

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Founders and the 'Vision Thing'

"Revolutionary Men of Letters and the Pursuit of Radical Change: The Views of Burke, Tocqueville, Adams, Madison, and Jefferson" by Susan Dunn, in *The William and Mary Quarterly* (Oct. 1996), Box 8781, Williamsburg, Va. 23187-8781.

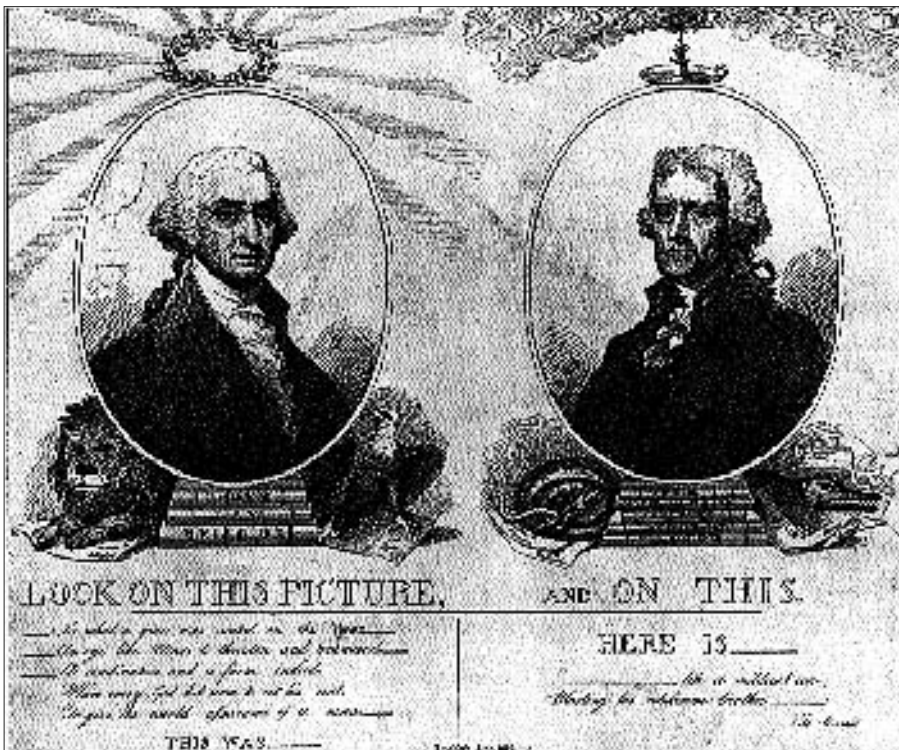
What is the proper role of abstract ideas in politics? Are they an indispensable source of liberating visions or merely, in Edmund Burke's phrase, "untried speculations" that often lead to disaster?

The question intrigued America's Founding Fathers and many of their contemporaries, notes Dunn, a historian at Williams College, especially as they watched the French Revolution unfold after 1789. One pole of the debate was defined by Burke, Britain's great conservative parliamentarian, who in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) denounced the "spirit of innovation" for its disregard of tradition and experience. Inclined toward the Burkean view was a significant group of Americans, including Alexander Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris, and John Adams. For Hamilton and Morris, writes Dunn, "the strength of American democracy lay in its continuity

with its colonial past and English institutions. Experience and practical wisdom were purely positive values; neither man thought that experience dulled the mind with routine, stale formulae, or worn ideas."

Another important Founder, James Madison, the chief architect of the U.S. Constitution, held a more nuanced view. He saw both experience and theory as flawed forms of human understanding. "Madison knew well that men had no choice but to use their rational faculties and imagination to shape the political future," Dunn writes.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the famed observer of *Democracy in America* (1835-40), was no less horrified than Burke at what France's revolutionary intellectuals had wrought, but he insisted that abstract ideas do have a role in politics. In monarchical France, he argued, the kinds of "wise and practical men" Burke admired lived an insular royal exist-



An artist in 1807 contrasted President Jefferson, relying on Voltaire and other dubious authorities, with the sagacious conservative, Washington.

tence, ignorant of changing social and political conditions. “Only the interplay of *free institutions* can really teach men of state this principal part of their art,” he wrote in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856). France’s intellectuals were more attuned to the changes in French society, but they were barred from the practical experience in politics that would have tempered their theories.

Thomas Jefferson was closer in spirit to the French philosophes than most of the other Founding Fathers. Always a contradictory mix of the pragmatic and the idealistic, he favored the latter toward the end of his life.

By 1824, he had come to see the American Revolution as very like the French, a blank slate for the abstract ideas of the Founders: “Our Revolution...presented us an album on which we were free to write what we pleased,” he wrote.

Yet Jefferson, like Tocqueville, grasped an essential truth, Dunn argues. For modern societies, the choice was no longer between preservation and revolution, as Burke believed, but between evolution and revolution. “A healthy polity, they suggested, would always turn to its men and women of experience and theory, courageous, farsighted, and hopeful, for perpetual renewal, the key to its survival.”

The Democrats’ Gender Gap

“Finding the Real Center” by Ruy Teixeira, in *Dissent* (Spring 1997), 521 Fifth Ave., Ste. 1700, New York, N.Y. 10017.

By many accounts, President Bill Clinton won a second term last year by moving to the center and re-establishing his credentials as a “New Democrat.” Congressional Democrats, in contrast, took more of a traditional liberal approach—and, as a result, failed to recapture the House. But hold on—that’s not exactly what happened, contends Teixeira, director of the politics and public opinion program at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C.

“The truth is,” he writes, “that Clinton’s political resurgence was based on his defense of *Old Democrat* programs, sometimes abbreviated as M2E2: Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the environment, as well as...a widespread perception that the economy was improving.” Almost 60 percent of Clinton voters, in one postelection survey, cited his support of domestic programs (education, Medicare, and the environment) to explain their choice, compared with only 31 percent who pointed to his New Democrat positions on welfare reform, a balanced budget, and crime.

Clinton won 49 percent of the popular vote last year, six points more than in 1992. Despite all the media attention lavished on affluent suburban “soccer moms,” Teixeira says, about three-fourths of that increased support came from moderate-income voters who were not college graduates, especially women.

The economic picture for these women has been bleak, Teixeira notes. At the end of

1995, wages for women with some college education were five percent lower than in 1989. While distrusting government as much as their male counterparts do, women “are more appreciative of government’s essential role in providing social services like health care and education. They are also more willing than men to see the government ensure job availability and a wholesome social and family environment.” Thus, Clinton’s defense of M2E2, as well as his small-scale regulatory proposals (such as the V-chip, school uniforms, and extending family and medical leave), appealed to them.

House Democrats also reclaimed some lost ground—though not enough to reclaim the House. While their share of the votes of non-college white men jumped, it was still 10 points short of the 53 percent they claimed in 1992. Winning over those still-reluctant non-college white males is now the House Democrats’ real challenge, in Teixeira’s view. A New Democrat approach is not likely to work, he says. After all, Clinton got an even smaller share of this vote (38 percent) “than the supposed Democratic dinosaurs in the House!”

What should traditional liberal Democrats do? Teixeira suggests sticking to the M2E2 agenda while taking a leaf (moral values) from the New Democrats: “I think we need to learn to talk about the role of government in raising living standards in a language voters understand: the language of values.”