
AT ISSUE

The Trouble with Elites

If elite bashing has become a national pastime—possibly *the* national pastime, in the absence of baseball—no one today appears to be playing the game better than Republican politicians. For their recent triumph at the polls at least some credit should go to skills they've been honing ever since the Reagan Revolution got under way in the early 1980s.

But Democrats have little room to complain. When the chips are down—and that's fairly often—these past masters of the game still take swipes at the wealthy, particularly the finance-and-broker types who did so well during the "Decade of Greed," even though it's not altogether clear that BMW-driving hard chargers truly qualify as the elite. It's awfully hard to get these things straight these days.

Indeed, defining who the elites are is very much what the modern game is all about. If few people now seem inclined to debate whether elites are in fact a bad thing, they will argue to their last breath about who the elites are. The reason is obvious: win this one and you win the game.

For Democrats of FDR's time and earlier, it was a whole different ball game. No one doubted who the elites were. They were wealthy plutocrats, East Coast establishment types, fat cats, robber barons, captains of industry. The challenge was to convince the people, the hoi polloi, that the elites needed reining in, their practices regulated, and at least some portion of their unseemly wealth redistributed for the greater good of the commonweal. The outcome of the game in those days was more easily determined. If times were bad, the people tended to go along with the elite bashers. If not, well, it was a lot harder to make the case, and the GOP fared better. Or at least this was the way it appeared to work.

The reality was always a little more com-

plicated, of course, a little more fraught with ambiguities and ironies, such as the fact that some of the all-time great elite bashers, including FDR himself, looked very much like the elites they were bashing. But such qualifications aside, the game did seem simpler. If it wasn't out-and-out class warfare of the kind desired by Marxists, it did seem to play out a little more clearly according to crude economic interests.

Gone such clarity. Things have long since turned murky and cultural. Starting in the mid-1970s at latest, a new image of the elite began to acquire currency. This image partly derived from the perceptive social analysis of such thinkers as Daniel Bell and Peter Drucker. They and others noticed that in the

new society aborning, the "knowledge society" as Drucker called it, a new class of symbol-manipulating professionals (lawyers, ad and PR people, university profs, high-level government bureaucrats,

entertainment producers, and journalists) was assuming greater power and influence. But that's not all. The widening sway of this New Class, as the ascendant group was collectively dubbed, was perceived by some observers—mainly conservatives, but some liberals as well—to be of a not-wholly-beneficent character.

It comes as no surprise that many of the New Class folk were baby boomers, and, as such, were products of a very similar formation: that is, overindulged, overly secure, TV-besotted middle-to-upper-middle-class childhoods passed during two remarkably prosperous decades; leftish, dogmatically secular college educations; participation in, or at least flirtation with, the counterculture. Out of this shared background came a generation of wild-eyed experimenters, spoiled me-firsters, and glib cynics disdainful of tradition, hard work, and the simple virtues—or so a certain unfavorable group portrait suggested. Not surpris-

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ingly, this portrait ignored the more positive results of the New Class's formation, including a healthy idealism that expressed itself in selfless volunteer efforts (from the Peace Corps to VISTA to countless other service organizations) and a commitment to healing America's enduring scars of race.

But if the unfavorable portrait was a caricature, there was more than enough truth to it to give force and credibility to the critique of the New Class that would be advanced so cogently by a congeries of apostate Marxists and mugged liberals (many of New York intellectual fame) called the neoconservatives. The tough-minded analysis of America's cultural and social drift that came from the pens of such thinkers as Bell, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan would do an invaluable demolition job on the stale—indeed dangerous—left-liberal shibboleths and agendas embraced by so many of the New Class as their orthodoxy.

This critique accurately identified the self-deceptions and smugness of that orthodoxy. It diagnosed the destructive or ineffectual character of many of its social-engineering schemes. It exposed the deterioration of our schools and the nihilism and degradation cheerfully purveyed by the popular culture. It pointed out the biases of the news media. All of this and much else was for the good—and not only for the conservative movement in America, which had long needed intellectual stiffening and something more positive than a merely reactionary temperament. And in truth, the neoconservative critique benefited the Democrats at least as much as the Republicans—though the former seem more prone to forget their lessons.

In certain respects, though, triumphs always spoil victors. Once-astute criticism can become formulaic—or worse, disingenuous and ugly. Perhaps worst of all, truth may fall victim to partisan expediency. This has not come fully to pass, but troubling signs abound, nowhere more pointedly than in the rhetoric that now circles the word

“elite,” rhetoric that emanates from the Left as well as the Right.

