

Excerpts from an address by
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POLITICS AS THE "ART OF THE IMPOSSIBLE"

The new politics is actually fairly old, at least the idea of popular participation and personal political activity has been around for quite a while.

The pundits who are baffled by the outcomes in New Hampshire and Wisconsin clearly have been away too long from the basic texts of democracy or they would have realized that the ancient Greeks, as well as Thomas Jefferson and the authors of the Federalist Papers, did not think of democracy as a government of professionals, treating the people as their own rag doll. Abraham Lincoln defined our system as government of the people, by the people, and for the people. All three prepositions--of, by, for--are important. Take away one of them and you may have government of a sort, but it will not be democracy as we understand it.

The new politics that was put to an early test in New Hampshire with the participation of thousands of "amateurs," is based on the simple idea that the individual citizen matters. American political enterprise had to be founded on the idea that in a democracy every citizen has to concern himself with basic matters of social morality. He should be asking himself about the responsibility Americans have for one another.

If democracy is to be revitalized, this matter of mutual responsibility is all important. The old need to have a sense of responsibility for the happiness of the young, and to listen to them. The young need to have a sense of responsibility for the happiness of the old. Whites need to have a sense of responsibility for their black brothers. The rich, for the poor. The poor, for the poorest among them. Everyone has to cultivate a sense of responsibility for the total good of the nation. The nation itself has to cultivate a sense of responsibility for the public happiness of the world at large.

This is what the new politics is all about. If the new politics is to catch hold, we have to give up some bad habits. First we have to break with the idea that the only thing to do when the nation realizes it has lost sight of its goals is for it to redouble its efforts. Here is the root of many of our difficulties. Then we have to break with our only real threat from the Orient: the idea of fatalism--or, as it is dressed up in Western clothes, the adage that "politics is the art of the possible."

There is a certain measure of truth in that dictum, of course, but it is being used more and more to justify paralysis. Too many politicians sit on their status quo talking about politics being the art of the possible when action is required. All art is an attempt to do the impossible, and there are times when good politics means attempting the impossible or the seemingly impossible.

Just a few months ago, it was widely deemed politically impossible to challenge an incumbent President. Fatalism decreed that the convention in Chicago was settled before it began. Then it was regarded as impossible to use the normal channels of political action to affect a course of events in Vietnam.

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It was also held politically impossible to carry out a successful political campaign without the usual resources to call upon. All these "impossibilities" turned out to be possible after all.

The new politics, which is a return to a very old politics, is the special contribution of the young of this generation. It returned at a time when it was needed desperately. As I see it, it is at once a repudiation and a revival of something very precious.

It is a repudiation of the idea that democracy is all form and no substance--the notion that while all the procedures may be carried out scrupulously, actual political decisions are made by an elite who communicate with each other in closed rooms, and with the people by way of slogans and overblown press releases. This means, for example, that the moral character of a war in which the people are engaged need not be subjected to the people's judgment. Again, it means that honest dissent may best be tolerated as a nuisance but when it promises to get out of hand, be subtly branded as treason.

The new politics is also a repudiation of the idea that the self-governing people our patriotic scriptures speak about should be turned into an undifferentiated mass. There is all the difference in the world between the idea of The People--a phrase the Founding Fathers surrounded with the majesty once given only to kings--and The Masses. The individual in the body known as The People is a person with a mind and heart and conscience of his own; The Masses are, inert of themselves, directed this way or that by propaganda and high pressure tactics.

Persons have to be persuaded one by one. Masses are moved like pianos, from position to position.

A third ingredient of the new politics has to do with conscience. The citizens in a democracy should be a vast constituency of conscience. A "mass" has no conscience. To deal with a "mass," one need cultivate a "consensus" within it. It is infinitely more difficult to deal with The People for the individual persons who make up The People have to make individual moral judgments on the great issues facing the nation--and at the same time sustain the health of the whole body politic. You can lead a "mass" with the aid of a few good propagandists and a pollster or two. To shape the people into a genuine self-governing body requires constant debate, discussion, dialogue, and communication--in a word, participation by everyone.