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USA: “A REPUBLIC, IF YOU CAN KEEP IT”

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At the close of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia, a woman asked delegate Ben Franklin if we had a republic or a monarchy. Franklin is reported to have replied “a republic, if you can keep it.”

The United States is a republic -- a system of governance in which the supreme power resides in those citizens who are entitled to vote and is exercised by representatives elected by and responsible to the electorate. Additionally, the United States is a federation of sovereign states wherein, according to the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution, “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

The Constitution sets in place a tug of war between the sovereign states of the United States and the federal government over the exercise of power. The representatives elected by the people to offices in the federal government, notably Congress and the White House, play a very large role in determining the outcome of that tug of war. In that conflict the most important election is the presidential election. Thus the importance of this year’s national election in November. In the following we address that election in terms of the electoral system, the election process, political action committees, the candidates, and the overriding issue.

THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

There is no provision in the U.S. Constitution for political parties. They developed as a means for influencing elections and getting handpicked candidates elected. There are several political parties in the United States but only two have any significant influence on the national scene: Republicans and Democrats. This is especially the case regarding candidates for the presidency.

Years ago, political parties in “smoke-filled rooms” decided who the candidates would be for federal office including the president and vice-president who campaign, are elected, and serve as a team. Roughly 50 years ago, this system was replaced by a series of elections in different states, held at different times prior to the presidential election year. Those elections are called primaries. The first of these primaries takes place in January.

These primaries link a specific candidate to a set of delegates to the parties’ national conventions held in the summer. The number of delegates assigned to each state is determined by each political party. A candidate running in a primary in the State of Missouri, for example, who wins 60 percent of the votes cast in that primary claims 60 percent of the delegates to the national convention. There are 2,286 delegates to the Republican national convention this year; the Democratic national convention has 5,552 delegates. Increasingly over the years, primary campaigns involve televised “debates” that engage the party’s leading primary candidates.

A candidate who wins more than 50 percent of the delegates to the national convention is selected as the party’s presidential candidate. By custom, the presidential candidate selects the vice-presidential candidate to run on the same ticket in the national election that is held on the first Tuesday in November. A sitting president who has served one four-year term of office typically is nominated to run for a second term without opposition. The president and vice-president are limited to two terms or eight years in office. That change resulted from the four terms served by Franklin Roosevelt, which many thought too long for one man to control the reins of government.

A president who has been defeated for a second term is called “ex-president.” A president who won two terms is called “former president.” Jimmy Carter and George Bush I both are ex-presidents. Bill Clinton and George Bush II are former presidents.

THE ELECTION PROCESS

The national election in November decides who will serve as president and vice-president for the next four years beginning with the winners’ inauguration in the following January. One of the most important duties of the vice-president is to preside at sessions of the U.S. Senate and to break a tie in any vote cast on the floor of the Senate. There are 100 U.S. senators, two from each state. The vice-president assumes the office of the president whenever the president is unable to carry out his/her duties. For example, Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as president just a few hours after the assassination of John Kennedy in 1963.

The president’s office is much more powerful. He/she serves as commander-in-chief of the armed services, head of state, and chief executive. From the very founding of the republic, there were fears that given the powers attached to that office, the presidency might become a monarchy. Thus the system of checks and balances in which power in Washington is

divided between Congress, the White House, and the Supreme Court. Further, power in Washington is limited by the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution that assigns all powers to the several sovereign states except those that are specifically enumerated for the federal government, such as national defense.

George Washington was elected first president in part because his character and record of service gave strong indications that he would not become another British monarch like George III. Those very same fears persist today, reflecting (1) the vast size of the executive branch of government, with its regulatory powers, and the power of the president to bypass Congress by issuing executive orders and (2) the enormous taxing powers of Congress.

The founding fathers set up a presidential/vice-presidential election process based indirectly on the popular vote and directly on a system of electors in which each state is assigned one elector for each its two U.S. senators and one for each of the persons representing that state in the U.S. House of Representatives. In the 2008 election there were 538 electors, with 270 needed to win the election. California, for example, had 54 electoral votes in 2008; Alaska had 3. The presidential/vice-presidential candidates who win the popular vote in any given state are awarded all of the electors for that state. Thus, the national election is a winner-take-all election.

