

Democracy and Idolatry

This was no ordinary love. The proof was in the posters—specifically, influential “street artist” Shephard Fairey’s iconic images of Barack Obama, which proved a huge hit at campaign rallies. Rendered in blood red and gray, with his face in silk-screened, Warholian black, the presidential hopeful gazes out toward some distant point, confident and contemplative at once. Only one word was emblazoned across the bottom, in large, block letters: “Hope,” or “Progress.” Fairey describes his work as propaganda engineering and explained that, as a staunch opponent of the Iraq War, making art about Obama, who had spoken out against the war from the start, was for him “like making art for peace.” Peace, however, is not the zeitgeist of this particular graphic style. On the contrary, it recalls Bolshevik propaganda in particular, and Third World revolutionary politics in general; it is power as spectacle, power in whose name millions have been oppressed. As Lisa Wedeen writes in her 1999 study of the cult of Bashar Assad, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, such idealized, heroic portraits are meant to construct “an original founding moment that signals a new golden age and an end to the miseries of the past.” Judging by the posters raised by the ecstatic masses, the campaign was not just about Obama the Democratic presidential candidate. It was about Obama, America’s long-awaited Beloved Leader.

Sure enough, as Obama’s campaign entered the final stretch, his speeches and rallies pulled in supporters in the tens of thousands. Dozens of different groups, from white, upper-class entrepreneurs to African-Americans to homosexuals, cast aside their divisions for the sake of the greater good in

a spirit of—as the posters affirmed—“hope” and “progress.” These political Lollapaloozas were, no doubt, a measure of America’s desire for change. But they were also, according to Fouad Ajami, a measure of American distress. The sight of vast crowds embracing politics with such zealotry, wrote Ajami in the *Wall Street Journal* weeks before the election, is one that we generally associate with the temper of authoritarian societies, not liberal democratic ones:

Save in times of national peril, Americans have been sober, really minimalist, in what they expected out of national elections, out of politics itself. The outcomes that mattered were decided in the push and pull of daily life, by the inventors and the entrepreneurs, and the captains of industry and finance. To be sure, there was a measure of willfulness in this national vision, for politics and wars guided the destiny of this republic. But that American sobriety and skepticism about politics—and leaders—set this republic apart from political cultures that saw redemption lurking around every corner.

That traditionally sober, really minimalist attitude on the part of the American public owes much to the media, which may generally be relied upon to treat politicians with cynicism and suspicion, if not outright hostility. Yet with the emergence of the phenomenon that was candidate Obama, those doubts turned to faith. Indeed, the media’s traditional, even dependable skepticism rapidly dissolved into a passion decidedly messianic in tone. There were, for instance, *Time’s* and *Newsweek’s* famous “halo” covers, both of which featured a sunlit Obama, his head touched by bright light; in the former, he is an infant in his mother’s arms, a present-day Madonna and Child. *Rolling Stone*, for its part, showed a stylized Obama with a sunburst behind him, radiating a hazy white glow. Daily Kos, the leading progressive blog, mused, “Does it not feel as if some special hand is guiding Obama on his journey, I mean, as he has said, the utter improbability of it all?” And former Democratic presidential candidate Gary Hart, in a *Huffington Post* column entitled “Politics as Transcendence,” insisted

that Obama “is not operating on the same plane as ordinary politicians.... I see Barack Obama... [as] the agent of transformation in an age of revolution, as a figure uniquely qualified to open the door to the twenty-first century.” *The American Prospect*’s blogger Ezra Klein concurred, proclaiming that “Obama’s finest speeches do not excite... they elevate.... He is not the Word made flesh, but the triumph of word over flesh.... Obama is, at his best, able to call us back to our highest selves.” And msnbc’s Chris Matthews, quoted in the *New York Observer*, effused, “I’ve never seen anything like this. This is bigger than Kennedy. [Obama] comes along, and he seems to have the answers, he’s the New Testament.”

It has been pointed out that, with the United States descending into a severe economic crisis, voters were ripe for the swaying—even those who tend toward the right in American politics, or are usually apathetic toward politics altogether. They were, after all, in search of political redemption, and a strong hand to guide the nation back to financial stability. They were also impatient with the mismanaged war in Iraq, and understandably—and commendably—inspired by the post-racial promise the Obama campaign proffered. For these reasons, along with the undeniable charisma, youth appeal, and rhetorical talents of the man himself, America handed Barack Obama a clear victory this past November, and a majority in Congress as well. It is precisely now, however, as the politics of hope have captured the hearts and minds of so many, that we must remind ourselves why the idealization of politics, and of political leaders in particular, is so dangerous to liberal democracies. For in truth, these societies require *skeptical* citizens, not trusting ones, if they are to remain strong and healthy, and fulfill the promise for which they were created.

