



An Admirable Folly

From afar, America's presidential contests often look more like playground antics than a shining example of democracy. But looks can be deceiving.

BY DENIS MACSHANE

EVERY FOUR YEARS, WHEN THE BRITISH AND other Europeans watch with shock, awe, and incomprehension the presidential contest that convulses the United States, I'm reminded of President Julius Nyerere's joking retort decades ago to American visitors who criticized his one-party state in Tanzania. The United States is a one-party state too, he would say, but since America is so big, it takes two parties to do the job. Nyerere saw no real difference between America's two major politi-

cal parties and nothing much at stake in its elections, a view typical of the mid-20th-century socialist tradition he absorbed as a student in England and one that still informs views of American politics from across the Atlantic.

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Because European politics are defined by an almost religious divide between socialist and conservative parties, we can look down our noses at the contest between Republicans and Democrats as the equivalent of a squabble over whether you take your tea with sugar or lemon. But this narcissism of small differences makes for hugely enjoyable elections, as personality appears utterly to dominate, and these contests are irresistible to the European news media. As a politician passionate about

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making the idea of Europe work, it causes me some dismay that British coverage of politics in Germany or France or Spain is picayune by comparison.

The fabled British-Canadian press proprietor and politician Lord Beaverbrook insisted that all politics should be reported in terms of human interest, and there is nothing of greater human interest than the character of an American president. What novelist would have pitched a black freshman senator against a septuagenarian war hero? Europe is agog at the prospect of an Obama presidency, and there are no politicians in Europe who have John McCain's experience as a warrior and courageous prisoner of war. This is larger-than-life Hollywood politics for Europeans, whose politicians are machine professionals who crawl their way up the greasy pole of power.

Yet in their obsession with personality—the actor Ronald Reagan versus the moralizing Jimmy Carter, or the 1968-generation Bill Clinton versus the preppy George H. W. Bush—Europeans are blind to the fact that the American system is far more likely to produce dramatic change. The shift from the Jim Crow America of the early 1950s to the civil rights America bequeathed by Lyndon Johnson at the end of the 1960s was one of the biggest revolutions in relations between peoples in world

history. The gap between the détenteist foreign policy of the first President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker and the confrontationist foreign policy of Bush's son and Vice President Dick Cheney a handful of years later represents a far bigger distance between two approaches to international affairs than anything seen in Europe during the same period.

But foreign affairs do not loom nearly as large in America as they do in Europe. With Germany dependent on Russian gas and oil supplies, and Poland and the Baltic states unable to forget the Soviet occupation of their lands, European elections often turn on foreign issues. In 2004, the Socialist Party in Spain defeated the ruling Spanish conservatives led by José María Aznar because the latter was seen as a

puppet of Washington who sent Spanish troops to die in an unpopular war in Iraq. For more than a decade before Tony Blair assumed its leadership in 1994, Britain's Labor Party was seen as unelectable because it was hostile to European Union membership. Today, EU issues influence all national elections on the eastern side of the Atlantic to an extent unimaginable in the United States. In Britain, the Labor Party likes to present the oppositionist Conservatives as isolationist and anti-European, while right-wing parties present Labor as being too close to Europe and too willing to trade British sovereignty. In the United States, no matter what the rhetoric used to win the nomination, and despite the barrage of mutual accusations that so excites foreign-policy specialists, the question of America's international relations or foreign-policy perspectives does not sway many voters.

The key difference, however, remains that Europeans elect *politicians* to run their nations, while Americans elect *a* politician. Even the most dominant political leaders in Europe—the Margaret Thatchers and Tony Blairs—can only do what their parliaments allow, and must regularly appear before and answer pointed questions from their fellow parliamentarians. In the United States, the chief executive rarely ventures to

Capitol Hill except in magisterial passage to deliver his State of the Union speech, which rapt legislators are expected to receive with no sound but respectful applause.

