

# Bury the Hatchet

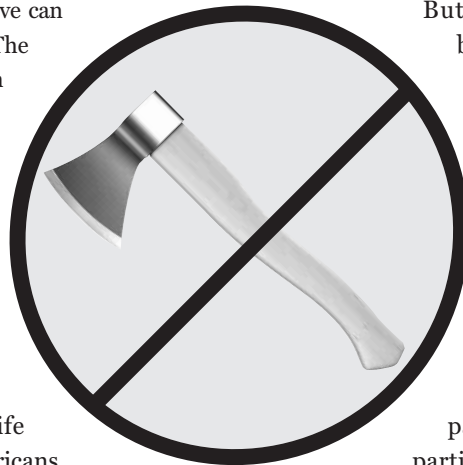
*The antidote to frenzied partisanship won't be found in politics as usual but in problem-solving leaders who govern from the center.*

BY GIL TROY

DESPITE SELECTING TWO MEN KNOWN FOR THEIR political civility as presidential nominees, Americans in the fall of 2008 have been enduring yet another nasty political contest. By September, both candidates could easily have sung along with Britney Spears, “Oops . . . I did it again.” A bit of historical perspective can soothe some of our discontents. The long-standing paradox of American presidential campaigning is that voters complain about political mudslinging but also respond to it. Repeatedly since Thomas Jefferson battled John Adams for the right to succeed George Washington, the Republic has survived partisan hysteria and citizen disappointment.

Yet the ugliness of public life somehow offends modern Americans more. Today’s festering unhappiness with politics is a product of the plummeting faith in politicians and political institutions that pollsters have tracked since the 1970s and the escalating spiral of cynicism and despair that has accompanied it. Intense partisanship among politicians, vicious political battles in the media, and nasty electoral campaigns coexist with extensive citizen apathy and pathetically low voter turnout.

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By contrast, our political ancestors often approached the political game in better humor and with a closer attachment to political life. Political skirmishing involved citizens in at least the most basic acts of democracy, especially voting.

But today, many Americans are bystanders left choking on the fumes of partisan combat. Our politics suffer from the paradox of strong partisanship combined with weak parties. Throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries, Americans did politics via their parties. Partisans regularly read party newspapers printed by partisan printers on party payrolls. During campaigns, partisans marched in party parades to hear party leaders exhort them to vote the party line. American politics’ many military metaphors—the *standard-bearer rallied the troops*, telling the *rank and file* that this was a *do-or-die campaign*—testified to this intensity of party activity, not just party affiliation.

Strong parties fostered political engagement. With most Americans living on farms or in very small towns, and even city dwellers residing in close-knit neighborhoods, everyone knew who belonged to which party and, even more important, who could

deliver the goods. Party officials were true community leaders, not strangers with fancy titles. And these leaders made good—to reformers’ eternal frustration. The infamous “Boss” William Marcy Tweed of New York was typical. In the 1870s, Tweed busily lined his and his buddies’ pockets while also passing out constituent services personally and spectacularly, ranging from Christmas turkeys for the needy to roads, buildings, and parks to transform Manhattan.

Even the activities we mock today—the torchlight parades and the florid oratory—were community builders. They did not prevent mudslinging. But just as competition engenders a grudging mutual respect among political professionals, the widespread participation in party hijinks reinforced a shared commitment to America’s future. And especially after the Civil War put the ultimate polarizing issue of slavery to rest, unifying rituals after Election Day helped heal the community’s partisan wounds. In Delaware, citizens still celebrate the day after Election Day as “Return Day.” In some counties, rivals parade together and in others they bury a ceremonial hatchet. Especially in small-town America, the post-campaign reconciliation was as routine as the pre-election combat. These rituals, once widespread, restored civility by shifting everyone’s identity as active partisans to their more transcendent identity as patriotic Americans.

Since the rise of television in the 1950s, the media have become the central forum for American politicking, and increasingly today that role is being played by the blogosphere. With the blogger and the viewer replacing the pamphleteer and the parader, politicians focus on marketing themselves and their causes to passive consumers rather than mobilizing passionate soldiers. The new language of politics sounds like this: *Spin doctors stage photo ops as pollsters survey voter preferences, spawning celebrity candidates*. The old promise of a new kind of Internet-based citizen politics now looks more and more like a mere marketing ploy. Far from reflecting true citizen engagement, the volume of online donations and the number of website hits have simply been converted into indexes of candidate popularity.

