

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

The themes of this Newsletter are usually about religion and religious education. However, in the United States of America it is difficult to draw a line between religion and politics. As the first essay argues, the United States of America has always been a religious rather than a political unity and this arrangement is threatening to become unraveled. Elections in the United States are variations on an evangelical revival. Historians call certain eras Awakenings which is misleading because the religious fervor never ceases, more evident now when the cycle of elections is uninterrupted.

The political right has some awareness that their advocacies are religious in nature (most of the “social” issues) and they are not shy to call in God to validate their mission and certify their policies. They still subscribe to Bishop Lawrence’s nineteenth century judgment that riches are a sign of God’s blessing. Mitt Romney’s money will probably not be an obstacle to his being elected president. His bigger problem is the Mormon religion. More than a third of the people say that they are not inclined (won’t?) to vote for a Mormon. That is about the same as what polls showed in the 1960s about voting for an African American and in the 1920s for Catholics. People say in interviews what they take to be acceptable; it is no longer respectable to be overtly racist or anti-Catholic. Romney will need to convince a lot of people that his religion should not be an obstacle to his election and that in fact Mormonism can lay claim to be the most American of religions.

Not only does the political left not recognize the religiousness of the country; it ridicules or dismisses religion. It invokes a doctrine called the separation of church and state, European language which has never been relevant in the United States where there are fifty states and hundreds of religious groups, few of which come in the form of churches. The authors of the U.S. Constitution avoided the language of church and state. Thomas Jefferson introduced it in an 1801 letter. Ironically, Jefferson’s letter was about the federal government’s lack of jurisdiction on religious matters. The language surfaced in the 1880s and was introduced into law by the Supreme Court in the 1940s. Discussions of church and state are a distraction from examining the big role of religion in public life.

People who dismiss religion are susceptible to being swept up by religious fervor while not recognizing what is happening. The support of Barack Obama in 2007-08 was more a religious than a political movement. Despite a continuing ingrained racism, the country could still elect a black preacher, a well educated and highly rational African American. However, President Obama immediately disappointed his flock because he had to engage in politics, the art of compromise, and there were few politicians left to negotiate with. History may judge him more kindly than do present commentators for having achieved a few things in the face of overwhelming odds.

UNIONS WITHOUT UNITY

By Gabriel Moran

The troubles of the European Union should be a warning sign to the United States of America. "European Union" was a softer claim than what was really sought, namely, the United States of Europe. Some authors in fact used this latter name but most people realized that a United States of Europe, modeled on the United States of America, was not feasible. The launching of the euro as a common currency of a European Union was a premature step presupposing a union of states that did not exist.

The issuing of currencies had previously been the work of states that had governments to back the currency and political power of a treasury to protect the currency in hard economic times. The euro seemed to be working reasonably well but as soon as several of the states got into financial trouble there was no authority to work through the problems. Other states are reluctant to give aid to a state that they feel has been irresponsible. They are understandably concerned about their own economies and would prefer to see the rogue states cannibalize themselves.

The lesson for the United States of America is clear but frightening to contemplate. The United States Constitution contained a fatal flaw in trying to create a nation-state that was misnamed the "United States of America." There has never been a political union of the United States of America. A federation of states has functioned with that name. A union of American states would be desirable; obviously such a union of states would not itself be a state. The Organization of American States might be a precursor of such a union.. But it is not likely to bring about an American Union while one of the countries calls itself the United States of America.

The Declaration of Independence was actually entitled "The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen united States of America." There was no United States; there were thirteen united States. The thirteen colonies announced that "these united colonies are of right ought to be free and independent states." A confederation of those states successfully prosecuted a war. For the subsequent Constitution to have created a national union it would have had to create a national government. There were proposals at the time, for example, by George Mason, to establish a truly national government. Instead, the Constitution simply perpetuated a "federal" government with powers delegated to it by the (free and independent) states.

From the beginning, the term federal has been confusing. The people who are constantly attacking Washington are the people who actually believe in a federal government. The Tea Partiers demand that power be taken away from the federal government, while admitting that, of course, we need a federal government for a few routine activities. Giving the federal government less power would not cure anything and might even worsen its stumbling. The question that has to be asked is where the power of the people to govern themselves should be situated. Does anyone seriously think that what goes on in Albany, Sacramento, or Austin is a serious answer? We need a national government to compete and cooperate with other nation-states but we do not have one.

The name United States of America is composed of four words, none of which is accurate. "United" was an announcement of what was hoped for but did not exist. "States" could not exist if there was to be one nation-state. "Of" misconstrued what supposedly was to be united. And "America" was a term that already referred to a continent and a quasi-religious dream. An alternative would be to call the country "The Uniting States in America." That is not a very felicitous phrase but it would have the advantage of retaining the shortened name of "USA." That might be as big a step as the country could now take. What would be covered over by USA is that the uniting can proceed only by the dissolving of the states.