A liberal democracy, it has long been acknowledged, is a tenuous enterprise. It aspires to establish order, and at the same time to preserve a measure of disorder. As a democracy, it seeks to express one will: That of the people, or at least the majority therein. As a liberal regime, however,

it is obligated to respect a plurality of desires, beliefs, and interests. The Latin inscription that appears on the seal of the United States, *E pluribus unum* (“From Many, One”), gives expression to this duality. The question then naturally arises: How can modern liberal democracies succeed in maintaining this delicate balance? The answer, according to the earliest theorists of democracy, is trust. Only by cultivating bonds of trust between individuals, groups, and their elected representatives can this frail synthesis of competing aims function, let alone flourish. In fact, it may be argued, a democratic form of government requires *more* trust on the part of the people than other political systems, since its coercive power—its ability to maintain order by means of fear—is so limited in comparison to that of authoritarian regimes.

Yet if democracies require a high dose of trust, they require its opposite in equal measure. The reason lies in the nature of political power itself, which, as Lord Acton famously remarked, tends to corrupt those who wield it. James Madison conceded as much in the *Federalist Papers*, when he warned, “Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.” Consequently, for the republic to function smoothly—that is, to succeed in preventing particular factions from subverting the public good, and institutions from disregarding the popular will—a mechanism that guards against political whim and corruption is required. Known as “checks and balances,” this mechanism is the separation of powers, which limits the strength of each branch of government in relation to, and by means of, the others. But in the final equation, politics is a social order, not a science. As such, institutional arrangements alone are not enough to secure its future. Rather, for the best defense against political corruption, we must look to psychology—or, more precisely, to a specific way of thinking that treats politics with wariness. The great Athenian statesman Demosthenes said it best: “There is one safeguard known generally to the wise, which is an advantage and security to all, but especially to democracies as against despots. What is it? Distrust.”

Indeed, democratic societies have always regarded their political systems, and by extension, their leaders, with a measure of skepticism. In fact, in

most democracies, it is the emphasis on the *frailties* of politicians that reigns supreme, and not their idealization. God-kings are a feature of tyranny and totalitarianism; regimes based on liberty prefer politicians of the mortal variety. This approach has resulted in both the concept of term limits and the willingness to replace great statesmen when popular opinion believes them to have outgrown their usefulness. Thus Winston Churchill, the wildly popular prime minister who led Britain to victory against the Axis powers in World War II, lost his bid for re-election at war's end; so, too, the lionized David Ben-Gurion, who charted Israel's war-torn course to statehood, found himself maneuvered out of his own party after dozens of years at its head.

In these and other instances, giving short shrift to great men is not a sign of ingratitude. On the contrary, it is a sign of maturity, of the recognition that policies, and not personalities, must ultimately prevail. Above all, this attitude toward political leaders is critical to preserving the basis of the democratic order: freedom. True, from time to time, democracies may fall under the sway of larger-than-life politicians, whether on account of their charisma or their personas as "strong leaders." Yet throughout their histories, democracies have displayed a consistent awareness of the threat posed by the elevation of such men to the heights of power. We already see this principle at work in the ancient Greek practice of ostracism: Citizens inscribed the name of a person on a shard of pottery (*ostrakon*) as a means of deciding who would be banished from society for a period of ten years. As the historian Plutarch explained, "Ostracism was not the punishment of any criminal act, but was speciously said to be the mere depression and humiliation of excessive greatness and power." Plutarch goes on to describe the banishment of Aristides, a statesman and military leader widely regarded for his modesty and selflessness:

Now at the time of which I was speaking, as the voters were inscribing their *ostraca*, it is said that an unlettered and utterly boorish fellow handed his ostrakon to Aristides, whom he took to be one of the ordinary crowd, and asked him to write Aristides on it. He, astonished, asked the man what

possible wrong Aristides had done him. “None whatever,” was the answer, “I don’t even know the fellow, but I am tired of hearing him everywhere called ‘the Just.’” On hearing this, Aristides made no answer, but wrote his name on the ostrakon and handed it back.

The “unlettered and boorish” Athenian was no doubt acting out of spite. Yet he is arguably no more contemptible than those citizens who idolize their leader, blind to his foibles and all but inviting the disillusionment they will inevitably bring upon themselves. After all, the fate of every democracy depends on the ability of its citizens to think critically. A critical disposition, for example, is essential to that paradigmatic act of civic duty: voting. In order to choose among various candidates, each with competing claims to superiority, citizens cannot take their words at face value. Rather, they must be able to discern the contradictions in their arguments, the illegitimacy of their motives, or the unsubstantiated nature of their claims. Even between elections, a certain measure of discontent is necessary to motivate citizens to make demands of their representatives, and to put forth ideas and solutions of their own—in short, to become active members of the body politic. Finally, skeptical citizens are more likely to organize initiatives that address civic problems *without* the involvement of government, precluding the need for a paternalistic state—which, as Tocqueville once warned us, will not serve the cause of freedom, but rather will act as a kind of “soft tyranny.”