This system is designed to dilute the influence of the states with large populations by assigning at least three electors to every state, large or small. Candidates, for that reason, are encouraged to campaign in all 50 states. Today, of course, campaigning is done quite easily via television and other forms of electronic communication. In 2000, Albert Gore got 543,895 more popular votes than George Bush, but Bush won the election with 271 electoral votes, once a very contentious election in Florida involving 25 electoral votes was settled.

A citizen must be at least 18 years of age to register. By and large votes are cast on election day by registered voters reporting to their assigned voting place, often a public school or fire department station. Voters who are absent from their residence on election day are encouraged to vote beforehand by absentee ballot. Active duty military personnel serving overseas are allowed to vote in this manner provided they are registered to vote. Noncitizens are not allowed to vote, nor are convicted felons though in some states efforts are being made to allow felons to vote. The issue of election fraud comes up every election year with Republicans in general backing state laws that require a state-issued photo ID to vote and Democrats opposing.

POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEES (PACs)

Political action committees are established in general to support a political candidate or influence public legislation. The PACs that support a political candidate are not under the direct supervision of that candidate. Even so, their advocacy for a political candidate is

clear and obvious. They carry out their support principally through television advertising that often is negative on grounds that attacking an opponent is more effective than supporting an ally. Because their advertising makes use of half-truths, statements taken out of context, and outright lies, practices that are protected as free speech, PACs often come under attack from advocates of clean government. Their influence is the greater as their financial resources grow.

Super PACs are joined at the hip to big government. They flourish as government gets bigger because with bigger government the payoffs for those who support the winning candidate get bigger. Some powerful interests are known to support super PACs on both sides of the political aisle to assure their rightful place in the queue lining up for political favors: “to the victor, go the spoils.”

A 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision freed PACs of any limit on spending because any such limit, the Court ruled, would infringe on their First Amendment rights. That decision gave birth to what are called super PACs that raise huge sums of monies. To date in 2012, super PACs have raised more than \$107 million. One super PAC just recently received a \$1 million contribution from a prominent movie actor. Of the top ten super PACs in terms of money raised, four are linked to labor unions.

The PACs’ negative advertising often has the effect of unsettling a candidate who has been targeted and getting that candidate away from his/her message in order to defend him/herself from the charges in the advertising. Thus, candidates are forced to use their own valuable time, staff, and financial resources to respond to an attack ad that very likely contains charges or claims that are not true. The deep pockets of the super PACs allow them to create new attack ads on short notice and to get them on the air so that the candidate under attack is forced once again to use his/her time, staff, and financial resources to refute a new set of charges or claims.

Along with their loosely affiliated PACs, both Republican and Democratic presidential campaigns have learned the premise of the German Nazi propaganda machine: repeat a lie often enough and it becomes accepted as the truth.

THE CANDIDATES

Much is known about the two principal candidates for the presidency of the United States, though many complain that little is known of Obama’s early years and little of Romney’s personal wealth.

Barack Obama was born of a white mother who died in 1995 and a black father who abandoned him. His white grandparents played an important role in his upbringing. He has two young daughters. His mother-in-law lives in the White House and serves in the

capacity of a nanny. Prior to his election as president in 2008, he served in the U.S. Senate and the Illinois state legislature.

He claims to be Christian but sometimes is identified by his adversaries as Muslim. He rarely is seen at a public worship service.

Obama has strong ties to the Chicago Democratic machine: most prominently with Valerie Jarrett, David Axelrod, Rahm Emanuel, and Bill Daley. His wife Michelle is actively engaged in public/political affairs. Jarrett, Axelrod, along with Barack and his wife, have strong ties to the University of Chicago. Nothing characterizes Democratic machine politics in Chicago more accurately than the expression “if they bring a knife to the fight, we bring a gun.” Obama actually used those very words in a June 2008 fundraiser leading up to the national election that opened the door to the White House.

His political philosophy seems to be communitarianism grounded in the work and writings of Saul Alinsky, a community organizer with considerable experience and positive public image in Chicago. A few of his critics argue angrily that he is a Marxist.

