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Is the Party Over?

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Jim Read on “Is the Party Over?”

OCTOBER 19, 2016

Jim Read

The 2016 presidential campaign has been strange and unprecedented in many respects. Donald Trump has promised if he is elected he will put his opponent in jail, crossing the line that separates democracies from dictatorships. His most recent tactic is to claim the entire political system is rigged, and some of his most vocal supporters now call for violent uprising should he lose the election. (See The Boston Globe, October 15: <http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2016/10/15/donald-trump-warnings-conspiracy-rig-election-are-stoking-anger-among-his-followers/LcCY6e0QOcfH8VdeK9UdsM/story.html?event=event25>)

The peculiarity of this election did not begin with Donald Trump, though he has exponentially magnified its already bizarre character. The strangeness began with a mass revolt against the major political parties from both ends of the political spectrum. Both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump owed their surprising success in primaries and caucuses to the fact that they

campaigns in large part against the very party whose nomination they sought. Sanders's anti-party insurgency fell just short; Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party succeeded.

The fact that anti-party insurgencies were strong in both major parties suggest that its principal cause is not some development specific to Republican voters. Animosity to parties and party establishments is increasingly characteristic of the American electorate as a whole. Impatience, disgust, even hatred of parties appears this year to have become the new political normal.

A great many people – by no means all of them Trump supporters – share this anti-party mood. A 2014 Survey by the Pew Research Center indicated that, as the two major political parties have moved further apart, an increasing proportion of voters have become frustrated with both parties and disinclined to identify themselves with either. <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/26/the-political-typology-beyond-red-vs-blue/>. This increasing disengagement from parties echoes what I observe from my students at St. John's and St. Benedict's.

In one sense the animus against the major parties is wholly understandable, given their behavior. Donald Trump did not cause the government shutdown and near-default on the national debt in October 2013. If political parties behave this way, why affiliate with them? So I understand the logic behind the assumption that our national politics would become more moderate, cooperative, and civil if we effectively dismantled both major parties.

Nevertheless I believe this assumption is radically and dangerously false. American political parties did not produce American political extremism. That extremism has deep roots – including virulently racist roots – that have no necessary connection to political parties. To a larger degree than we like to think, political parties thrive to the extent that they can take strong and potentially violent political passions and then direct them into relatively constructive channels such as winning elections.

If Republican Party leaders had retained even minimal influence with Republican primary voters, Donald Trump would never have become the Republican nominee. The Republican establishment's opposition, far from stopping Trump's momentum in the primaries, probably accelerated it. And yet Trump would not have been a competitive presidential candidate if he had run as an independent. He bet that most Republicans, including those who had vocally opposed him in the primary, retained enough residual party loyalty to vote for him in November.

Many Democrats are quick to point out that Donald Trump's strongest supporters are in large degree the same voters who have been driving the Republican Party's strong shift to the right over the last decade. This is true. But it is also the case that Republican Party leaders' interest in winning elections gave them an incentive to restrain the party's supporters and spokespersons from speaking and acting in obviously un-civil ways. It is precisely this limitation that went out the window when Donald Trump became the party's presidential nominee.

I have described the current anti-party insurgency as unprecedented. But that is not strictly true. Its closest parallel is the collapse of the national party system in the early 1850s, when the Whig Party became fatally divided over slavery, immigration, and prohibition. The

Democratic Party at first to enjoyed a political windfall from its rival's demise. But the Democrats themselves soon became fatally divided over slave states' demand to legalize slavery in all federal territories. It was the self-destruction of the Democratic Party in 1860 that ensured Lincoln's election and triggered civil war.

I am currently writing a book on Abraham Lincoln. Among other things, Abraham Lincoln was a party builder and he believed in strong, national parties. He played an important role in building the Whig party in Illinois in the early 1840s and then in creating the Republican Party in Illinois and nationally after the Whig Party had collapsed in the early 1850s.

Lincoln's hopes in the 1860 election for a peaceful and gradual abolition of slavery were closely linked with his vision of a strong national political party committed to that aim. Lincoln did not imagine that the Democratic Party would disappear. He anticipated instead that Democrats would endure as a national party and exercise strong – but peaceful — opposition to the Republican Party's agenda.

The American Civil War was caused by many things. But its immediate trigger was the fact that the losers of a free and constitutional election were not willing to abide by that result, but instead (as Lincoln put it in his July 4, 1861 message to Congress) considered themselves entitled to secure with bullets what they could not accomplish with ballots.

The collapse of the two major political parties during the decade preceding the 1860 election helped pave the way for this resort to bullets instead of ballots. That is why, unlike many idealistic and well-meaning people, I do not cheer the prospective collapse of the major American political parties. Last time it didn't end well.