The rise of media politics has spawned a new breed of freelancing politicians who excel at demand-

ing attention rather than working behind the scenes to get things done. These showboaters entertain or scare voters, often by affirming their common political identities. Problem solving invites reason, compromise, and, ultimately, mutual respect; identity building invites posturing, passion, and, ultimately, intolerance.

In the days of Rutherford Hayes and William McKinley, the parties loomed larger than individual politicians, who often seemed undistinguished and interchangeable. Matt Quay of Pennsylvania, Thomas Platt of New York, and other party bosses dominated local and national politics, bullying legislators and the blur of undistinguished bearded and mustachioed presidents between Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. Thanks to the democratization of the parties, the last time bosses dictated a nomination was in 1952, when Adlai Stevenson became the surprise Democratic nominee. Such top-down politicking would be almost unimaginable today. Earlier this year, when it appeared that the Democratic presidential primaries might not produce a clear victor, many party superdelegates were reluctant to make the party’s choice, even though that is precisely the role assigned them. It was a telling indicator of the parties’ weakness that Hillary Clinton, the favorite of the Democratic establishment, lost, while John McCain, noted for his deviations from party orthodoxy, won the GOP nomination.

Primary season highlights the parties’ debility, reducing them to the role of referee among contenders. Then the winner takes over the party structure, frequently installing new leaders while commandeering party fundraising lists. The nominees function much like new sheriffs who swagger into town and dominate the scene for a dramatic but fleeting moment rather than like local deputies who rise through the system and last.

Despite being less powerful and more responsive to public opinion, parties brimming with edge but lacking a mass membership base produce further division and alienation. Party links tend to serve as convenient labels rather than defining allegiances. The modern mix of culture and politics has made party identity combustible and polarizing. Fortunately, no single issue like slavery divides the nation. Americans are more “purple” than the

red-blue narrative suggests. Still, the media showcases Chardonnay-sipping, *New York Times*-reading, pro-choice, pro-gay marriage, urban, progressive Democrats confronting beer-swilling, Rush Limbaugh--listening, pro-life, pro-traditional marriage, rural, conservative Republicans. It is Prius versus pickup, tennis versus NASCAR, Ivy League types versus state university grads and dropouts. The harsh fights reflect the rival groups' disgust for each other, as well as the competition for swing voters who transcend the rigid paradigms and can tip elections, such as blue-collar suburban Catholics and well-educated soccer moms. Thanks to these divisions, the mid-20th century's big-tent party coalitions, with Republicans including liberals such as Nelson Rockefeller of New York and Democrats including conservatives such as John Sparkman of Alabama, have vanished with the Rambler and the rotary phone.

Parties are now the political equivalent of professional sports teams. Individuals root themselves hoarse for their side, even occasionally confronting rival fans, but few save the pros actually play the game. Increasingly, parties seem less like armies of concerned citizens than coalitions of angry ideological and economic interest groups. While political scientists may hail the rise of intense partisanship as a spur to political activism, the interest-group jockeying only feeds the popular impression of politics as an insiders' game.

At the same time, an increasingly odious money game pollutes the whole spectacle. Beyond branding, candidates most appreciate the party infrastructures as fundraising vehicles. In 2004 the presidential candidates raised more than \$600 million, while the two parties raised an additional \$1.2 billion for both the congressional and national campaigns, despite the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform limiting "soft" funds. Money has become an unavoidable preoccupation of modern politics, draining time and attention from the public's business. Even incumbent senators estimate that they spend a third of their time

fundraising—which helps explain the influx into politics of multimillionaires who can finance their own campaigns.

So much money flows through the system that parties lose control. Independent political advocacy groups have proliferated to circumvent campaign finance laws limiting contributions and give extremists a voice. In 2004, these unregulated "527" organizations alone raised

**LIKE FANS OF PROFESSIONAL sports teams, Americans root themselves hoarse for their team but seldom actively participate in politics.**

\$400 million. The attack ads that renegade 527s produce so easily, and inject into the campaign narrative so effectively, such as the Willie Horton ads of 1988 and the Swift Boat ads of 2004, allow forces formally distanced from the parties to polarize the atmosphere, take the focus off policy, and sway elections.