Obama’s base constituency includes young people, blacks, Hispanics, pro-choice women, gays and lesbians, and gun control advocates. In 2012, Obama has declared his support for same-sex marriage, gays and lesbians serving openly in the military, and nonenforcement of certain federal laws applying to illegal aliens. He has stonewalled the issue of “walking” guns to Mexican drug cartels and national security leaks.

Though his public speeches are scripted and he depends heavily on a teleprompter, Obama has considerable oratorical skills. Depending on his audience, Obama’s speaking style ranges from cool and collected to repetitive and shrill.

His Democratic surrogates, including Vice-President Biden, repeatedly attack Romney for being a man of wealth and therefore out of touch with the common man.

He enjoys golf and basketball and is often seen publicly golfing or watching a basketball game.

There is some doubt regarding Obama’s eligibility to serve as president based on questions regarding the authenticity of his birth certificate (only a person born in the United States is eligible to serve as president). This issue is still very much alive today.

His critics claim that very little is known about his past, especially his years in college and later in law school. Those critics wonder why, given his personal charm, Obama seems to have no friends from those years, and no record regarding who served in his wedding party. Some of his harshest critics accuse him of establishing an imperial presidency.

If one word captures Obama's candidacy it is *control*. Control of the institutions and organizations that condition human behavior and human development.

Mitt Romney is the son of George Romney, a prominent Republican who served as governor of Michigan. At age 65, he is 14 years older than Obama.

Mitt has five adult sons. His wife is an active campaigner for Romney and is widely admired for her courage in dealing with her own multiple sclerosis affliction.

Mitt is a Mormon that, unlike Obama's Christianity, has not been questioned even by his most severe critics. However, some fundamentalist Christians question the claim that Mormonism is a Christian religion and therefore turn away from his candidacy.

Romney's political philosophy is individualism though not of the libertarian variety. He has been personally successful in business which to some recommends him for the presidency on grounds that he knows how to create jobs, and to others disqualifies him on grounds that his business specialized in advising and re-structuring other American businesses that in turn outsourced American jobs to improve their bottom lines.

Romney's chief constituency is white men, active-duty and retired military personnel, business persons, and supporters of the Second Amendment right to bear arms. His critics have complained that with the exception of the last two years he has not been forthcoming with regard to his income tax returns. They hint that he has been hiding his wealth in a Swiss bank account and the Cayman Islands.

His public speaking style is decidedly not charismatic though he can be effective in public debates. There is none of the attack-dog style and content in Romney that sometimes one finds in Obama.

In defending the wealthy against charges that they are not paying their "fair share," Romney often asserts that as investors and venture capitalists they are the ones taking risks and creating jobs and Obama just does not understand that process. At times Romney accuses Obama of dividing the country by playing on the antipathy of the poor and middle class toward the wealthy as evidenced by his class warfare rhetoric.

Both Obama and Romney say that they support tax reform. Obama would like to see higher tax rates on the rich included in that reform. Romney wants to lower rates and broaden the tax base by closing loopholes in order to increase tax revenues.

Romney is not known for a special interest or participation in traditional sports though he does jet ski.

Romney does not carry the same political baggage that Obama does because he has no ties to any machine politics. In that regard, he is "squeaky clean." As governor of

Massachusetts 2002-2006, Romney took no salary. He did not run for re-election in a state that is staunchly Democratic. Earlier on, he stepped in as president of the 2002 Winter Olympic games in Salt Lake City to rescue the organization and put in on a sound financial footing. For three years in the role of president of those games, Romney took no salary. Before that, he donated his entire very substantial inheritance to Brigham Young University.

If a single word characterizes Romney's candidacy it is *freedom*. Freedom of individuals to conduct their affairs and direct their own personal development free of the overreaching control of government agencies.

THE OVERRIDING ISSUE

There are many controversial issues being addressed in the public discourse this election cycle including same-sex marriage, union rights, border security, exercise of military power, global warming, loan relief for college students, cybercrime/cyberwarfare, home foreclosures, infrastructure, intelligence leaks, amnesty for illegal aliens, voter fraud/suppression, terrorism, space exploration, and the like. But the overriding issues are the role and scope of the federal government, issues that go back to the founding fathers.