To some extent, it's to be expected that politicians reaching for the populist mantle will call their opponents elitists. It even makes for a kind of giddy comedy in an age when we need all the laughs we can get. After all, what could have been sillier than the spectacle of the former president, highborn and Ivy League educated, calling his opponent an elitist? Or that of the current president and his wife thumping on the profiteers of the 1980s when they were involved in some pretty high-rolling money games themselves?

The danger, though, is that all this pounding on elites may begin to have consequences quite beyond those intended. Clearly, “elite” is being used as a code word, a shorthand term that stands for everything that one side of the political spectrum claims is wrong about the other. Whether it's conservatives railing against the influence of New Class types or liberals attacking profiteering Wall Street yuppies and corporate honchos, the term “elite” is made to serve as an all-purpose punching bag, indeed as a scapegoat.

Where might this lead? Again, portents bode ill. In his last book, *The Betrayal of the Elites* (reviewed in this issue), the late historian Christopher Lasch mounted a criticism of elites that so dexterously combines both the left-wing and right-wing populist uses of the word that it forms an almost perfectly Manichean picture of America. On one side, the side of Light, are the increasingly imperiled middle and lower-middle classes, consisting of hard-working, patriotic, God-fearing, and community-oriented folk who see everything they live for being destroyed. No mystery by whom. The villains of the piece, the forces of Darkness, are America's elite—in business, government, education, the media. These elites, internationalist in orientation, have no loyalty to communities or even to their own nation. In their urge to get ahead, secure in their protected buildings or walled communities, their children in private schools, they are mortgaging the welfare of the rest of the country.

Sad to say, there is more than a little truth

to this picture. America's elites, in all sectors of society and of all political persuasions, have become irresponsible, selfish, and hypocritical to a disturbing degree. At the very least, it's time on their part for soul-searching and mea culpas all around. But it would be disastrous if the idea of elites fell into total disrepute.

And it is in danger of doing just that. Today, cynicism about political leaders stokes the populist dream of direct democracy, which electronic technology already makes feasible. (Those who think democracy in this form would be a good thing should think twice about its dangers, some anticipated by America's Founders, including its susceptibility to media manipulation, subtle and not-so-subtle corruption, and demagoguery.) Contempt for business leaders encourages a mindless hostility toward the entrepreneurialism and innovation that is needed to keep our economy growing. And indiscriminate attacks on civil servants lead to a silly denial of the importance of services that government alone can provide.

The problem, quite simply, is not that we have elites; it is the quality of the elites we have. That might seem obvious, but amid all the elite bashing we hear remarkably little intelligent discussion of how elites could be made better. Clearly they could. Herewith three modest proposals:

The most important one applies not only to the formation of elites but to the formation of all Americans. It pertains to the education of character. The current campaign for school prayer is, as Stephen J. Carter points out in an essay in the *New Yorker*, a case of misguided energy and good intentions. A moment of nondenominational silence might be a fine thing, but a prayer of any kind would inevitably offend the beliefs of some parties. More important, though, it wouldn't be enough. What is needed is a curriculum that, through the serious study of religions, philosophy, his-

tory, biographies of heroic figures, and good literature, inculcates an awareness and appreciation of the virtues. The fact that this is not available at all levels of schooling—or if available, is barely adequate—is a scandal that needs immediate addressing.

The second proposal is that we find ways to cultivate an elite using criteria that include but go beyond simple test-taking skills. This is no easy matter in a society that has come to use raw intelligence as the single most important measure of rewardable talent. But it can be done. To some degree, America's service academies provide a model in the way they seek students who excel as leaders in all areas of life—in school, in sports, in church, in community service. The model can be replicated elsewhere if there is a social will to do so. We need not only to educate people of character but to reward and advance them.

Finally, we need to hold our elites to standards of performance throughout their careers. Like everybody else, elites have a tendency to insulate themselves from evaluation. The worst example is in the university, where mediocrity entrenches itself through the tenure system. But similar "tenure" systems prevail in other professions and fields. Civil servants are notoriously unaccountable for the programs they oversee. And many corporate leaders have insulated themselves (by packing corporate boards with allies, among other ways) from the harsher verdicts of the marketplace and the stockholder.

America is a meritocracy—not a perfect one, to be sure, but one that has grown generally fairer over time. As systems of bringing forth leaders go, it is hard to think of a better one. But a meritocracy can advance only what the nation gives it to advance. And the elite that emerges can reflect only what the larger nation values.

—J. T.