USA as the name of the country already has historical and emotional meaning. What the initials stand for could be mostly put aside. It would be like the International House of Pancakes which was popularly called IHOP and is now officially named IHOP. Or perhaps a more serious analogy would be HSBC as the name of a powerful bank with hundreds of branches in the United States. You will look far and long in their advertising to find what the initials stand for (Hong Kong and Singapore Banking Corporation), the full name not being good for advertising its business in the United States.

If the United States of America has essentially the same problem as a United States of Europe, how come it took only a few decades for the latter to become obvious? The United States of America cleverly exploited the emotional meaning of the term America. Although "America" is much younger than "Europe," it was from the moment of its coining a name for spiritual and material riches. People identified with "America" in a way that Europeans did not identify with "Europe." The European states were nations that had long histories and provided identity to people. A French man or woman does not think "I am above all a European; I also happen to be French." (only Bernard Henri Levy seems to be an exception). In contrast, the people who called themselves American were fleeing from a nation-state and were looking for a new identity as an American.

A parallel can be seen in the fragile unity of the United Kingdom which has existed since 1707. There has been enough geography and history to hold together a UK but probably not for much longer as "devolution" proceeds. Does any Scotsman wake up in the morning and say "I am proud to be a United Kingdomer?" Members of the royal family might feel that way but it is difficult to imagine anyone else's identity being tied to a union of kingdoms. When a treaty of U.K. disunion is signed, there will not be many tears shed in Scotland.

In the metaphor that was coined in the early twentieth century but was already implied in the eighteenth, "American" was a melting of national identities into something new. With open immigration and seemingly endless resources, a nation-state that was constructed from a melting of other nationalities worked reasonably well. While the USA was still establishing its place among the nations of the world, other nations could be sympathetic to what it was trying to create. The USA was always a violent place but it did not have an interest in conquering other nation-states. Instead, it mostly stole its land from others in America: native peoples, Canadians, Mexicans, Columbians and others. The logic was

simple: Americans have a right to America. As a motley gathering of formerly poor people who were now fairly rich, the country could gain a reputation for generosity.

The country barely survived an internecine war after South Carolina declared that it was “resuming its free and independent status among the nations.” Until that war “United States” usually took a plural verb, an implicit acknowledgment that there were states united for some common purposes but no union of states. Since that war “United States” has taken a singular verb but the union has been based on the religious dream of America not a political union of diverse elements with competing interests.

The country survived other crises, such as the great depression of the 1930s. The cannibalizing that immediately set in was turned back by the emergence of a national leader, Franklin Roosevelt. FDR engaged in swift-moving national actions for which he often did not have constitutional (that is, federal) power. When the Supreme Court understandably tried to stop him, his response was to try to overwhelm the Court by increasing the size of the Court. He brilliantly enacted a piece of national legislation called “social security.” It has been one of the most popular and economically stable pieces of legislation in the history of the country. Without Social Security the present economic disasters would be unimaginably worse. The far right does not accept a national government or the nation. Like its political ally, Fox News, the far right “believe in America” (which also happens to be Mitt Romney’s campaign slogan).

The cannibalizing of the country has now set in with a vengeance. The demand to cut the budget and national investments is what most economists agree is the worst policy imaginable. Why then the demand? Here is where Germany’s relation to Greece is instructive for the USA. The (free and independent) states of the USA, while being starved of government services, are competing with each other for jobs when the need is for national policies so that the country could compete against other nations. Jennifer Granholm, former governor of Michigan, insightfully describes in a new book how states get job growth by enticing corporations into their states from other states. The result for the country is a net loss but a state – say Texas – can claim to succeed at “creating jobs.”

Is there any hope for a USA? The country is in a state of paralysis but it is not in imminent danger of dissolving (too big to fail). There will probably have to be a much worse crisis before the country can consider the radical changes that are needed. Barack Obama has tried to play the role of FDR but he does not seem suited for the role, and the concentrations of wealth are much greater today. Obama would be an invaluable contributor to a national think tank. A new FDR is unlikely. No executive today could execute needed political decisions for a contentious three hundred eight million people who call themselves the Americans and who are fed up with the federal government.

