century American party politicians was one of the movement's smaller, if more amusing, historical ironies. The greatest irony, of course, was that Roosevelt, who had run in 1904 as a thoroughgoing party politician, had, in his anger at his hand-picked successor William Howard Taft's supposed betrayal of reformism, transformed himself into his opposing image in an attempt to wrest back power.

Successful though the Progressive movement was in gaining some notable reforms intended to diminish political parties, the two chief instruments for change—Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—were practiced party politicians who also believed strongly in the exercise of presidential power, as leaders of their parties as well as of the nation. Having come of political age spurning the Mugwump movement, Roosevelt was a shrewd and at times merciless party commander who made sure that his hands, and no

others, controlled the levers of the state party organizations around the country. In rejecting the laissez-faire orthodoxy of his party, he appealed not to anti-party reform and "pure democracy," but to the exercise of presidential might: "I believe in a strong executive," he declared. "I believe in power." Roosevelt's unsuccessful third-party candidacy in 1912 ironically corroborated his more considered party alignments. By permanently damaging Roosevelt's standing with Republican regulars, and thereby foreclosing his re-nomination and likely re-election in 1916, his Bull Moose adventure helped cede the GOP to the laissez-faire pro-business conservatism the policies of which, in the Coolidge era, laid the groundwork for the Great Depression.

It would take a Democrat whom Roosevelt despised, President Woodrow Wilson, to secure some of the reforms advanced by the Bull Moose Progressives in 1912, including votes for women and the establishment of a federal income tax. Wilson, who became an equally skillful partisan politician, began as a theorist as well as a practitioner of what became known as "responsible" party politics and government. He recognized what he called "the extraordinary part political parties have made in making a national life." Efforts to provide "non-partisan" government, he remarked, "always in the long run fail."

Progressivism had run its course by 1919, when Wilson's campaign for American entry into the League of Nations crashed and burned. Yet the president who most thoroughly embodied the Progressive movement's values of efficiency and expertise—and its distrust of partisanship—reached office a decade later. I am referring to Herbert Hoover, who was considered the most qualified man of the age not least because he was seen as above party. He came to public life after a career as a professional mining engineer, writer, and translator, and owed virtually nothing to party politics, having risen to prominence as secretary of commerce under Harding and Coolidge. His chief devotion was to the so-called Efficiency Movement, which held that non-partisan professional experts were best positioned to eliminate the epidemic of waste and fraud that was ruining American government and business. His election as a Republican was heralded as the transcendence of bad partisan politics and celebrated as the beginning of a golden age of permanent prosperity. That, of course, was not to be—and as one of his most thoughtful biographers, Joan Hoff Wilson, has noted, "He did not really become a regular party man until after he was no longer president," which is when he became the indelible symbol of old guard Republican Party dogmatism.

FRANKLIN DELANO Roosevelt, of course, was an attentive, rigorous, and skilled party leader, strongly influenced by Wilson's presidency, especially by his failures in politics and policy. He was perfectly at home with James A. Farley, the quintessential machine pol whom he appointed postmaster general and chairman of the Democratic National Committee, as he was with Rexford Tugwell, the Columbia University professor who exemplified the bright young men he recruited into his Brains Trust. Even before he reached the White House, FDR had won the affection of his fellow New York Democrats for his ability to carry the entire party with him come Election Day. One Brooklyn district leader, Hymie Schorenstein, explained to local government candidates why he was sending his political funds to Roosevelt, who was running for governor, rather than to those lower down on the ticket. Had they ever

seen the Staten Island Ferry sliding into its slip, never alone but dragging in “all the crap in the harbor behind it”? Then Schorenstein paused for his punch line: “FDR is our Staten Island Ferry.”

Franklin Roosevelt did attempt to remake the Democratic Party into a bastion of what he called “militant liberalism,” even as his expansion of executive administration redefined party loyalty. His famous effort to purge the party of its hidebound conservatives, particularly in the Jim Crow South, which began in earnest in 1938, was an all-out attack on certain retrograde party structures. So was his shift in patronage preferences away from the regular party organization overseen by Farley and toward New Dealers in the executive headed by White House aide Thomas Corcoran. While FDR succeeded in some anti-conservative reforms, the purge largely failed. The Democratic Party emerged as a new coalition of an expanded liberal base, including organized labor, blacks, Jews, and women’s rights advocates, alongside Southern Democrats who remained a powerful force in the party’s counsels. The Southerners formed their own coalition with conservative Republicans out of the disastrous midterm elections of 1938 to block much reform until 1964. Still, Roosevelt’s intention was not to destroy his party, or party government, but to sharpen the ideological divide. Something like that sharpening would eventually occur in the 1960s, although it would bring political results very different from those Roosevelt had anticipated.

