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## As the Smoke Clears— What Does the Election Really Mean?

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**Thursday, November 4, 2004**

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Though the early morning hours on Wednesday reflected the Sturm und Drang of a political meltdown, the situation was resolved by midday, when it became clear that the total number of provisional ballots in Ohio would be insufficient to reverse President Bush's clear lead in that critical state.

In the end, the election was concluded with dignity and grace, as befits a great democracy. Senator John Kerry, standing in Boston's historic Faneuil Hall, told his supporters, "In America, it is vital that every vote count, and that every vote be counted. But the outcome should be decided by voters, not a protracted legal process. I would not give up this fight if there was a chance that we would prevail." He went on to explain the insufficient number of provisional ballots that made an Ohio win impossible for his candidacy. "And therefore we cannot win this election," he concluded.

In an eloquent and moving address, Senator Kerry conceded the race and looked to the future. "We are required now to work together for the good of our country. In the days ahead, we must find common cause. We must join in common effort, without remorse or recrimination, without anger or rancor. America is in need of unity and longing for a larger measure of compassion. I hope President Bush will advance these values in the coming years. I pledge to do my part to try to bridge the partisan divide. I know this is a difficult time for my supporters, but I ask them, all of you, to join me in doing that."

Robbed twice of his opportunity to deliver a victory address on the night of a presidential election, President George W. Bush nonetheless spoke movingly as he addressed the nation and accepted the electoral victory. "Earlier today, Senator Kerry called with his congratulations," the president reported. "We had a really good phone call. He was very gracious. Senator Kerry waged a spirited campaign, and he and his supporters can be proud of their efforts. Laura and I wish Senator Kerry and Teresa and their whole family all our best wishes. America has spoken, and I am humbled by the trust and confidence of my fellow citizens."

In celebrating his victory, President Bush also looked to those who had supported his opponent. After reviewing his plans for the next four years, the President reached out to Kerry supporters. "Reaching these goals will require the broad support of Americans. So today I want to speak to every person who voted for my opponent. To make this nation stronger and better, I will need your support and I will work to earn it. I will do all I can do to deserve your trust. A new term is a new opportunity to reach out to the whole nation. We have one country, one Constitution, and one future that binds us."

Cynics on both sides dismissed the grace and formality of Wednesday's speeches as little more than the dance of political etiquette. There is something to that, of course, but we should never take lightly the fact that Americans—divided

though we are by a deep ideological divide—still respect the democratic process and accept the clear verdict of the electorate. When election results in some other nations are greeted by gunfire in the streets, a gracious concession and a humble acceptance on the part of political candidates are not to be dismissed lightly.

The 2004 presidential race defied expectations and surprised at least the majority of analysts in both parties. The conventional wisdom held that a large voter turnout spelled disaster for the Republican candidate, but a massive voter registration and mobilization effort on the part of the Bush campaign actually turned that maxim on its head. Furthermore, many Democratic analysts discounted the impact of values issues, and so failed to detect an enormous unrest among conservative Americans that would be transformed into a tidal wave of voting on Election Day.

One thing is now certain: Both parties now recognize the strategic, indeed determinative, impact of evangelical voters and others concerned primarily about moral and social issues. As the initial electoral data is compiled, the pattern is absolutely clear. The role of voters motivated to preserve marriage, restrain an activist judiciary, and protect unborn human life was decisive, massive, and indisputable.

If demography really is destiny, the demographic data revealed an ideological and sociological divide. As reporters John Harwood and Jacob M. Schlesinger reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, “White voters turned out to cast ballots for President Bush by double-digit margins. Hispanics backed Mr. Kerry by a similar margin, while blacks backed him by 10 to 1.” Beyond this, “regular churchgoers were rock-solid behind the Republican incumbent. So were married voters with children and Americans who own guns. Those who care most about the threat of terrorism and issues related to moral values voted overwhelmingly to give the 43rd president a second term.”

But, on the other hand, “voters who say they never attend church services sided just as strongly with the Democratic senator from Massachusetts. So did gay voters, single voters, union members, and those most concerned about health care, jobs and Iraq.”

With so much attention given to the electoral map with states divided into red [Republican] and blue [Democratic] designations, many wondered if these designations were more artificial than real. That question was put to rest on Tuesday, when the divisions between red and blue America were demonstrated to be even more extreme than previous elections had indicated. When the red and blue map is broken down at the county level, the nation is revealed to be a massive sea of red interrupted by isolated pockets of highly-populated blue.

Religious faith—and Christian faith in particular—is the most effective predictor of red and blue identity. As the Harwood and Schlesinger research indicated, churchgoers voted overwhelmingly for George W. Bush, with the rate of church attendance being the single most effective predictor of a vote for the Republican candidate.

The reverse was equally true, with secularists voting as a bloc for John Kerry. This clear electoral divide should remind us of sociologist Peter Berger’s research measuring the relative religiosity of world cultures. In his study, Berger found that the nation of India registered the highest level of religious fervor, while Sweden came in dead last, registering highest in terms of cultural secularism. Looking at America, Berger famously observed that we are “a nation of Indians ruled over by an elite of Swedes.” On Tuesday, the Indians asserted themselves politically in a powerful way, and sent the Swedes packing. This will serve as a wake up call for both parties, with Republicans now reminded that moral issues matter most to their most committed voters and with the Democrats wondering how they can ever build a bridge to a population now alienated by the party’s liberal secular values.

Added to all this is the realization that state measures defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman—most in the form of constitutional amendments—all passed by huge margins. Even as gay advocacy groups prepared to contest the provisions in court, Lambda Legal, one of the most active groups litigating for gay rights and same-sex marriage, warned gay couples to turn to the courts only if victory appeared to be a reasonable outcome. “We’ll discourage additional litigation if it runs a serious risk of resulting in a loss that could set us back many years,” said Lambda Legal attorney David Buckel.

International observers were almost apoplectic in the face of President Bush’s decisive win. One British observer noted that with moral issues playing such an important role in the election, Americans appeared closer to societies like Nigeria and Saudi Arabia than secular Europe. Europeans were shocked and puzzled at the role of “God, guns, and gays” in the 2004 U. S. election, demonstrating once again the reality of “American exceptionalism” that sets this nation apart

from the liberalism and secularism of its European allies.

Some American observers seemed to be as shocked as the Europeans. Michelle Cottle, writing in *The New Republic*, was flabbergasted that “Bush’s reelection was driven by a bunch of folks freaked out over the thought of gay marriage and stem-cell research.” In a twist of clearly unintended irony, “God save the republic,” was all she could say in response.

The election data revealed some more humorous aspects as well. Citizens of Alabama voted to allow the state government to promote the shrimp industry and Alaskan voters rejected a provision that would have outlawed hunters using doughnuts and pizza to lure bears out of the forest. Democracy lives on.

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