One thing that the country has going for it – almost the only thing – is that all the people believe in America. The attachment to “America” has the danger of creating a pseudo-patriotism in which people love a myth about the country instead of the country. “America” has always been a name for two kinds of wealth that tend to be opposed: spiritual and material. The material riches have probably always been the primary

motivation; individuals in the United States have, with the complicity of the federal government, become fabulously rich. Nevertheless, there are still people within the United States and in other countries for whom “America” is the name of the hope for a fully human life. That ideal might be enough to sustain the transition of the USA to a nation-state with a national government, a process that would take decades.

At present, however, the country seems mainly intent on destroying itself. Each of the individuals who are running for president is running on a platform of attacking the federal government. That would make sense if he or she were proposing to create a national government. Instead, they propose to return power to the people (a phrase that has moved from the far left to the far right in half a century). But the people need a government; a nation-state needs a national government. The defensive Democrats seem as incapable as the Republicans of imagining what that transition might entail.

A first step of national reform would be to dissolve the Electoral College. There is actually a widespread support for such a move on the mistaken belief that it would simply eliminate an eighteenth-century mechanism that has no effect today. Actually, the Electoral College determines how presidential elections are held. Campaigns are plotted state by state, and politicians spend ridiculous amounts of time in some states and almost no time in other states. Without the Electoral College, one vote would count as one wherever you voted. Presidential campaigns might be less expensively run by television and the internet with weekly debates on very specific topics. If politicians wanted to shake some hands they could go to where concentrations of people are which might not be in Iowa, New Hampshire or South Carolina

The uniting of the USA should not ultimately be a union composed of states but of cities and towns organized by regions. The fifty states could remain as Senate districts until better districts emerge. There is a need for an arm of government that resists passing pressures. The current Senate has a few thoughtful people but the body is mostly composed of lobbyists for their state. The USA needs a small number of regions to partner with a national government. There could be as few as four like the continental time zones or as many as a dozen similar to appellate court divisions. For historical and cultural reasons, there would probably be regions such as northeast, upper midwest, west coast, southeast and southwest. By stretching the term region, Alaska, Hawaii and Texas could be another region.

There would remain some competition among regions which would have to be overseen by a strong central government. Geographically it would be best to locate a central government toward the center of the USA, perhaps near Lebanon Kansas or in a real city such as Saint Louis. Washington D.C., as a museum of war monuments, could compete with Disneyland for the tourist trade. One of the country’s many billionaires would no doubt be interested in the White House as prime real estate, a sale which would fund the national government’s less lavish digs in the midwest. The national government’s reconstituted Congress could then debate issues that pertain to the survival and health of the nation, including its place among the nations of the world. A president of the USA could actually be elected by the vote of the people.

MEANT TO UNITE, SEEMS TO BE RENDING

By Steven Erlanger

The euro was a political project meant to unite Europe after the Soviet collapse in a sphere of collective prosperity that would lead to greater federalism. Instead the euro seems to be pulling Europe apart. The assumptions of 60 years suddenly seem hollow, and the road ahead is unclear, as if the GPS system has gone out of whack.

On the surface, the European Union is an enormous success. It has nearly 500 million citizens and a gross domestic product of more than \$17 trillion, larger than the United States and more than three times China's or Japan's. It is the United States' largest trading partner by far, and together the two economies account for roughly half of the world's domestic product and nearly a third of its trade.

But Europe is in economic and demographic decline as Asia is arising. The European Union's share of global trade is steadily dropping, especially in exports. Its aging population is placing huge strains on generous social welfare and pension programs and pumping up sovereign debt in an extended period of flat growth. The current crisis over the euro has deep roots in the imbalances between north and south, rich and poor, export-led and service-driven economies, tied together by a currency but few rules, and those rarely enforced.

A European Union of 15 nations seemed coherent and manageable; the Europe of 27, soon to be 28, is almost ungovernable, even by a professional bureaucracy with little connection to voters and whose decisions cause increasing resentment, summarized in the "democratic deficit" that the European Union suffers.

The historical ironies are considerable. Germany, for example, divided and in ruins after the war it fought to dominate Europe, is reunited and dominating Europe now, but without arms and with deep reluctance. Nothing gets done in the European Union without German agreement, commitment and money. But in Chancellor Angela Merkel, Germany has a leader who is reactive and uninspiring, while her coalition partners, the Free Democrats, are slumping into irrelevance. Her eye is on Germany's internal politics, its loose federalism and coalition government, a major contrast to France's centralized, nearly monarchical state.

France once dominated the European Union, but Paris has now fallen behind booming Germany, one reason that François Mitterrand feared German reunification. Anxious about its own debt, banks and credit rating, France is having a hard time dragging Berlin along. At the same time, the countries of Eastern Europe are more vibrant economically than many of their western partners. They share much of the German, Dutch and Finnish view about strict fiscal discipline and are reluctant to join a shaky euro and become responsible for the failure of others.