The New Deal party coalition remained so powerful for so long that it appeared to have led to a new bipartisan consensus in the 1950s—to an end of ideology. President Eisenhower’s “modern Republicanism,” with its acceptance of many New Deal programs and ideas, encouraged the presumption that the nation had entered an age of consensus, a new Era of Good Feelings. Yet bubbling just beneath the calm, and sometimes breaking to the surface, were the volatile political elements that would define the 1960s: the civil rights movement, first and foremost, but also the sharp reaction against modern Republicanism that would produce the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater and the initial coup within the GOP by its most conservative forces.

The turbulence of the 1960s and early 1970s did not destroy the political parties, but it did shatter the parties as the nation had come to know them. John F. Kennedy, like Lyndon B. Johnson, was hardly a non-partisan or anti-partisan president, despite his touting of the “best and the brightest.” But Kennedy’s—and then Johnson’s—embrace of civil rights sent an already discontented conservative white South firmly into the Republican Party, where it eventually turned the party into a Southern-controlled organization not completely unlike the Democratic Party of the 1850s. Johnson’s pursuit of the Vietnam war opened divisions inside the Democratic Party, not just between hawks and doves but also between party regulars and so-called New Politics reformers, who echoed in some ways the affluent anti-party reformers of a century earlier.

Those splits helped to make Richard M. Nixon president—a figure of partisanship above principle. After a moment of posing as an American Disraeli, Nixon set about trying to get not just his party but the government to stand behind what he called the “New American Majority” or the “Silent Majority,” exploiting racial turmoil and resentments, consolidating the Dixiecrat constituency of George C. Wallace, and concentrating power in the executive as never before with a strident political agenda. Now the leader of the Republican Party, he attempted to remake the party in his own image and under his iron control. Watergate—the pursuit of Nixonian partisanship by any means necessary—destroyed Nixon, and with him

his meta-partisan plan; it also blew a hole in the center of the Republican Party, which finally allowed the party's Goldwater wing to recapture control of the GOP once and for all, under the aegis of Ronald Reagan.

In response to Nixon's crimes, the Democrats selected for the presidency a details-oriented engineer in the Southern anti-party Progressive tradition. Jimmy Carter promoted himself as a moral man who would never lie, would end politics as usual, and would rely on brains, virtue, and talent: "Why Not the Best?" He was, in a way, the Democrats' version of the Progressive ideal, their own Hoover, although the similarities never crossed their minds.

Carter's failures paved the way for Reagan's admixture of a conventionally partisan, ideologically extreme, and peculiarly pragmatic administration that unevenly advanced the new conservatives' quest to push the sum and substance of government far to the right. Democrats countered by flailing about for a decade, first attempting to revive the spirit of New Deal liberalism with Walter Mondale, Carter's vice president, carrying the burden of the distant and recently rejected past, then returning to neo-Progressive expertise with Michael Dukakis, who in his most famous statement declared: "This election isn't about ideology. It's about competence." Eventually the Democrats found success with Bill Clinton, a new sort of partisan Democrat who tried to rebuild the party and relieve it of its accumulated political handicaps, from isolationism in foreign policy to knee-jerk defensive reactions to any criticisms of what had become the nation's welfare state.

Since 1980, there have been three third-party campaigns in the anti-party tradition: the moderate Republican John B. Anderson's run in 1980, perceived as a high-minded moderate option for Republicans alienated by Reagan conservatism and liberals offended by what they saw as Carter's creeping conservatism; the eccentric entrepreneur Ross Perot's self-funded campaign in 1992, pitched as the chance to substitute a hard-headed, commonsensical private citizen in place of the corrupt professional politicians; and the modern muckraker Ralph Nader's left-wing anti-corporate Green Party campaign in 2000, dedicated to the proposition that there was not a dime's bit of difference between the Democrats and the Republicans, between Al Gore and George W. Bush. All those candidacies supposedly heralded yet another fresh start for American politics after the events of the late 1960s and 1970s had loosened voters' attachments to the major parties: an era—the term was now gaining currency—of post-partisanship. In all three cases, anti-party candidacies did nothing to prevent the election of partisan administrations, including the radically partisan White House of the younger Bush. Indeed, Nader's run ensured Bush's presidency.

VI.

