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Editor's Notebook: An Election Post-Mortem

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Editor’s Notebook
An Election Post-Mortem
by Michael Kryzanek

The presidential election year is finally over and this country can finally get back to doing what it does best, ignore politics and matters of public life. Yes, more people cast their ballot than in most past elections and yes, there did seem to be more interest in this election. But this quadrennial exercise in democracy left most Americans numb from the constant onslaught of a campaign that was excruciatingly long, filled with negativity and truth-bending, and unbelievably costly (somewhere in the neighborhood of $3 billion). This was an ugly election that did little to bring a divided America back together.

Nevertheless, as it is often said, the American people have spoken and given George W. Bush a second term. Now that they have spoken and some time has passed since the votes were tallied, the question becomes, what did the majority of American people say or mean when they decided to give our President another four years in the White House? Here are a few of my thoughts on the presidential election of 2004.

• Americans are no different than any other human beings—they are motivated by fear of the unknown and long for normalcy in their lives. George Bush simply trumped John Kerry by playing to these simple human forces and convincing Americans that he was the one to make them secure.

• Voters like candidates who know how to connect with them. For all his malapropisms and syntactical maladies, George Bush was viewed by many Americans as just a regular guy. Of course Bush is just as much of a patrician as John Kerry, but the second JFK just wasn’t able to shed the image of a blueblood Brahmin.

• For good or bad, religion and politics have become fused in the body politic. Separation of church and state is now an out of date standard as this president effectively made religion, religious values and religious institutions a key part of his campaign. It worked.

• The 2004 election proved for the first time in awhile that it wasn’t as James Carville said “the economy, stupid.” No matter how many times John Kerry hit the Bush administration for job losses and a sluggish economy, many American voters were not moved or impressed. This was an election about terror and values.

• Being a decisive leader has always been a key personal characteristic of leadership, and George Bush exuded decisiveness in his decisions regarding the war in Iraq. The fact that he may very likely be viewed over time as just plain wrong or too stubborn to change his mind didn’t matter with the voters. No one likes a flip-flopper, especially one who wants to become President of the United States.

• Being a Massachusetts liberal is like the 2004 equivalent of Hester Prynne wearing the scarlet letter. We may think we have a pretty good life here in the Bay State, but most of America, except for all those Californians, thinks that we are a bit odd and clearly out of step with the mainstream, whatever that means.

• America is always about second chances. The fact that polls showed that George Bush was not a terribly popular chief executive was not enough to overcome the fact that the voters were willing to give him another opportunity to get it right. The old adage about going with the known rather than the unknown seemed to be work here.

For those of you who were crying in your beer over the results of this election, remember that this country will survive. There are House of Representative and Senate elections just two years away. If George Bush and the Republicans don’t get it right in Iraq or on taxes or with Social Security, the American people can speak again and give the Democrats a boost. That’s probably the best part of our flawed democracy, the people have regular chances to speak their mind.

—Michael Kryzanek is Editor of the Bridgewater Review