

COMMENT

Blues

by Hendrik Hertzberg

Here in the bluest borough of the bluest city of the bluest state in all our red-white-and-blue American Union, it has not been a happy week. A cocktail of emotions was being felt in these parts after last week's Presidential election, and the most potent ingredient was sadness. We've got the blues, and we've got 'em bad.

The grief that so many felt at Senator Kerry's defeat was quite unexpected, and profound enough that, for the moment at least, it held off bitterness and recrimination. On both sides, this was a campaign that vast numbers of people threw their hearts into. There was a huge volunteer outpouring for Kerry, from Bruce Springsteen and George Soros on high to the hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, who manned phone banks and travelled to "swing states" and wrote the first political checks of their lives. To be sure, something along these lines had happened before, in the campaigns of Adlai Stevenson, Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, and George McGovern on the Democratic side, and of Barry Goldwater on the Republican. But this time the scale was larger and the yearning was greater, because in contrast to the campaigns of 1952 and 1964 and 1968 and 1972, all of which had the quixotic quality of gallant but doomed struggles, the chance of victory in 2004 seemed real, especially as Election Day approached. And this time the stakes felt higher—higher than in any election for at least three decades and maybe longer.

During the campaign it was routinely remarked that the Democrats' fervor was rooted much more in anti-Bush than in pro-Kerry sentiments. That was certainly true at the beginning, when many primary voters calculated that a decorated war hero, even one from liberal Massachusetts, would be more "electable" than a volatile Vermont doctor. It was far less true at the end. Grave and formal, steady and decent, more emotionally accessible as Election Day approached, John Kerry wore well. He earned the respect of his supporters and had begun to earn their affection. (Perhaps that will protect him from the kind of scapegoating to which Al Gore was so relentlessly subjected.) All Kerry needed to become thoroughly presidential was the Presidency. His supporters risked heartbreak, and they found it.

Along with the sadness, there is puzzlement. Incumbents, especially in time of war, have a built-in advantage. But this incumbent had led the country into a war, the war in Iraq, that half the public had come to see as a mistake, and had led the country down what more than half the public saw, in pollster's shorthand, as "the wrong track." The election's outcome defies logic, and perhaps that is the point. The early analyses credited Bush's victory to religious conservatives, particularly those in the evangelical movement. In voting for Bush, as eighty per cent of them did, many of these formerly nonvoting white evangelicals are remaining true to their unworldliness. In voting for a party that wants to tax work rather than wealth, that scorns thrift, that sees the natural world not as a common inheritance but as an object of exploitation, and that equates economic inequality with economic vitality, they have voted against their own material (and, some might imagine, spiritual) well-being. The moral values that stirred them seem not to encompass botched wars or economic injustices or environmental depredations; rather, moral values are about sexual behavior and its various manifestations and outcomes, about family structures, and about a particularly demonstrative brand of religious piety. What was important to these voters, it appears, was not Bush's public record but what they conceived to be his private soul. He is a good Christian, so his policy failures are forgivable. He is a saved sinner, so the dissipations of his early and middle years are not

tokens of a weak character but testaments to the transformative power of his faith. He relies on God for guidance, so his intellectual laziness is not a danger.

What people on what might be called the cultural blue side, which includes many who voted for Bush, find deeply unsettling about him is not his religious faith—he is hardly the first devout President—but the way he speaks of making decisions with his gut, which, he has often suggested, takes its direction from God. In his second term, given the validation he received on Election Day, he is likely to be more confident—in himself, in his “instincts,” and in Almighty Gut. He will be less inclined than ever to listen to his earthly father, or to his earthly father’s earthly surrogates, such as Colin Powell.

Along with the sadness and the puzzlement, there is apprehension. Here in the big coastal cities, we have reason to fear for the immediate safety of our lives and our families—more reason, it must be said, than have the residents of the “heartland,” to which the per-capita bulk of “homeland security” resources, along with extra electoral votes, are distributed. It was deep-blue New York (which went three to one for Kerry) and deep-blue Washington, D.C. (nine to one Kerry), that were, and presumably remain, Al Qaeda’s targets of choice. In the heartland, it is claimed, some view the coastal cities as faintly un-American. The terrorists do not agree. They see us as the very essence—the heart, if you like—of America. And, difficult as it may be for some rural gun owners to appreciate, many of us sincerely believe that President Bush’s policies have put us in greater peril than we would be facing under a Kerry (or a Gore) Administration. There is apprehension that the well-documented failure to devote adequate resources to the protection of our cities, seaports, and airports will not be remedied. There is apprehension that the colossal incompetence and bad judgment—accompanied by ideological hubris, diplomatic arrogance, and an eagerness to ignore or suppress inconvenient evidence—that have tied up our military might in the knots of Iraq will, having been rewarded at the polls, continue. There is apprehension that the anti-Bush sentiments that are manifest throughout much of the world will now transmute into fully fledged anti-Americanism. The governments of our estranged European allies, led by reality-based statesmen, will do their best to accommodate the practical fact of a second Bush term. But these are, after all, democratic countries, and their publics may not be so patient or so sensible.

And there is apprehension about where this Administration will try to take our society. In his victory statement on Wednesday Bush spoke of “a new opportunity to reach out to the whole nation.” By Thursday, at his postelection press conference, this had been modified to “I’ll reach out to everyone who shares our goals.” One of those goals is to revamp the tax system in ways that would shift the burden further downward, including the permanent abolition of the inheritance tax. Another is to privatize part of Social Security, which by definition would mean a reduction in guaranteed benefits for future retirees. Achieving the first of these goals would impose the pitiless culture of winners and losers on the beginning of life; achieving the second would impose it on life’s end. Together they would constitute a fundamental revocation of an American social contract that was hammered out seventy years ago during the New Deal.

In Thursday’s *Times*, a front-page news analysis argued that “it is impossible to read President Bush’s reelection with larger Republican majorities in both houses of Congress as anything other than the clearest confirmation yet that this is a center-right country—divided yes, but with an undisputed majority united behind his leadership.” That is certainly true in institutional terms. But it is not true in terms of people, of actual human beings. Though the Republicans won nineteen of the thirty-four Senate seats that were up for grabs last Tuesday, for a gain of four, the number of voters who cast their ballots for Republican Senate candidates was 37.9 million, while 41.3 million voted for Democrats—almost exactly Bush’s popular-vote margin over Kerry. When the new Congress convenes in January, its fifty-five Republicans will be there on account of the

votes of 57.6 million people, while the forty-four Democrats and one independent will be there on account of the votes of 59.6 million people. As for the House, it is much harder to aggregate vote totals meaningfully, because so many seats are uncontested. But the Republicans' gain of four seats was due entirely to Tom DeLay's precedent-breaking re-gerrymandering of the Texas district lines.

The red-blue split has not changed since 2000. This is not a center-right country. It is a center-right country and a center-left country, but the center has not held. The winner-take-all aspects of our system have converged into a perfect storm that has given virtually all the political power to the right; conservative Republicans will now control the Presidency, the House of Representatives, and the Senate so firmly that the Supreme Court, which is also in conservative hands, has abruptly become the most moderate of the four centers of federal power. The system of checks and balances has broken down, but the country remains divided—right down the nonexistent, powerless middle.