

PERIODICALS

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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Horatio Alger On the Bench

"From Rags to Robes: The Horatio Alger Myth and the Supreme Court" by E. Digby Baltzell and Howard G. Schneiderman, in *Society* (May-June 1991), Rutgers—The State University, New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

America's aristocrats, Tocqueville observed, are to be found not among the rich, but rather occupying "the judicial bench and bar." Insulated from popular pressures and appointed for life, the justices of the Supreme Court appear to be the cream of that aristocracy. It seems only natural that they would be people of privileged origins, especially compared with U.S. presidents. The reality, however, is just the reverse, point out Baltzell and Schneiderman, sociologists at the University of Pennsylvania and at Lafayette College, respectively.

Comparing the social origins of the eminent jurists and the presidents, Baltzell and Schneiderman found Horatio Alger much more often sitting on the bench than in the Oval Office. Of the 36 chief executives from George Washington to Richard Nixon, no less than 31 came from upper-class or upper-middle class families; only five—or 14 percent—came from middle- or lower-class homes. By contrast, of the 96 Supreme Court justices from 1789 to 1969, 32—or 33 percent—emerged from such relatively humble backgrounds. Most (18) of these 32 jurists came from "solid middle class farming or small-town families." Others were the "sons of poor farmers and lower-status small-town residents." The two jurists from truly underprivileged backgrounds were Abe Fortas and Thurgood Marshall. Fortas, the son of immigrant Jews, grew up in the

ghetto of Memphis, Tennessee. His father was a cabinet-maker who taught himself English; his mother was illiterate. Marshall grew up in a black ghetto in Baltimore, his father a servant at an exclusive club and his mother a teacher at an all-black elementary school.

Surprisingly, the historical record suggests that presidents born with a silver spoon in their mouth generally perform better than the self-made men who climb to the top. Of the eight presidents deemed "great" or "near-great" in several surveys of scholars, only one—Abraham Lincoln—did not have a privileged background. On the aristocratic Supreme Court, however, men born in the proverbial log cabin have generally done much better. Thirteen of the 27 justices ranked "great" or "near-great" by legal scholars and historians in a 1970 survey had not been born to privilege.

What accounts for the better record of the "humble" on the Supreme Court? Baltzell and Schneiderman say it may be that "presidential performance depends to a greater extent on the subtleties of upper-class habits of authority, whereas professional competence and superior intelligence are more essential for Supreme Court performance." A look at the class origins of the eight "great" and "near-great" chief justices seems to bear that out: Five of the eight distinguished ones came from the upper class. In that post, Baltzell and

Schneiderman say, “professional competence must be augmented with the subtle qualities of leadership apparently possessed also by upper-class presidents.” Still, Americans of more modest origins

may be glad to know, one of the chief justices ranked by the authors as among the very greatest, Earl Warren, rose from quite humble beginnings. He was, it seems, a true aristocrat.

Liberalism at Bay

“Race” by Thomas Byrne Edsall with Mary D. Edsall, in *The Atlantic* (May 1991), 745 Boylston St., Boston, Mass. 02116.

The Democratic Party, which has lost five of the last six presidential elections, has a serious problem—yet Democratic liberals haven’t been able to bring themselves to face it. So contend Edsall, a noted *Washington Post* political reporter, and his wife, a writer. The Democratic Party, they say, vitally needs white working-class and lower-middle-class voters. But such Americans “have been caught up in an explosive chain reaction of race, rights, values, and taxes which has propelled significant percentages of them out of the Democratic Party in presidential elections and into the ‘unreliable’ column in state and local contests.” So long as liberal Democrats respond to these defections with charges of racism, the Edsalls say, their party is doomed to defeat.

In recent decades, the Edsalls argue, a polarization of the electorate has taken place—and public policies backed by liberals have been behind it. Affirmative action, busing to achieve racial integration, and “much of the rights revolution in behalf of criminal defendants, prisoners, homosexuals, welfare recipients, and a host of other previously marginalized groups have, for many voters, converted the government from ally to adversary. The simultaneous increase . . . in crime, welfare dependency, illegitimacy, and educational failure [has] established in the minds of many voters a numbing array of ‘costs’—perceived and real—of liberalism.” Yet liberals, say the Edsalls, have had “major difficulty” even recognizing those costs.

The replacement of a liberal majority in American politics with a conservative majority, they note, involved the conversion of only about 5–10 percent of the electorate—mainly white working-class voters. Alabama Governor George Wallace, running as a third-party presidential candidate in 1968, showed the GOP how to win their support. He “defined a new right-wing populism” and portrayed the Democratic establishment as bent on imposing an unwanted liberal agenda on the American electorate.

The Democrats obliged by radically changing their party’s rules. The power to nominate presidential candidates was shifted from the state and local party orga-



This year’s battle between President George Bush and congressional Democrats over “quotas” and the “civil rights” bill underscores the importance race has assumed in American politics.