

“GOD, SEX & AMERICA: OR WHY THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN MATTERS AS MUCH AS THE RESULT”

Article for EU Reporter

20th October 2004

I love America. I have literally lost count of the number of visits I have made since I first toured America as a student on a Greyhound bus in 1969. I am sure that a computer somewhere in the States will have totalled my visits, which must now number somewhere approaching sixty. I spent ten days in California in the middle of October. This period included the second and third Presidential debates. Even as someone who thinks that he knows and understands American politics, I was amazed that the post-debate comment focussed not on the state of the economy or the news from Iraq, but on the ‘culture wars’ subjects of God and gay marriage. Without any sense of strangeness the media concentrated on what God had said to President Bush about invading Iraq. Was the President right to have taken advice not from his earthly father but from “a greater father”? Did God agree with the President’s interpretation that God wanted him to bring freedom to the Iraqis and to any other currently undemocratic peoples on the planet? When not debating the wisdom and validity of God’s advice to the President, the media dwelt at great length on the appropriateness of Senator Kerry’s reference to the fact that Dick Cheney’s daughter is a lesbian. The Republican campaign took a clear and calculated decision to field her mother in outraged parent mode, a tactic apparently suggested by the daughter herself, who is a key player in the Vice President’s campaign. The original question put to both candidates in the third debate was– “Mr President do you believe that homosexuality is a matter of choice”. These two incidents persuade me that Europe has as much to learn from the campaign as from its result. The European assumption that Americans are basically like us, but louder, wealthier and more naïve must be put in doubt by this extraordinary election campaign.

I will make an admission that may probably destroy the remaining shreds of my credibility in much of Europe. I like California. Worse than that, I just don’t like the easy bits – San Francisco, Yosemite National Park and Frasier - in recent years I have also come to like the tough bits – the grubby “lala land” that is Los Angeles, sun dried San Diego and even the artificial settlements in the desert around Palm Springs. California should be a reminder to us all of the dangers of generalising about ‘America’. California is altogether easier on the European consciousness: it cares about the environment. It is proposing a huge state programme to fund stem cell research. It is outward looking, innovative and slightly whacky. In Governor Schwarzenegger it has a Republican Governor from Austria who is prepared to tackle the insanity of California’s Proposition-led budgetary chaos and who has managed to

reach out, at least in some areas, beyond the partisan divisions of the rest of the nation.

A highlight of my trip to Los Angeles was my first exposure to college football with all its attendant ceremony. My host was a passionate fan of CalTech, located halfway to Northern California. Their opponents were the University of Southern California, located in Los Angeles. I found myself plunged into the cauldron of passion otherwise known as the Los Angeles Coliseum, the 1932 Olympic stadium which seats ninety-five thousand people. If truth be told, I do not feel strongly about either institution, but out of courtesy to my host, and because their colours were blue and gold, I became a CAL fan for the afternoon and was to be heard chanting with ever greater enthusiasm "Go Bears". During the warm-up ceremonies for the game the original mixed seating sorted itself out into two partisan blocks: Twenty five thousand of 'Us' and seventy thousand of 'Them'. As the rival bands strutted their stuff the levels of venom rose to scary heights. Cal Tech is a state school whereas USC is a private college (I was regularly informed that USC stood for University of Spoilt Children). As the game proceeded the level of class-based insult became quite explicit. Twenty five thousand Cal Tech supporters were to be seen shaking their car keys at the USC team, a reference, I was given to understand, to USC's tradition of rewarding successful players with BMWs! As the game went on with the extraordinary violent rhythm of American Football, stopping and starting to ensure time for the commercial breaks on the television coverage, the insults became ever wilder. My attempt to imply that this was "only a game" was treated with the derision it deserved. I am told I have the build for American Football, but I certainly don't have the expertise. USC won by four points in what seemed to me to be a good game, but getting out of the stadium in my Cal Tech tee shirt required me to draw on forty years experience of political ambiguity.