The argument for skepticism, however, does not rest solely on the need to safeguard liberty. After all, citizens want more from their leaders than the defense of their individual rights. They also demand success in other areas, from economic stewardship to foreign policy and environmental protection. Issues of such complexity require leaders who not only are competent, but also possess the capacity for growth, improvement, and self-criticism. In other words, they must be aware of their shortcomings, and they must seek ardently to overcome them. Inevitably, this demands exposing the chinks in one’s armor and forgoing the illusion of perfection. In the recent Israeli elections, the Labor party tried to use this fact to its advantage: Its campaign

conceded the weaknesses of party chairman Ehud Barak, insisting that while he is not a “nice” or “friendly” guy, he *is* a “leader.” As the election results showed, however, the majority of the voting public agreed with the first part of the campaign’s assessment far more than it did with the second.

Of course, there is such a thing as too much political skepticism, and the consequences for a democracy are no less dire. Israel again serves as a case in point: The flood of corruption charges and indictments of various political leaders, and the increasing public disappointment with broken promises and political about-faces, has led many citizens simply to wash their hands of politics altogether. Convinced that there is no real difference among the candidates, that they are all liars and cheats who care only about themselves and their careers, citizens have shunned the polls *en masse* in recent elections. This apathy has been key to the numerous small, special-interest parties’ gaining entry to the Knesset—all of which, by definition, run counter to the public good. Disenchantment with politics has also been cited as one of the factors in the rise in violence among extremist settler youth after the 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria: Believing that democratic politics offer them no means of addressing their desires and frustrations, they reject governmental authority outright.

Clearly, a democracy cannot function effectively if its citizens are so mistrustful of their leaders that they give up on politics completely. And it is here, in sustaining a sense of connection between citizen and politics, that the media plays a particularly vital role. No doubt, the media’s emphasis on “bad politics”—corruption, scandals, and shameless self-interest on the part of politicians—goes some distance toward eroding public trust in democratic politics, and can prove problematic. Yet in the final analysis, the more critical the press, the healthier the democracy. As politicians’ toughest critics, journalists ensure not only that leaders stay honest, but that citizens’ suspicions are addressed. As a result, citizens can grant the system—if not its politicians—their trust and support.

Once again, the danger of breaching this trust is evident in the Israeli media's handling of the disengagement. When prime minister Ariel Sharon decided to initiate a unilateral withdrawal from the Strip and evacuate its Jewish settlements, his decision earned him the wrath of the political right—but also the support of the left, which included many prominent figures in the Israeli media. Journalists who had once reviled Sharon as an extremist now rushed to his defense. The well-known news commentator Amnon Abramovich, for instance, in a metaphor that made him famous, said that Sharon “must be treated like the precious *etrog*, cushioned by cotton wool, wrapped in cellophane, and sheltered inside a sturdy box.” As a result, opposition to Sharon and the disengagement plan was downplayed in the media, and the prime minister was exalted as a strong leader who knew what was best for the country. While this tactic may have succeeded in the short term, the long-term loser was none other than Israeli democracy itself.

There is, of course, a time and place for strong leaders in democratic societies. John F. Kennedy's youth, charm, good looks, and attractive family endeared him to the media, certainly, but also to people on both the right and left of the political spectrum. As such, he became a much-needed symbol of unity at a time of social upheaval, and a personification of the strength and confidence that a frightened, uncertain America needed as it confronted the specter of the Cold War. President Obama may well fill a similar role as America—indeed, the world—faces the onset of the worst financial crisis in more than half a century.

And yet, the essence of political leadership in a democracy is not charisma or strength. It is, rather, an ability to listen, persuade, compromise, and construct policies for the greater good. It is a bitter irony, then, that these are the very traits that defined one of Israel's most unpopular prime ministers, Levi Eshkol. As historian Michael B. Oren explained in an essay in these pages (“Levi Eshkol, Forgotten Hero,” *AZURE* 14, Winter 2003), Eshkol's apparent blandness has consigned him to historical obscurity, despite having led Israel through one of its most desperate crises,

the 1967 Six Day War. Meek, unassuming, and slovenly in appearance, lacking both military experience and rhetorical skill, Eshkol was a far cry from such dynamic figures as David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan. He seemed hesitant and unfit for the challenge of wielding power at all, let alone ensuring victory in wartime. Yet as Oren explains, rather than dictating his positions, Eshkol “listened carefully to opponents and allies alike, and worked hard to forge a broad consensus before deciding on fundamental issues,” qualities that were crucial in determining the favorable outcome of the war. Eshkol was no Jack Kennedy; he was not a “hero,” nor did he inspire the masses. But he was the right leader at the right time. In fact, he is precisely the kind of leader that liberal democracies need *all* the time.

In a February 2008 blogpost for *Vanity Fair*, writer James Wolcott wrote that he found himself “increasingly wary of and resistant to the salvational fervor of the Obama campaign, the idealistic zeal divorced from any particular policy or cause and chariot-driven by pure euphoria.... His summons to history and call to hope seems to transcend legislative maneuvers and horse trading; his charisma is on a more ethereal plane, and I don’t look to politics for transcendence and self-certification.” Neither should we. Democratic politics is a messy, unglamorous business. It is not the New Testament, with its doctrine that faith can trump deed. It is the Old Testament, with its deep distrust of earthly leaders and its unsparing censure of even the greatest of them, in order that we never lose sight of their mortality. Throughout its history, America has understood this lesson. There’s no time like the present for a little brushing up.

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