

BICENTENNIAL: TIME FOR POLITICAL CHANGE?

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Within a few months the sights and sounds of electioneering will start in earnest; newspapers, magazines and TV screens will be filled with political talk and political faces. It would not be surprising if the coming presidential election year of 1976 develops into one of the most interesting (and possibly, the most important) since the Lincoln election in 1860.

For many years now we have wondered why with the general public apparently so strongly divided in outlook regarding political ideology, there has been no serious attempt to regroup voters into basic conservative and liberal factions. For nearly two centuries, the structure of American society and its political system has favored (and fortunately so) a two, major party system. Over the last one hundred and fifteen years, and particularly since the 1930s, our two parties, Democrat and Republican, despite their supposed difficulties, have actually become almost identical in that each pursues most of the same goals and each embraces, in varying proportions, a broad spectrum of thought ranging from ultra-conservative to radical-liberal. While it is true that the Democrats are more liberally oriented and the Republicans more conservatively oriented, there are still large segments in each party that would be more comfortably aligned with the opposition.

A recent Gallup poll of voters asking for a personal preference between a conservative party and a liberal party reported that 26% chose liberal, 38% chose conservative and 36% were undecided. A Harris poll (worded to favor liberal sensibilities) showed that 43% of Americans consider themselves "middle-of-the-road," 30% "conservative," 15% "liberal," 3% "radical" and 9%, "not sure." It would seem, then, that there is a considerable and growing conservative strength in the country. This should have been evident from the last election when, faced with a choice between Nixon and McGovern (and with no opportunity that time to register a protest vote for Wallace), the conservative majority united for the first time and won overwhelmingly.

This year, at last, there seems to be some serious thought and energy being expended to try and bring about realignment and a coalition of conservative strength. In his new book, *The Making of the New Majority Party*, conservative editor William A. Rusher delves deeply into the history of our politics and makes a good case for the time being ripe for change. Why not, he asks, in view of the conservative values endorsed by so great a proportion of the population, create a new party specifically designed to express these beliefs? Just as the Republican Party replaced the Whig Party to become the dominant opposition party. Rusher feels it is now time to organize a new conservative "Independence Party" that will eventually replace the Republicans.

The old voter coalitions from Franklin Roosevelt's day, which essentially divided the country's voters economically into "haves" and "have-nots" have disappeared and changed into those of "producers" and "nonproducers." Rusher identifies the producing element as that encompassing nearly all of the economically conservative middle class — the businessmen, the housewives, the professional people, the engineers and the white-collar workers—plus nearly all of the socially conservative, populist, lower middle class—the manual laborers, the industrial workers, the "hard hats," the small farmers and the blue collar population in general. In liberal opposition is a vast new welfare constituency encouraged and led by powerful elements of an essentially nonproducing class he calls "verbalists"—the student and educational establishment, the research institutions, the major foundations, the dominant news and communications media and the federal and state bureaucracies. Since this liberal grouping is firmly entrenched within the Democratic Party, either the Republican Party should drop its "yes, but" image and attempt to embrace all conservatives, or give way to an entirely new, conservatively oriented party.

The two strong leaders of conservative sentiment today are George Wallace, heading the social conservative populists in the Democratic Party, and Ronald Reagan (along with Goldwater and James Buckley), leading the economic conservatives in the Republican Party. It is probable that neither Wallace nor Reagan will bolt his party, at least, not until the primaries are over. But if neither succeeds in bringing about significant change to his liking within the established parties (and chances are against either doing so) then it would seem a time of ideal opportunity for them to consider a new coalition of conservative strength, join forces to form a new party and contest the election.

At this stage, all is just conjecture and possibility, but the ingredients are all present and the time is very suitable for a major political upheaval and change. It might be that 1976, the year of our Bicentennial, will be one of the most unusual election years in history.