Historically, most US Presidential elections echo the conventions of college football. There are cheerleaders, razzamatazz, vast enthusiasm and much debate about the finer points of strategy. Once the game is over partisanship is largely put aside and the artificial loyalties of football or party politics are put back in their locker for the next match. I have, however, a terrible feeling that the 2004 campaign is not like this. America in this election is polarised, vicious, unhappy and fearful in a way that I have never seen before. There is a shortage of optimism on both sides, a sense that the events of September 11th have permanently damaged the confidence of America as "the shining city on the hill". The average American has gone from being unaware of the world to being aware that the world does not like them. They are now a people afraid of the outside world and, worse than that, afraid of themselves. Fear stalks just beneath the surface of all the campaign issues. A shortage of flu jabs is treated with the seriousness of a potential terrorist attack using anthrax. The fundamentalist Christian lobby is convinced that America is under attack by Islamic extremists determined to destroy the nation. Some of their rhetoric implies that any such attack would be retribution for the Godless behaviour of the Liberal half of the nation, with its dubious sexual mores and devotion to civil liberties that should be sacrificed in a wartime situation.

If Ronald Reagan was the perfect vehicle for America's natural optimism, George W Bush is the perfect symbol for its current fear. His seven minutes of shock in the Florida classroom on September 11th and his courage in engaging with the challenge

in the days after the horror are equally part of America. Shared across the nation is the President's evident bewilderment at the asymmetry of so much military power and so little ability to provide security. Technology, especially military technology, is the God which no one dares admit has failed. In the tradition of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny, how can the Almighty have allowed this to happen to his chosen people? As the years pass after September 11th, the Americans are reaching ever deeper into their stores of traditional solace. Sadly, in the process, they are becoming ever more divided as a society. Both sides will tell you that the importance of the election rests on the ability of the winner to appoint up to four new judges to the Supreme Court and thereby to shift American society permanently in one or other direction. The electoral map has been polarised by computer-generated gerrymandering that would be simply illegal in a European context. Seventeen States still exclude ex-felons from voting even in a federal election. The corruption and extravagance of a money-based political system was light heartedly acknowledged by both Presidential candidates at the close of the third debate.

Over everything hangs the unresolved poison of the Florida recounts in the 2000 campaign. Every American election campaign is brash and aggressive and hard fought, but this one has in it a poison that is not good for America nor for the world which has to live with the decisions of the sole super power. In recent months foreign policy has been entirely subordinated to the demands of the election. If George W Bush is elected it will tell the world much about the temper of the USA. In 2000 he won the majority of votes in the Electoral College, but not the popular vote, on a platform as a compassionate Conservative who was a "uniter not a divider". If John Kerry is elected he will undoubtedly seek to repair relations with the Allies and to restore American standing in the world, but he will be constrained by the reality of a divided and fearful nation. The fundamentalist themes, apocalyptic nonsense in the campaign rhetoric, and know-nothing approach to complicated issues are not a pathology necessarily endemic in either American culture or society. They are a direct result of a conscious choice to shape the campaign along these lines. In other words, they are the product of a decision on the part of the Bush White House to divide and incite – a failure of moral as well as political leadership of the first order. Leadership, in my view, must recognize the tensions and trends in the society as it crafts its strategies but it must also appeal to the country's better angels even as it guides its tactics by its own selection from Machiavelli's Prince.

I do not find that Europeans dislike individual Americans. The polls tell us that European electorates are not solidly anti-American, but they do reveal massive majorities against George W Bush, based on, I suspect, a complete incomprehension of the heartland mentality. Europe just does not get the language of the solemn core of the nation from Texas to Kansas and back to Georgia. Europeans are irretrievably 'coastal' in both their affections for and their sympathies with America. They should have our support and sympathy as they struggle with the news that a leading Christian fundamentalist told the President before the invasion that God had told him attacking Iraq would be messy and lead to casualties. Apparently President Bush preferred his own message from God. Should any feelings of moral superiority occur to the European mind, let them just quietly repeat the words Rocco Buttiglione. I do not know who is going to win in early November, but I do know that Europe must learn to deal with the "all" of America, from sea to shining sea. An America divided against itself in the face of terrorism will be a disaster from which the entire world will suffer.

Tom Spencer

Executive Director European Centre for Public Affairs and
Visiting Professor of Public Affairs, Brunel University.



© Tom Spencer