

A Rough Autopsy On Democrats

By Adam Walinsky

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THE FIRST QUESTION is, why are we here? And the answer must be, because we have failed. We are a rump faction of a party which is sliding—indeed, rolling—into an abyss of ruin.

It would be easy, and comforting, to attribute this failure to the sins of Humphrey, Richard Daley or John Connally, to a killer five years ago or a killer more recent. It would be easy—and it would be self-deluding and self-defeating, and wildly, catastrophically wrong.

Of course, we all know the causes of our present discontent. There is the war in Vietnam; and the alienation of the young; and the rebellion of the blacks; and the disaffection of the whites; and the almost orgiastic cycle of rebellion and repression, defiance and violence, on which we now seem embarked.

These men, the current villains of the liberal demonology, have played their full part in these events. Some say in anger that they have been malevolent, others in sorrow that they have been merely inept; but almost all would say that it is their fault—and certainly that it is not ours.

Confession of Impotence

THAT POSITION may afford moral comfort to those who hold it. It is also a hopeless position. To disclaim responsibility for our present plight is also to deny the power to change it, for responsibility is the inevitable companion of power.

I for one would rather admit past mistakes than confess to current impo-

tence. Of greater importance is the fact that there is no hope for this coalition, no hope for a regeneration of our politics, unless we are prepared to learn from the errors and illusions that have brought us to our present pass; not the errors of others, though they have been more than plentiful, but our own. It is time to face our truth.

We must first rid ourselves of the illusion that the Democratic Party has merely been captured by a narrow oligarchy, or a "fascist gang," and that our sole or even principal task is to recapture control of its central machinery. That is not so. Rather, what grows more clear with every passing day is that the party itself—the coalition of individuals and interest groups that actually cast the votes and elect the officials—is collapsing.

This is more than a matter of losing a single presidential election—though there is every evidence that Vice President Humphrey may well receive the lowest percentage of the popular vote of any major party presidential candidate since Theodore Roosevelt took the bulk of the Republican vote from Taft over half a century ago. Parties can recover from a single defeat, however crushing. The Republicans, thanks to the Democratic disas-

ter, have quite evidently recovered from the Goldwater debacle of 1964. What is disturbing is the evidence that those who are abandoning the Democratic Party this year will not shift back again soon.

An Exploding Conglomerate

THE REPUBLICAN defeat of 1964 was the product of a single candidate, a fantastic aberration even by GOP standards. But the coming Democratic disaster is the product of Hubert Humphrey only insofar as Hubert Humphrey is himself a symbol of every traditional Democratic virtue, the quintessential product of his party. The Democratic Party has been a conglomerate of trade unions, city machines, ethnic minorities, family farmers and intellectuals; and for the past 20 years, this conglomerate has worked in close alliance with the Southern barons but also with that growing segment of industry dependent on an activist foreign policy—what President Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex and what Democrats call big contributors.

It is this conglomerate that is now exploding into its constituent parts. Union membership is declining both relatively and absolutely; what members remain seem united only in resentment against their leadership and a fierce determination to keep the less fortunate from competing for their jobs. The once powerful city machines—perhaps Chicago is the last in any case—are reduced to servants of big business and prisoners of their civil servants.

There are now only two identifiable ethnic groups—blacks and those who hate them—and neither group retains great confidence in the wisdom and purposes of the Democratic Party. Those family farmers who voted Democratic are vanishing from the land in a frenzy of agricultural concentration. The intellectuals and students are, after their fashion, torn between a fourth party and the politics of the street. The Southern barons have already jumped ship and the big contributors of the complex are nowhere to be seen.

There is, to put it bluntly, not a great deal left. Of course, in this vast vacuum, an energetic and enlightened group such as this should be able, with four years of effort, to capture the party machinery. But it would be illusion indeed to confuse the capture of that machinery with capturing control, or even affecting the direction, of the American Government or the Ameri-

can Nation.

The Wallace Illusion

STANDING ON the shoulders of this first illusion is a second. This is the illusion that the Wallace movement and the Wallace voters can or should be dismissed as ignorant bigots, rednecks, fascist pigs. It will not down. There are too many of them to dismiss.

The Wallace vote, by all accounts, now approaches one-fifth of the Nation, a fraction twice as great as the black minority whose consent, we have all agreed, is indispensable if the country is to be governed at all. At a less cosmic level, it is plain to anyone who

counts electoral votes that the Democratic Party must recapture the allegiance of those lower-middle class whites if it is ever to win a presidential election again.

And there is something more. For who are these people—the Wallace voters, those who are leaving the Democratic standard? They are many things, but outside the South, there is one description that might fit many of them: they are people who supported John Kennedy in 1960 and who supported Robert Kennedy—and some, Eugene McCarthy—in 1968.

Partly, of course, this was because the Kennedys were Irish, and Catholic. But it is much more. I submit that these traditional Democrats supported Robert Kennedy because they saw in him a rebellion against the Establishment, a defiance of the politicians and power brokers they also despise and a sense that he cared about them. When he was gone, there was nothing in the major parties for them.

Nonsensical Wisdom

FOR CONSIDER the man we are told is the typical Wallace voter of 1968: slightly over 30, a blue-collar worker or petty clerk, perhaps a civil servant; living in a big city or one of its near suburbs; married, with a family.

It is the conventional wisdom that this man has become spoiled by success; that the new prosperity of the '60s has turned him from a progressive into a conservative force; that he no longer wants to improve his life in a changing America but to preserve his way of life in a country that remains as it is. What nonsense.

If this man is now over the age of 28 — if he graduated from high school, that is, just ten years ago—he missed entirely the revolution in the financing of higher education that has made it possible for 50 per cent of all high school graduates to go on to college today.