Smaller government and larger government depend on the same political conditions in Washington: one party must control the White House and both houses of Congress. Otherwise stalemate likely results. The Constitutional provision of checks and balances assures that stalemate happens when the executive and legislative branches are divided across party lines. This was intentional on the part of the founding fathers who as stated earlier were fearful that the president would become a monarch. Stalemate coupled with the Tenth Amendment protects the various sovereign states from an overreaching federal government.

The stalemate since the 2010 election reflects a House of Representatives dominated by the Republican Party and a Senate and White House controlled by the Democratic Party. The coming national election will determine if stalemate continues or not.

While Washington is bogged down in stalemate, two major domestic issues must be addressed: (1) economic recovery that most importantly calls for a reduction of the jobless rate well below the current 8.2 percent; (2) an economy in which both the private sector and the public sector for years have operated on indebtedness.

As to the first problem, the Republicans want to accelerate recovery by leaning heavily on the private sector whereas the Democrats want to lean heavily on the public sector.

As to the second problem, private sector debt is being addressed through the market system in which personal indebtedness is handled through reduce private sector (chiefly

consumer) spending with any savings achieved used to reduce personal debt. In the extreme, private sector economic agents turn to the default and bankruptcy options. A total of 1,350,000 Americans filed for personal bankruptcy in 2011. At the same time, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation reported that 92 banks failed.

In sharp contrast, public sector debt continues to grow because the federal government spends much more than it collects in tax revenues. Much of this growth has occurred in the main entitlement programs – Medicare (for persons 65 and older), Medicaid (for poor persons of all ages), and Social Security retirement. There is virtual unanimous agreement in Washington that nothing can be done with regard to deficits and mounting public debt if nothing is done to rein in entitlement programs. Advocates of those programs, both in Washington and across the country, are powerful enough to assure that these programs will not be reined in. Thus, the United States is in the grips of an entitlement/debt crisis that cannot be resolved by a stalemated Washington.

The Democrats' solution to the public debt problem is higher taxes; the Republicans' solution is cuts in spending. The November election will help resolve that issue provided the same party dominates the White House and both houses of Congress. Democrats know that the Bush tax cuts will expire in January and will automatically trigger the higher taxes they advocate, knowing as they do that nearly one-half of all persons filing federal income tax returns pay zero taxes. Since they pay no taxes those persons do not object to the higher taxes that others must pay. The Democrats do not have to win complete control in Washington for that to happen. However, the automatic tax increases in 2013 likely will stall the economic recovery. There is, in other words, a price to pay for the Democrats' solution.

In contrast, Republicans need complete control in order to rein in public spending and reduce the deficit. Such cuts, however, will impact the millions of persons dependent on federal entitlement programs who form an important part of the Democrats' constituent base who can resist but not prevail with Republicans in control. If successful, the Republicans run into the same problems as the tax-raising Democrats: deep spending cuts will stall economic recovery.

There is no painless solution to the current fiscal crisis. Both parties know this but covet partisan control more than fiscal responsibility. So it is necessary to divert the attention of the electorate to personal issues and personal attacks that are based on the premise that anything that is not true but is repeated often enough becomes accepted as true by an electorate that is tired of the partisan bickering and back stabbing,

What Washington and the United States need are political leaders who are willing to put country before personal ambition, who are willing to tell the American people the truth about the fiscal crisis. They must be willing to practice virtues widely affirmed by

American politicians and their entourage of advisers, consultants, and supporters: courage, integrity, and honesty. Sadly, those virtues are not the driving forces behind presidential campaigns.

In their place we have raw ambition, hypocrisy, and outright lying that too often are successful in propelling persons into office and keeping them there for years. Never mind the long-term consequences of raw ambition, hypocrisy, and lying – a cynical America, deprived of hope, increasingly divided and more difficult to govern.

This year's presidential election raises the very same questions addressed in the Constitutional Convention regarding the exercise of power. Is America to have a federal government so powerful that it can impose taxes on the citizenry for not complying with a morally repugnant federal mandate, as ruled in June by the Supreme Court in the Obamacare case, and can trample on religious liberty by forcing religious institutions to provide services they find morally repulsive? Is this how a republic exercises power? Or is this how a monarchy works?

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