The New Political Zeitgeist
August 5, 2004

by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

“Passion is not a word often associated with contemporary American politics or recent national elections. In an era during which almost half of eligible voters don’t bother to vote, few people exhibit strong feelings about either issues or candidates. The average American cares little about politics and spends little time thinking about it.”

The above statement accurately depicted the national political climate—with few exceptions—from the end of the Vietnam War era until the 2000 presidential election. It manifestly doesn’t apply any longer. Understanding why it doesn’t is increasingly necessary to make any sense of contemporary electoral politics.

The recently concluded Democratic Party convention in Boston is a good place to start. Viewer ship was down in part because the networks provided only three hours of coverage of the 24 session hours. But none of this fazed the convention delegates who did something quite remarkable for Democrats. They were well behaved. It’s difficult to imagine any recent Democratic convention acting on cue, as did this one. They took the lead of the Kerry campaign and, for the most part, refrained from criticizing President Bush in a remarkable feat of self-restraint.

Moreover, they adopted without debate a party platform that ducks a position about going to war in Iraq—despite the fact that delegates overwhelmingly opposed the war. Even stranger, they ended up nominating John Kerry, a candidate they disagreed with on fundamental questions.

But by convention end, none of this really mattered. The Boston Democrats were not much interested in debating the positions their nominee took or even the platform they adopted. Their interest was more visceral. They were motivated by anger, distrust, and an all-consuming loathing of President Bush. In the parlance of the convention, they were energized by their own passion.

We will find the same is true for Republicans when they meet later this month. In fact, not in modern political history have the leaders of both parties—been as cohesive, energetic, and spoiling for a fight.

Nor are ordinary voters exempt from this wave of political interest. Evidence is abundant that this year’s presidential election is somehow different from recent presidential elections.

More people are telling pollsters that they are paying attention to the presidential campaigns; more voters say they have made up their minds about their vote choice; and voter turnout could be higher than any turnout in the past several decades.

What best explain this new intensity—this new political zeitgeist in American politics? In fact, many factors animate the electorate, including the economy, war, political scandal, and so forth. And none of these can be
ignored. But this year there is another force not seen in recent times that may trump all of them. That force is hatred.

Hatred may not be the precise word, but it’s close. Political partisans--and to some extent voters as well--have become haters. Bush is the object of most of it now, but it didn’t start with Bush. While Clinton was in office, he was anathema to legions of Republican identifiers. They despised him for who he was, what he did, and what he stood for.

Since 2000, George Bush has generated much the same feelings from many Democratic voters. As with Clinton, milder words like dislike or distaste don’t capture the feelings Bush generates. The feelings toward Bush, like Clinton before him, are deep and venomous.

The question however is why? Why did so many hate Clinton and why now do so many hate Bush? Why do so many of us feel so strongly, indeed, so passionately about these presidents?

Conventional answers, of course, have been offered, and they have some validity. Clinton’s personal behavior offended some, and his blatant lies angered most. For Bush, the contentious 2000 election and the war in Iraq get the blame.

But neither Clinton’s private conduct nor Bush’s public policies seem adequate explanations for the vitriol both have generated. Both Clinton and Bush are likable men—some would even say charismatic. True, both are associated with policies repugnant to some, and both made their share of enemies on the way to the White House.

But in the broad context of American history, they are hardly unique. Even in modern times they fail to stand out as figures that should have generated the strong feelings that in fact they have generated. Many presidents before them have finished their terms unpopular, even controversial.

Taft was so unpopular that Theodore Roosevelt came out of retirement, ran against him, and helped defeat him. Wilson finished his terms bitter and unpopular after the failure of the Versailles Conference ending World War 1. Harding died in office, conveniently some said, before the full extent of corruption in his administration was uncovered. Hoover was blamed personally by many for the Great Depression.

Roosevelt was thoroughly disliked by many for his New Deal policies. Truman finished his term with one of the lowest approval ratings on record. Johnson infuriated many both for his (then) radical domestic policies and for Vietnam. Carter was widely disdained by the end of his term for stagflation and the Iranian hostage crisis. And the first George Bush was the object of widespread derision by the end of his term for his seeming lack of concern regarding the recession of 1990-91.

All of these presidents had detractors, many were personally disliked, but none of them generated the deep and widespread hatred that Clinton did and Bush now does.

Remarkably, even Nixon, historically the most reviled (and feared) president in recent years, didn’t generate the widespread intensity of feelings experienced today.
So what accounts for it all, and where is it taking us? These are obvious questions to ask. Alas, the answers are not so obvious. Some writers have pointed to the recent recession and increasing economic fissures in society. And some stress the erosion of consensus over cultural values. Others have cited the nature of the Iraq war. Still others have focused on the increasingly shrill and ideological tone of national politics.

In truth, there is no consensus about why American politics seems so venal and bitter. Nevertheless, it is clear we need to think more about the direction politics is headed. The unfolding 2004 campaign is offering lots of opportunity to do this.

There is some irony here. For decades commentators have lamented the low interest and participation in American politics, and the lack of passion in our politics. Well, the interest is up and the passion has returned. Maybe we should have been more careful what we wished for.

------------------

Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2004 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.