So when you talk to him about discrimination of opportunity for education, he knows what you mean but he applies it not to the black man but to himself. What chance did he have for a college education, for the entrance tickets to the modern meritocratic bureaucracy, for admission to the lush suburbs and for educational evasion of the draft? What did we ever do to help him get those tickets—and what are

we doing today? To ask the question is to answer it.

So he faces the future, this young man, with 30 years of working life ahead of him; 30 years in which the educational requirements for economic and social advancement will rapidly grow beyond his wildest dreams; 30 years to go to the plant, and to watch television; 30 years of "day that follows day, with death the only goal."

Now he is caught between ever-rising automation—encouraged by a Democratic investment credit — and demands for inverse discrimination put forward by the long-suffering blacks and their liberal allies. He pays union dues, but the union is not for him. It is just another bureaucracy, run by old and failing men he never sees, who spend his dues money to support political candidates he does not like and sometimes (too often) use their position to line their own pockets. When his leadership reaches a strike settlement, he is likely to vote it down out of sheer perverseness; and when he gets the chance, he votes against the leadership itself.

For years he has given his political votes and his taxes to Democratic leadership, and that leadership has too often ignored his concerns, drafted his sons, spent his money and then demanded that he and he alone make way for the rising black. For the plight of the black American, we all share equal guilt. But we do not pay equally. We all pay some taxes, of course, but the price of disturbed neighborhoods and troubled schools and racial clashes in our streets, that price, the real price of awakening justice, we leave to the man who now casts his vote for George Corley Wallace.

The Excluded Ones

THE THIRD illusion is also founded on the unsound premise that we represent an electoral majority. This is the illusion that we can carefully pick and choose among those with whom we care to associate—that we can easily exclude from a meeting such as this all those who do not share our particular vision of the Nation, and of the Democratic Party.

Where in this meeting, for example, are the radical young people who have exposed themselves to prosecution and policemen's clubs—not just this year, but last year and the year before that, before Democratic Senators were even willing to speak out against the Vietnam war? Where are those black- and brown-skinned Americans whose desperation is so great

they have come to see violence as their only resource of self-defense? Where are even those, committed to the political process, who think that commitment better served by a new party?

Of course, it may seem reasonable to all of us to insist that we must work within the electoral system and, moreover, within the Democratic Party. But surely that issue is not so self-evident to everyone of decent intention that we should, or can afford to, write off the cooperation of all those who do not share this particular tactical view. After all, they were right

about the war long before most of us; and right about the fundamental problems of race long before most of us; and they are at least groping for answers to problems that many of us barely know exist.

The fourth illusion is that we can confine ourselves to traditional political action—to the organizing of clubs, the holding of conventions, the setting up of representative committees. We cannot, as we have done for 30 years, seek power by the mere promise of better days to come. We have gone to the well too often, we Democrats. We have promised and not delivered. We have offered hope, but hope is "a good breakfast and a lean supper."

This is not only a matter of the war in Vietnam — where we promised peace in 1964 and then stood silent for too long as that pledge was broken and our Administration went to war. It is a matter, sadly, of almost all the great social legislation of the last four years.

We promised education—but our education programs have not taught the children. We promised new cities—but our housing programs have gone far

toward destroying the ones we have. We promised health—and our vaunted medicare program has shot the cost of medical care up while doing little or nothing to improve the quality of care for which we now pay so much. We promised help to the farm—and nearly eliminated the farmer.

We promised blacks that patience would bring justice. We promised whites that justice would bring order. We have achieved neither. We promised and promised, passed laws and appropriation bills, taxed and spent. And when it was all over, who is there to say that life is truly better than it was before?

This is not all to be blamed on the war in Vietnam or on a blind and recalcitrant Congress. For despite that war, we are spending far more on social programs than ever before in our history, far more certainly than is justified by the results.

The failure has been a failure to govern. We, all of us, you and I, have passed the bills and ignored the people; forgotten that the only difficult



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thing about spending money—especially other people's money—is spending it well.

Greatest and most tragic of all was our failure to bring real and substantial improvement to the lot and life of the black ghettos of the great cities. Our efforts were sincere and well-intentioned. But they were encrusted with bureaucracy; bemused by the absurd notion that dignity and pride could be conferred by fiat or created by meager handouts, and ultimately poisoned by the vain hope that the terrible legacy of centuries of oppression could be wiped away without cost or danger to ourselves.

The result has been waste—the worst kind: not the mere waste of money, but the waste of hope, the waste of compassion, the waste of dreams, the waste of the best possibilities of our generation.

No, if we are to again lead this Nation—if we are again to hold the confidence of the American people—then we must earn that confidence. We must begin not with national committees and the search for votes but with a serious and sustained demonstration that we care; that we are willing to work and sacrifice when we are out of power to try to make good on the magnificent promises we once made to gain power.

A New Kind of Party

I AM PROPOSING nothing more, and nothing less, than the creation of a new kind of Democratic Party founded not on promises of government largesse but on willing cooperation and fellow feeling; on the direct participation of all its members in the improvement of their lives, in lessening the sufferings of others and in the great enterprises of America.

I am proposing not that we engage in social action but that we become a vehicle for social action. I believe we can begin to build those bonds of trust and affection, shared interest and respect that make a community more than a collection of strangers. If we do this even half as well as I believe we can, then I have no doubt that all the rest—the party machinery, seats in Congress and City Hall, judgeships and the Presidency itself—will fall where they then will clearly belong.

Robert Kennedy once told us that the first of all dangers is futility: “the belief that there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills—against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence. But each of us,” he said, “can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation . . .

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Let's go home and start making some ripples.