The singularity of the American system—one vote for one person to head the nation—contrasts with the European tradition of one vote for one person who then with other parliamentarians decides who will run the country. It frequently happens that one prime minister can succeed another without a general election, as Gordon Brown did in replacing Tony Blair. The only exception to the European norm is France, with its relatively powerful president elected in a national vote, but even in France a presidency that amounted to an elected monarchy in the days of Charles de Gaulle and François Mitterrand is in the process of being reshaped into one more constrained and dependent on support in France's parliament.

In Europe, voters choose a team of political person-

alities in the knowledge that the person who will be finance or defense or interior minister will be as important as the head of government. American presidents, by contrast, are virtually unchallengeable for four years. Every head of government in Europe has to deal with a team of ministers who have their own power base because they have been elected and usually are party grandees. Thus, European voters know not just who will be their president or chancellor or prime minister, but who is likely to be foreign or finance minister. In America, voters decide on a single individual who will lead the nation and, as commander in chief, decide when to wage war. Cabinet members are mostly bit players, usually lacking the kind of independent authority European ministers possess.

American candidates seeking a presidential nomination have to promise the passionate and the angry in their political family that they will have what they want: an end to war, lower taxes, health care reform,



Tony Blair savors his last round of Prime Minister's Questions in parliament in June 2007 as Gordon Brown (right), his now-unpopular successor, looks on. The thrust and parry of parliamentary politics produces seasoned politicians but does not guarantee that they will be effective national leaders.

and so on. Once the candidate is past the hurdle of the nomination, however, these promises start to make contact with public-policy reality, and after the election many fly out the window, as Democrats become free-traders and Republicans embrace protectionism. Of course, European leaders, once in office, bend to reality and external events. But at least up to Election Day, they have to be coherent and offer a manifesto of specific promises that determines if they win or lose. And having won high office, European leaders still have to face fellow parliamentarians who believe in the party manifesto on which they were elected and expect their leader act on it. Failure to deliver on campaign promises can be fatal. A European leader who flubbed health care reform and saw his party lose control of the legislature, as Bill Clinton did in 1994, could never have survived.

To be sure, American presidents are not complete monarchs. They must contend with Congress, state and local governments, and a Supreme Court that decides major issues such as abortion, gun control, and capital punishment (matters that in Europe are reserved for elected legislators). And, of course, a president must face the voters. But America's chief executive has unparalleled powers, which is one reason why the personalities of candidates—their whims, impulses, and habits—matter more than they do in other countries.

Although the personality strengths and flaws of top political leaders in Europe are under constant scrutiny, nothing matches the minute examination of those who aspire to the White House. John Major succeeded Margaret Thatcher as Britain's prime minister in 1990 without anyone knowing or reporting that he was carrying on a passionate affair with a fellow Conservative member of Parliament and minister named Edwina Currie. The story came out only when she published her diaries after both had left public life. François Mitterrand became president of France while keeping his mistress and their child in a Paris apartment. I am not making a moral point, but a practical one. To the European eye, the American news media's relentless invasion of the privacy of those who seek the nation's highest office is another factor that firms up the perception that personality

rather than policy is central to U.S. presidential contests.

Another striking difference between the American and European styles of electoral warfare arises from the fact that paid political advertising is banned from European television, removing some of the heat and personal vitriol from campaigns and keeping the focus on policy differences. I once showed a group of hard-bitten British political infighters the Willie Horton ad George H. W. Bush's backers used to destroy Michael Dukakis in 1988, featuring the African American Horton, who committed violent crimes while on furlough from a Massachusetts prison. These veterans of the British political wars sat back in horror at the vicious but effective crudeness of the attack, with its blatant exploitation of fears about race and crime.

In British, German, and Spanish elections, televised political pitches are limited to formulaic party broadcasts. Each party is allocated a number of slots—usually of up to five minutes—after the main evening news. An independent commission oversees the broadcasts, and while the tone is partisan, direct onslaughts are out of bounds. Some broadcasts simply present the party leader talking directly to viewers—as boring as can be, especially compared to the normal fizz and snap of television advertising in Europe.