Britain, always an outlier in the European Union, looks wise to reject the euro, and the mood now is probably more anti-European than even in the days of Margaret Thatcher.

The fundamental changes needed to cope with the euro crisis – particularly the historical step of creating a common treasury – would require a redrawing of the basic treaties, which would require the approval of the voters.

But Europe is unpopular, a local metaphor for globalization, faceless and interfering. It is by no means certain that the voters are ready to leap into a new world of economic integration. Even if they prove to be, the new treaty will be complex and take years to draft even before being put to the electorate for ratification, if there is ratification. It is easy to say that the answer is “more Europe,” not less. That can seem self-evident to Eurocrats and the political elite. But “more Europe” may not be what voters want.

“The only thing that can save the euro in its current form can’t and shouldn’t be done without democratic debate and support,” said Simon Tilford, chief economist for the Center for European Reform, a research institution. “You need to bring the electorate with you,” he said. Of course, he acknowledged, a real democratic debate “could exacerbate the crisis.” That may be the largest historical irony of all.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE REPUBLICAN PARTY?

By Timothy Noah

The story begins at the Eisenhower era’s end. Writing in 1961 about the return of “action and political dialogue to the college campus,” the young activist Tom Hayden cited three examples. The first was the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society (which Hayden helped found), remembered today as a primary vehicle for campus protest against the Vietnam War. The second was the right-wing Young Americans for Freedom, which William Buckley founded, remembered today for advancing the careers of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan.

The Third was *Advance*, a magazine published by two Harvard undergraduates, Bruce Chapman and George Gilder. Today no one remembers *Advance*. Gilder and Chapman are familiar names but they are known mainly as right wingers. Back then they were Rockefeller Republicans who played a significant role in rallying Republican support for the civil rights movement. When the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964 it had proportionally greater support among Republicans than among Democrats who had to fend off opposition from Southern segregationists. But Goldwater, the party’s “presumptive presidential nominee,” voted against the bill.

The Goldwater forces rolled over the moderates that year, with a fervor that their Tea Party legatees would find difficult to match. At the Republicans California state convention, moderates barely managed to block a platform resolution to “send Negroes back to Africa.” However extreme the conspiracy-minded Glenn Beck may seem, he was outdone by Robert Welch, the conspiracy-minded founder of the John Birch Society.

Goldwater's landslide defeat by Lyndon Johnson, which also reduced the number of Republicans in the House to its lowest level in 30 years, actually strengthened the leverage of Rockefeller moderates. In the next few years, liberal Republicans came to the fore, including John Lindsay who was elected mayor of New York, Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, who became the first popularly elected African American senator, George H.W. Bush, who won a House seat in his adopted Texas, and George Romney, who briefly posed a threat to Richard Nixon's presidential ambitions. A 1966 poll found Romney leading the Republican field and defeating Johnson 54-46 until he blew it all by attributing his initially favorable view of the Vietnam War to "brainwashing" from generals and diplomats. Romney was the G.O.P. moderates' last and best chance to elect one of their own to the presidency.

Today nearly all political centrists are Democrats. And with the rise of the Tea Party, Republicans are experiencing another 1964 moment. More than a few Tea Partiers date their first political experience to the Goldwater campaign. But there are important differences between the two movements. For one, the Tea Party has managed to win elections and thereby attain some power at the national and state level.

For another, the Tea Party's anti-government ideology is tempered by quiet support for Social Security and Medicare. That's because the activists themselves tend to be middle-aged or older. Tea Partiers aren't opposed to government benefits; rather, they are opposed to "unearned" government benefits, which in practice ends up meaning any benefits extended to African Americans, Latinos, immigrants (especially undocumented ones) and the young.

A poll of South Dakota Tea Party supporters found that 83 percent opposed any Social Security cuts, 78 percent opposed any cuts to Medicare prescription-drug coverage, and 79 percent opposed cuts in reimbursements to physicians and hospitals. The small government that Tea Partiers favor is one where I get mine and most others don't get much at all. The problem for anyone seeking to lower the budget deficit is that it's the "earned benefits" like Social Security and Medicare that are mainly responsible for runaway government spending.

On some level, then, the Tea Party is a product of the very welfare-statism that the hard right fought to smother in 1964 and so many Tea Partiers profess to loathe today. U.S. taxpayers subsidize their incomes and well-being, and hence give them the time and capacity to organize protests and Tea Party groups. Government supplies the leisure that makes possible fervid and angry opposition to government. The Democrats built this Rube Goldberg structure, but they couldn't have done it without help from "moderate Republicans." In at least that sense the legacy of moderate Republicans lives on.

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