

Why Bush Will Win

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As Canadians lick their wounds over our national election result – a minority that carries with it the likelihood of another round soon – we should be thankful for our limited campaigns compared to the endless electioneering in the United States. The Iowa caucuses and the “Dean scream” – replayed endlessly by CNN – may seem long ago, but the mad dash for the White House has never stopped.

With Canada’s relationship to the U.S. now high on our list of concerns, this time around Canadians are more than passive spectators to the blood sport that is the U.S. presidential election. Other than sheer duration, perhaps the starkest difference between the U.S. and Canadian electoral contests lies in the nakedness of the American candidates’ appeals to values. Republicans, especially, trade freely in the rhetoric of God, country, and family. Stephen Harper did his best to keep this sort of language locked in the barn. When his would-be backbenchers piped up about these issues, their remarks were usually met with a national gasp and a sharp elbow from campaign organizers.

In the U.S., “Campaign 2004” got a jolt when the Democratic contender, Massachusetts Senator and Vietnam War veteran John Kerry, announced on July 6 that North Carolina Senator John Edwards would be his running mate. This was yet another blow in what was not an easy week for President George W. Bush. The Senate Intelligence Committee criticized what one commentator called “artificial intelligence” from the CIA on Iraq’s supposed stockpile of weapons of mass destruction and on Saddam Hussein’s link to Al Qaeda; the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “enemy combatants” incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay deserve due process; an increasingly non-compliant press suggested that abuses in Afghanistan prisons matched those at Abu Ghraib; and, as these developments played out, Americans were being asked to consider whose account of the state of the world was more honest: Bush’s or the documentary filmmaker Michael Moore’s as enunciated in *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

Hanging in the balance were suggestions that it didn’t matter one whit what the CIA said about the Iraqi threat – the U.S. Army, Navy, Marines, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s smart bombs were going in anyway. The last news Bush needed was that, with Edwards on the Democratic ticket, he couldn’t even take the South for granted in November. As the swaggering LBJ buoyed the patrician Kennedy, so, too, could Edwards help nudge the Senator from Massachusetts into the Oval Office.

But vice-presidential candidates, however they might flavour a campaign, don’t ultimately make or break their running mates. (A stark case in point was 1988, when Lloyd Bentson outshone the endlessly befuddled Dan Quayle, not least when he assured Quayle in debate that he was “no Jack Kennedy,” a brilliant improvisation that echoes still.) Bush’s response to the announcement of the Kerry/Edwards ticket was telling: Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge was put before the nation to announce that another Al Qaeda attack on American soil was planned, and the Bush team argued that Kerry didn’t have the values to protect the American people. Terror and values

were thus established as central Republican election themes. Informing both is the Bush mantra: “You are either with us or against us” – with us in Iraq, with us on the Patriot Act, with us on the “defense of marriage,” or against us on all three.

It may be that this tack represents a desperate grasp from a president and a party unable to run on their economic and foreign-policy records. But even so, liberal commentators are wrong to dismiss it. This is a race not for the mind but for the soul of America, and there may well be enough true believers to propel Bush to a second term, whatever the shortcomings of his first.

To American progressives and many Canadians, the re-election of this president seems not only incredible, but alarming. The prospect of a Bush victory in November, however, is in fact quite plausible. There are two main reasons for this. One has to do with values – the values of Republicans and the values the Bush administration projects – and the other has to do with voting patterns in the United States. Only about half the population votes in the United States; so it matters very much who shows up at the polls. Half of America elects the president; which half?

Let’s begin with values. If the election were to be decided solely on the values projected by the candidates (as opposed to more concrete policy issues), Bush would win by a healthy margin. Most Americans are conservative on social issues – they favour capital punishment, oppose gay marriage, and trust religious candidates more than secular ones (avowed atheists and agnostics are virtually unelectable in America). President Bush appeals fairly well to the values of Americans who consider themselves moderate, and he has self-identified Republicans sewn up.

Republicans’ core values are religiosity, propriety, obedience to authority, duty, national pride, and belief in the traditional family. Here Mr. Bush is masterfully positioned. He is a born-again Christian and a reformed alcoholic. He supports faith-based initiatives and home schooling, presumably to protect the offspring of his evangelical brethren from the secular liberalism of public schools. He pledged to restore “honour and dignity” to the White House after the Lewinsky scandal, and to that end has instigated a suit-and-tie dress code in the West Wing. (Khaki-clad policy nerds, so welcome in the Clinton White House, need not apply.) Bush has relied heavily on the gravitas that deferential Americans automatically assign to the occupant of the Oval Office, almost regardless of that individual’s words or actions. Playing up his solemn duty as commander-in-chief of the world’s most formidable military, Bush can count on half the electorate to revere his office and defer to its occupant as a matter of patriotic duty.

Duty is an important element of the Bush brand: this president stresses that he doesn’t want to act unilaterally to fight a war against evil; he must. He reminds Americans that they, too, must make the necessary sacrifices if darkness visible is to be vanquished for all time. Dissent in Bush’s America is unpatriotic. America is the greatest nation on earth; as such, it has special rights, grave responsibilities, and a manifest destiny to make the world safe for democracy and freedom. Against his liberal critics, Bush is positioning America’s interests as world interests. Furthermore, his proposed constitutional reform to ban gay marriage is part of a larger warning that America is under siege internally, that liberal values can be as corrosive to the American dream as terrorist threats. (Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum has called the fight against same-sex marriage “the ultimate homeland security” issue.)