

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 6 | Issue 2

Article 2

9-23-1990

Editor's Note

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Recommended Citation

O'Malley, Padraig (1990) "Editor's Note," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol6/iss2/2>

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Editor's Note

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DEC 12 1990

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Padraig O'Malley

Of all the difficulties facing the historian in his task of understanding and discussing the past, none can be greater than that of emphatically recreating the popular 'mood' defining any particular event or period," writes Paul Kennedy. This issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* is about mood and politics and how synergistic interplay of the two in recent years reflects both the national and local psyche.

"Something has gone terribly wrong [about the way in which we elect our presidents]," Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover lament in *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars?*; "The American Dream is fading," says the *Wall Street Journal*; "[There is] a gnawing, growing sense that savagery and second-ratedness are increasing in America," George Will observes.

There is an uneasiness abroad, a sense of depletion, a deadened time of waiting. The military buildup in the Persian Gulf continues, but for a purpose either unsaid or best left unsaid. The economy slides ineluctably toward recession; Congress and the Bush administration wrangled petulantly over a deficit reduction program, coming to agreement only when public disgust with their performance threatened severe retribution at the ballot box; the deficit itself has become a symbol of decline as the cost of borrowing increasingly eats into limited resources.

Massachusetts, only a short time ago the proud standard-bearer of the "Massachusetts Miracle," now implodes upon itself, reducing political debate to a series of angry recriminations and counterrecriminations; the public mood settles for cynicism and the pejorative. "When jargon turns living issues into abstractions, and where jargon ends competing with jargon, people don't have causes. They only have enemies; only the enemies are real," writes V. S. Naipaul. Abroad we have Saddam Hussein; in Massachusetts we have Michael Dukakis.

In "The Nowhere Man: When the 'Miracle' Turned to Mush," David Nyhan chronicles the sad fall of Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis and the consequences for the body politic. "Much of the reputation [Dukakis] erected over three decades of public life was flattened by a hurricane of opprobrium unleashed by the . . . fiscal collapse [of Massachusetts]," says Nyhan. "His greatest political burden was the widely shared perception that [he] had misled Massachusetts voters about their fiscal plight to increase his chances of winning the White House." In the end "his public persona was so demeaned, so dehu-

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manized, that even a person well disposed toward him saw him as a bloodless figure. . . . His name became a vile epithet to thousands of voters who, taken at their word, actually *hate* him for what happened to the commonwealth on his watch.”

But in one sense, the Dukakis-bashing that has been the hallmark of politics in Massachusetts for the last two years has its roots in the cynical manipulation of the public during the presidential election of 1988. In “The Vision Thing,” Shaun O’Connell reviews a number of books whose subject matter is not merely the presidential election of 1988, but the impact of image politics in the age of the thirty-second sound bite. He quotes Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*: “Just as the television commercial empties itself of authentic product information so that it can do its psychological work of [pseudotherapy], image politics empties itself of authentic political sustenance for the same reason.” Politics had become theater at best, a game show at worst. “George Bush,” Germond and Witcover state, “ran a campaign distinguished by a degree of negativism and intensity that had never been seen in presidential politics in the television age — a campaign that appealed to the lowest common denominator in the electorate.” Neither candidate, the *Newsweek* team say in *The Quest for the Presidency*, “could say with any precision why [he] wanted to be president or why [he] ought to be . . . There was no agenda to fight for, only victory for its own sake.” As a result the election “was a contest of manipulation, a war between high-tech button pushers unburdened by contending visions or issues.” Neither visions nor issues! — despite the fact that during the 1980s America had transmogrified itself from being the world’s largest creditor nation to the world’s largest debtor nation; that the richest one percent of Americans received 13 percent of the nation’s aftertax income while the lowest 40 percent of Americans received 14 percent; that infant mortality rates in Washington, D.C., Detroit, or Baltimore are down to Third World levels (“Nothing that happens in Bangladesh,” according to George Will, “should be as interesting to Americans as the fact that a boy born in Harlem today has a lower life expectancy than a boy born in Bangladesh”); that the dominant generation believes that its children will have harder, not easier, lives than it has had.