THE BUSH PRESIDENCY brought its own post-partisan ironies, although in retrospect they were superficial. Bush ran in 2000 on the theme of "compassionate conservatism" and promised to be "a uniter, not a divider"—building on his father's pledge of "a kinder, gentler" America while trying to blame the acidic partisanship of the Gingrich-DeLay Republicans on both political parties. He said that he would change the tone in Washington. It was a transparent campaign tactic, although the Democrats did a poor job of saying as much. From the start, Bush's administration was marked by efforts to use events, not least

the terrorist attacks of September 11, for forging what Bush's political "architect" Karl Rove believed would be a permanent Republican Party majority, the fulfillment of Nixon's partisan dream.

It should have come as no surprise that after eight years of George Bush (much as after almost six years of Nixon), American voters would be receptive to anti-partisan or post-partisan appeals, from a Democrat untouched by recent conflicts, who said he wanted to put aside divisive rhetoric and divided government, a Democrat even willing to say admiring things about Ronald Reagan as a "transformative" president. Commentators naturally focused on the post-racial aspects of Barack Obama's successful candidacy, and how, as the candidate himself put it, he "doesn't look like all those other presidents on the dollar bills." Yet Obama has broken the mold in another crucial way: he is one of the only presidents in modern times—Jimmy Carter being the other outstanding example—who explicitly and sincerely ran for office promising not simply to unite the country but to transcend partisanship, substituting a spirit of thoughtfulness, expertise, and integrity above party and politics.

As it happens, though, the post-partisanship trumpeted in 2008 and 2009 was an updated variation of a very old theme in our politics—a theme, with the endless fascination of our political history, that connects George Washington to E.L. Godkin, John Adams's Federalists to Grover Cleveland's Mugwumps, James Monroe to John Quincy Adams, and Adams to his grandson Henry Adams—and strangely enough, the first African American president to the Confederate fire-eaters. What all those earlier leaders, parties, and factions shared—in marked contrast to Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt (before and after 1912), Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton—was an antipathy to partisanship. It was an antipathy that failed to prevent the rise of parties or to dislodge them from their central place in American political life.

More important, that antipathy invariably ensured ultimate political defeat and even catastrophe, no matter whether the cause being advanced came from the right or the left. The anti-party current is by definition anti-democratic, as political parties have been the only reliable vehicles for advancing the ideas and interests of ordinary voters. Today's Tea Party activists, for all their proclaimed alienation from both major parties, understand this: they are not whining about the evils of partisanship, they are working it, and using the party system to advance their hard-right agenda as a wing of the Republican Party.

Whenever political leaders have presumed that their expertise and their background make them special repositories of wisdom above the wheeling and dealing and "spoilsmanship" of democratic politics, the result has been a fatal disconnection between themselves and the citizenry. And not just the citizenry—for without the trust and continuing cooperation born of strong party loyalties, it has been impossible for presidents to work closely with Congress to enact legislation, or to construct an effective executive branch.

President Kennedy is sometimes cited as an anti-partisan who held party hacks in disdain—or so a few liberal writers and historians such as James MacGregor Burns have persuaded themselves. But Kennedy relished being his party's chieftain, and astutely understood the imperatives of party and party leadership, which he explained as well as anyone has. "No president, it seems to me, can escape politics," Kennedy observed in 1960, as he began his quest for the Democratic presidential nomination. "He has not only been chosen by the nation—he has been chosen by his party. And if he insists that he is 'president of all

the people' and should, therefore, offend none of them—if he blurs the issues and differences between the parties—if he neglects the party machinery and avoids his party's leadership—then he has not only weakened the political party as an instrument of the democratic process—he has dealt a blow to the democratic process itself." Kennedy went on to say that he preferred the example of Abraham Lincoln, "who loved politics with the passion of a born practitioner."

What distinguishes Obama, like Carter, is that he has operated in an era in which, paradoxically, party ties among the voters have supposedly weakened but the parties themselves have become bitterly ideological. Carter became president in an earlier part of this cycle, which has become more intensely polarized under Obama than ever before. But as contentious as the current tone and substance of our politics has become, the oasis of post-partisanship, by whatever name you choose to call it, is as much a mirage today as it has ever been. The mirage persists in some high-minded circles, where it remains fashionable, as Theodore Roosevelt put it, to revile "the 'coarseness' of professional politicians." (How ironic it is to hear Mark McKinnon and Thomas Friedman, the consultant and the columnist, issue a summons to a new Mugwumpery in response to the Mugwumpery of the Obama administration.) But the beautiful dreamers of this generation, who yearn for an American politics without partisanship, will prove no more successful than those of all the generations that have gone before. And if they persist, they will do far more to damage their political hopes than to secure them.

Sean Wilentz is a contributing editor at The New Republic*, and the author of* Bob Dylan in America *(Doubleday). This article ran in the November 17, 2011, issue of the magazine.*
