

DEMS AND DUBYA

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In for a dime, in for a dollar. Anyway, there is no accountability for columnists. So assume that Governor Bush is elected president, just as readers of this column have been advised since spring. Therefore what, for Democrats, and for Bush?

Expect Democratic recriminations of an intensity that hasn't been seen since the election of 1972, when George McGovern and the little McGovernites helped elect Richard Nixon -- and dealt the Democratic Party a blow in the ideology that still hurts.

This will be no tame blame game. Gore supporters will dump on Clinton for being Clinton, Hillary for arrogance, the centrist Democratic Leadership Council for trying to pull the party righter than it wanted to go, and Ralph Nader for stealing liberal votes and for pulling the Gore campaign left. Off the record, at first, Gore supporters will say Gore is a terrible candidate, and a better Democratic candidate would have won, because "the issues" really favored them. Losers say that.

Clinton, crotch front-and-center on the cover of *Esquire*, will wonder how Gore couldn't do the left-right minuet that he, Clinton, danced so well. He will be fuming because for all the talk of legacy, he may now end up as President Parentheses, the sex guy who inhabited the White House between the Bushes, possibly facing more legal trouble than he would have under President Gore. His real legacy, that he did move the Democratic party from left to center-left, may well be in tatters for yet another decade.

The Naderites will blame Clinton and Gore for having taken the party too far right. Worst (for Democrats), Nader will probably live a long life. Expect him to set up a serious Third Party of the Left. For Republicans, happiness is a divided opposition.

This is where I came in. The same Democratic fight has been going on since 1968. Only once in that time -- 32 years and eight elections -- has a Democratic candidate broken the 50 percent mark. In 1976, Jimmy Carter got 50.1 percent.

When will they ever learn? The Democratic tribes can't stop the warfare. When they try to compromise they end up too far to the left, and they lose national elections because they are seen as too liberal.

What about Bush? There is a chance that he will win by more than the combined vote of Gore and Nader. For a while he will be very popular. There is a smart-aleck wise-guy quality beneath the on-message candidate, and I bet Americans are going to have good fun with him during the months that we idealize and fall in love with our new presidents. (When it was learned that Gerald Ford toasted his own English muffin in the White House, America swooned.)

Bush has said that he wants a mandate to get started on some big items, including partial privatization of Social Security, tort reform, a prescription drug benefit and tougher education standards. There is no reason to think he won't follow through, trying to bring Republicans and Democrats together in common cause.

But Bush has two foreseeable problems on two fronts: domestic and foreign, Democrats and Republicans.

The Congress has been preternaturally quiet during the presidential race, almost as if there is no first, and most powerful, branch of government. The liberal Democrats, energized by Nader, will say the fat cat Republicans are screwing the pee-pul. The conservative Republicans, unmuzzled, will rail against lefty Democrats, and soon, too, against a president who they will think is giving away too much. One side will attack conservatism, the other compassion.

President Bush will be wise to do what Clinton too often didn't: build his coalitions from the center of the spectrum outward rather than from the outside in. There are enough activist moderates, or almost-moderates, in both parties, to get some work done.

Turning the foreign policy trick may be tougher, in part because no one has yet figured out a coherent American foreign policy. Perhaps we haven't really needed one since the end of the Cold War. Things have been going along very well for Uncle Sam, incoherently.

But there has been a curious inversion of the parties and a rift within the GOP. Democrats are in some few ways more the party of international assertiveness than the Republicans, enough so that for a moment the party of Joe Lieberman almost got my vote. It is the transcendent issue of our era. America has become the most influential nation in history, and a titanic force for good in the world. To under-use that card would be historically shameful. Sooner or later, probably sooner, America will be called on to act somewhere where our interests are threatened because our values are threatened. That's when President Dubya will earn his check.

That's all pretty clear, but remember, no accountability for columnists.

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