One reason for this state of affairs, Douglas Fraser and Irving Bluestone argue in “The Presidential Primary: A Faulty Process,” lies in our methods of selecting political party presidential candidates — a process, they believe, that has become increasingly undemocratic. The current primary system, in their view, has undermined the effectiveness of political parties and the importance of political activists. It is a process weaned on money — an astonishing \$250,361,270 was spent during the 1988 primaries, an increase of over 100 percent in expenditures over the preceding presidential primaries. They note that “the candidates who received the most in contributions and spent the most for the campaign in contested elections were the winners.” Multiple state primaries on the same day preclude in-person, hands-on campaigning. Television is the medium and money the key. Television in turn has “created a process that has weakened the parties and created one of the least well-organized systems for choosing party leaders in the world.” The malaise shows itself in voter turnout; a mere 50 percent of eligible voters participated in the 1988 presidential election; George Bush, who received 53 percent of the active vote, received a mere 27 percent of the eligible vote. Voter participation in primaries, below 30 percent overall, was, of course, much lower, so that in a primary with a number of contestants “a candidate may garner sufficient convention votes to win the presidential nomination, yet his or her actual vote from among the eligible citizens may represent a minuscule percentage of the voting-age population.” Fraser and Bluestone make

the case for a primary process that would combine a limited primary schedule “with elevating the significance and input of party activists.”

The role of party activists as a key ingredient in restructuring the Republican State Committee is one of Andrew Natsios’s major themes in “On Being a Republican in Massachusetts: Notes of a Party Chairman.” Restructuring emphasized the provision of such campaign services to candidates and to the grassroots party organization as literature design, polling, direct mail fund-raising, telephone banks, and campaign schools. In addition, in 1987 the state committee adopted a 10 percent rule (modeled after the Democrats’ 15 percent rule), which requires a candidate to obtain 10 percent of the convention vote in order to appear on the primary ballot. Natsios defends that rule: requiring a minimum convention vote, he argues, “ensured that all candidates for statewide office would have their names placed in nomination at the convention, making a serious effort at appealing to delegates for their support. [This rule] clearly enhanced the power of the convention and the formal party organization over what it had with unrestricted ballot access.” However, three problems continue to stand between the Republicans and a return to a competitive position in state politics; Republicans must have the same financial resources available to them as Democratic candidates; they must develop credibility as a governing party; and the most serious problem in Natsios’s view is that “the Republican voter base in the state remains too small to make any dramatic improvement in the legislative or congressional delegation without the addition of new voter blocs that are not part of the National Republican Presidential Coalition.”

Two other articles round off this issue. In “Who Was That Woman I Didn’t See You With Last Night?” Norman Merrill puts the negative campaigning that is becoming the chief staple of the election process in historical perspective. Merrill writes that vicious rhetoric and invective are part of the tradition of American politics going back to the days of the Founding Fathers, and continuing through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, a tradition that itself traces its origins to the tradition of the Roman republic, especially the sharp acerbic tongues of Cato and Cicero.

Finally, Nigel Hamilton, in “JFK: The Education of a President,” examines the ways in which his background, family, and education formed the mind and character of President John F. Kennedy. Hamilton probes Kennedy’s early years, looking for the subtle clues that would suggest a future president in the making. Certain character traits emerge at an early age: his wanting to be liked and learning very quickly how to achieve that goal. The pattern of his early life — “a strict and in many ways excellent training of the mind, on a quasi-British system of education, but with great freedom outside the classroom” — suggests a division, Hamilton posits, that “reflected a split in Jack Kennedy’s own character . . . that stemmed from his parents. . . . [He] internalized much of the tension and emotional hostility in evidence at home.”

Here in Massachusetts we have had our season of emotional hostility: the bruising statewide elections, especially for governor, and the countrywide congressional elections. Once more we found ourselves bemoaning the manner in which we trivialize our electoral processes, the absence of vision, the tawdriness of candidates’ personal attacks on one another, the shallowness of the thinking, the pointlessness of the rhetoric.

Yet, for a brief shining moment earlier this year, we were given the dimensions of that vision. “Consciousness precedes Being,” Czechoslovak President Václav Havel told a joint session of the United States Congress. “For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility.

“Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our Being as humans, and the catastrophe towards which this world is headed, whether it be ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization, will be unavoidable. . . .

“In other words, we still don’t know how to put morality ahead of politics, science and economics. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions — if they are to be moral — is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success. Responsibility to the order of Being, where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be properly judged.

“The interpreter or mediator between us and this higher authority is what is traditionally referred to as human conscience.

“If I subordinate my political behavior to this imperative mediated to me by my conscience, I can’t go far wrong.”

Jack Kennedy would have appreciated the sentiments — and the wordsmith. 🐼