Because European politicians have little direct access to the public through the media, journalists are the perpetual mediators (which leaves politicians perhaps even more obsessed than their American counterparts with controlling the news). Televised inquisitions of wannabe government leaders are a major feature of elections. Some countries have formal debates in which the main candidates answer questions from a panel moderated by journalists. Face-to-face debates between aspirants do sometimes occur (though not, oddly, in Britain, where no prime minister has ever consented to debate the leader of the opposition). Yet, as in the United States, the TV duels usually disappoint, as both candidates are prepared and coached to be expert on defense so that punches rarely land. Moreover, since, other than in France, there are usually more than two main party leaders bidding to win seats in the parliament, there is rarely a one-on-one duel. Instead, European candidates endure tough individual inquisitions by respected TV political journalists who avidly seek to trip them up. This is a continuous process, not confined to elections, and any politician in Europe who aspires to high office has to face regular

hard-hitting interviews on TV and the still-popular European radio services such as the BBC, which command big audiences for political programs every week.

Aspiring American presidents mostly avoid such rigors, especially during the primaries, when candidates can largely confine their audiences to the adoring crowds of staged town hall meetings and the small caucuses in some supporter's living room. Anyone hoping to lead a government in Europe has to convince the public and party professionals over months, if not years, by dominating in parliament, public meetings, and the press, and by walking on the hot coals of a televised grilling without flinching or fumbling. By the time an election arrives, a principal candidate will have been battle hardened in dealing with the toughest of broadcast interrogations. When Tony Blair sought to oust Britain's Conservatives from power in 1997, he already had 14 years of tough parliamentary experience behind him and had forced his Labor Party to come to terms with economic and geopolitical modernity by imposing his will upon recalcitrant Labor leftists. But the Tories still sought to depict him as Bambi—a child without experience.

However, the greater scrutiny does not necessarily make for better leaders. Europe has had its share of duds. Although politicians such as John Major in Britain and Jacques Chirac in France won elections, the economic, social, and foreign policies of their countries under their stewardship were unimpressive. The Austrian Socialists won power in the fall of 2006, but so ineffective was the new Socialist chancellor that he had to dissolve his government and call fresh elections after less than two years in office. The center-left administration headed by Romano Prodi in Italy won power in 2006 but was so incoherent it could not stay in office for more than 20 months. Even under the presidential system in France, both Mitterrand and Chirac found themselves in office but having to share power with opposition parties that had a majority in the National Assembly and could determine who would be prime minister and hold other cabinet posts.

The differences between the American and European political systems have provided fodder for thousands of doctoral dissertations and books. But today the differences may be more

apparent than real. If in the 20th century the contest in Europe was between two different economic systems, free-market economics versus totalizing statism and welfarism, with America firmly supporting the former, the contest today is different. Europeans accept liberal market economics and struggle as American politicians do to find the right approaches to health care, social reform, and the demands of aging voters.

The 21st-century global political contest is now a three-way fight. In one corner is democracy. In another is a new form of autocracy represented by the Russian-Chinese model of politics, with its emphasis on stability, economic growth, and a strong centralized state. In the third corner is Islamist politics, whose practitioners, in different soft and hard manifestations, are seeking to win power from Morocco to Indonesia. Europe and America both support market economics, the rule of law, freedom of expression, and rights for women, gays, and minorities, and thus whatever fur may fly over American presidential contests should not hide the fact that a broader Euro-Atlantic community exists with common values independent of differing systems of political representation.

American democracy, even with the flaws, furies, and occasional fun of its quadrennial presidential bouts, remains an example for the world. When Barack Obama was born and John McCain was a young naval officer, half of Europe lay under communist rule and big Mediterranean nations such as Spain, Portugal, Greece, and intermittently Turkey were not yet democracies. By taking the democratic road that America exemplified, Europe has left poverty and bad politics behind. The United States is still needed to inspire others to follow.

European wiseacres often decry the vulgar animalism of the American political system. But it works. In their own way European politics are just as personal, crude, and creatively destructive, but their great differences, rivalries, and contests over who governs are often resolved by private carve-ups rather than the more democratic public spectacles that America conducts every four years. And given the limited quality of leadership it has to offer at the moment, Europe should look in the mirror before it looks down its nose. ■