The media increase the political nastiness while distancing voters from those clashes. Citizens become spectators. Headline-driven news emphasizes the extremes, the fights, the hysteria, the sensational. Political reporters, trying to appear objective by quoting two opposing sides to almost every story, mostly sharpen the differences, slighting any centrist position. The news media have for decades broadcast the shrillest voices from the pro-life and pro-choice movements, for example, even as most Americans have accepted a centrist position, disliking abortion theoretically but being too pragmatic to outlaw it. The media's Kabuki theater may not always sway Americans, but it demoralizes and distances them.

**A**s has been the case with almost every new technology, from the telegraph to television, the rise of the Internet fed false expectations that it would create a new, more democratic, interactive poli-

tics. But blogging's harsh, unfettered nature has coarsened politics. The fact that so many bloggers are essentially anonymous allows them to spew rancor, rumor, lies, and obscenities. Increasingly, the MSM (mainstream media) appear by contrast staid, centrist, boring, even responsible. Deadlines—once daily, now without limit in the age of the Internet—demand a constant stream of stories, diluting the quality and upping the rhetorical ante in the effort to grab attention.

In an ever-escalating rhetorical spiral, political discussion in the media and the blogosphere becomes harsher, sleazier. At the same time, the stories that stand out are the sensational and polarizing ones rather than the constructive, bridge-building ones. A variation of Gresham's law applies: Just as bad money drives out the good, bad rhetoric and sleazy politics drive out—or at least eclipse and obscure—the good.

**T**he strains within the American political system reflect a broader cultural crisis. It is hard to expect temperate leaders and reasonable politics in a culture of excess, a culture that encourages Americans to indulge almost every impulse. There are, however, signs of backlash. The two major party nominees of 2008 both rose to prominence by criticizing the political status quo, though as they consolidated their positions and charted strategy in the summer of 2008, the forces pushing for more partisanship prevailed.

Leaders willing to demand centrist government and less alienating politics are rare. Moderation is not considered sexy; bipartisan initiatives are frequently deemed boring. Ironically, it has been left to a media celebrity to fill part of the yawning gap in the middle. The comedian Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* has become a hero to young Americans—and one of their primary sources for news—by throwing off partisan shackles and mocking the system. Stewart skewers Republican incompetence, Democratic impotence, and media irresponsibility with equal intensity. He says his comedy comes “from feeling displaced from society because you're in the center. We're the group of fairness, common sense, and moderation.”

Despite the forces pulling politicians to the extremes, Americans must remember that the United

States is not Europe. The American political tradition is pragmatic and centrist. Our greatest presidents led from the center, seeking the golden path of national unity. George Washington inspired Americans to rally around their “common cause.” Even at the nation's moment of maximum political extremism, Abraham Lincoln moderated the abolitionists' antislavery fervor to keep the wavering border states fighting for union. Franklin D. Roosevelt's big-tent New Deal incorporated some changes radicals demanded while preserving capitalism. These leaders understood that a democracy, resting on the consent of the governed, requires citizens to buy into politics. They were not namby-pamby wafflers, but muscular moderates, rooted in core principles but nimble, confident, and patriotic enough to compromise when necessary.

In an age of celebrity politics and weakened parties, presidents have to fill the void, transcending partisanship and combating alienation. The media obsession with the Celebrity in Chief gives the president far more power than any party boss ever enjoyed. The “bully pulpit” of the White House has never been so prominent in American life, with the president so able to set the national tone and shape the country's conversation. Future presidents should nurture civic engagement and restore confidence in government, even while maintaining a particular party identity.

Muscular moderation from our leaders, and a renewed faith among citizens, requires a new American nationalism, with national identity trumping party loyalty. The public's frustrated yearning for a patriotic and civic revival fueled both Ronald Reagan's success and Barack Obama's meteoric rise. Both men captured Americans' desire for greater faith in their leaders, their country, their system, themselves. The excitement about John McCain's compelling life story likewise reflects a yearning for simpler, more patriotic times, rooted in self-sacrifice rather than self-indulgence.

We will start reducing the tension and reviving some faith in politics when we have leaders who understand that they must lead from the center, uniting Americans around core values and ensuring that politics are once again about being rooted in community and solving problems, not just rooting for one set of culture warriors over another. ■