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## Voting the Fate of the Nation

by CHALMERS JOHNSON

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In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, Barack Obama called the forthcoming presidential election a "defining moment" in this country's history. It is conceivable that he is right. There are precedents in American history for an election inaugurating a period of reform and political realignment.

Such a development, however, is extremely rare and surrounded by contingencies normally beyond the control of the advocates of reform. So let me speculate about whether the 2008 election might set in motion a political reconfiguration--and even a political renaissance--in the United States, restoring a modicum of democracy to the country's political system, while ending our march toward imperialism, perpetual warfare and bankruptcy that began with the cold war.

The political blunders, serious mistakes and governmental failures of the last eight years so discredited the administration of George W. Bush--his average approval rating has **fallen** to 27 percent and some polls now show him dipping into the low twenties--that his name was barely mentioned in the major speeches at the Republican convention. Even John McCain has chosen to run under the banner of "maverick" as a candidate of "change," despite the fact that his own party's misgoverning has elicited those demands for change.

Bringing the opposition party to power, however, is not in itself likely to restore the American republic to good working order. It is almost inconceivable that any president could stand up to the **overwhelming pressures** of the military-industrial complex, as well as the extra-constitutional powers of the sixteen intelligence agencies that make up the US Intelligence Community, and the entrenched interests they represent. The subversive influence of the imperial presidency (and vice presidency), the vast expansion of official secrecy and of the police and spying powers of the state, the institution of a second Defense Department in the form of the Department of Homeland Security and the **irrational commitments** of American imperialism (761 active military bases in 151 foreign countries as of 2008) will not easily be rolled back by the normal workings of the political system.

For even a possibility of that occurring, the vote in November would have to result in a "realigning election," of which there have been only two during the past century--the election of

Franklin Roosevelt in **1932** and of Richard Nixon in **1968**. Until 1932, the Republicans had controlled the presidency for fifty-six of the previous seventy-two years, beginning with Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860. After 1932, the Democrats occupied the White House for twenty-eight of the next thirty-six years.

The 1968 election saw the withdrawal of the candidacy of President Lyndon Johnson under the pressure of the Vietnam War, the defeat of his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, not to mention the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. That election, based on Nixon's so-called Southern strategy, led to a new political alignment nationally, favoring the Republicans. The essence of that realignment lay in the running of Republican racists for office in the old Confederate states where the Democrats had long been the party of choice. Before 1968, the Democrats had also been the majority party nationally, winning seven of the previous nine presidential elections. The Republicans won seven of the next ten between 1968 and 2004.

Of these two realigning elections, the Roosevelt election is certainly the more important for our moment, ushering in as it did one of the few truly democratic periods in American political history. In his new book ***Democracy Incorporated***, Princeton political theorist Sheldon Wolin suggests the following: "Democracy is about the conditions that make it possible for ordinary people to better their lives by becoming political beings and by making power responsive to their hopes and needs."

However, the founders of this country and virtually all subsequent political leaders have been hostile to democracy in this sense. They favored checks and balances, republicanism and rule by elites rather than rule by the common man or woman. Wolin writes, "The American political system was not born a democracy, but born with a bias against democracy. It was constructed by those who were either skeptical about democracy or hostile to it. Democratic advance proved to be slow, uphill, forever incomplete.

The republic existed for three-quarters of a century before formal slavery was ended; another hundred years before black Americans were assured of their voting rights. Only in the twentieth century were women guaranteed the vote and trade unions the right to bargain collectively. In none of these instances has victory been complete: women still lack full equality, racism persists, and the destruction of the remnants of trade unions remains a goal of corporate strategies. Far from being innate, democracy in America has gone against the grain, against the very forms by which the political and economic power of the country has been and continues to be ordered.

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal introduced a brief period of approximate democracy. This ended with the US entry into World War II, when the New Deal was replaced by a wartime economy based on munitions manufacture and the support of weapons producers. This development had a powerful effect on the American political psyche, since only war production ultimately overcame the conditions of the Great Depression and restored full employment. Ever since that time, the United States has experimented with maintaining a military economy and a civilian economy simultaneously. Over time, this has had the effect of **misallocating** vital resources away from investment and consumption, while sapping the country's international competitiveness.

Socioeconomic conditions in 2008 bear a certain resemblance to those of 1932, making a

realigning election conceivable. Unemployment in 1932 was a record 33 percent. In the fall of 2008, the rate is a much lower 6.1 percent, but other severe economic pressures abound. These include massive mortgage foreclosures, bank and investment house failures, rapid inflation in the prices of food and fuel, the failure of the health care system to deliver service to all citizens, a growing global-warming environmental catastrophe due to the over-consumption of fossil fuels, continuing costly military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, with more on the horizon due to foreign policy failures (in Georgia, Ukraine, Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan, and elsewhere), and record-setting budgetary and trade deficits.

The question is: Can the electorate be mobilized, as in 1932, and will this indeed lead to a realigning election? The answer to neither question is an unambiguous yes.

### **The Race Factor**

Even to contemplate that happening, of course, the Democratic Party first has to win the election--and in smashing style--and it faces two formidable obstacles to doing so: race and regionalism.

Although large numbers of white Democrats and independents have told pollsters that the race of a candidate is not a factor in how they will decide their vote, there is ample evidence that they are not telling the truth--either to pollsters or, in many cases perhaps no less importantly, **to themselves**. Andrew Hacker, a political scientist at Queen's College, New York, **has written** strikingly on this subject, starting with the phenomenon known as the "Bradley Effect."

The term refers to Tom Bradley, a former black mayor of Los Angeles, who lost his 1982 bid to become governor of California, even though every poll in the state showed him leading his white opponent by substantial margins. Similar results appeared in 1989, when David Dinkins ran for mayor of New York City and Douglas Wilder sought election as governor of Virginia. Dinkins was ahead by 18 percentage points, but won by only two, and Wilder was leading by nine points, but squeaked through by only half a percent. Numerous other examples lead Hacker to offer this advice to Obama campaign offices: *always subtract 7 percent* from favorable poll results. That's the potential Bradley effect.

Meanwhile, the Karl Rove-trained Republican Party has been hard at work disenfranchising black voters. Although we are finally beyond property qualifications, written tests and the poll tax, there are many new gimmicks. These include laws requiring voters to present official identity cards that include a photo, which, for all practical purposes, means either a driver's license or a passport. Many states drop men and women from the voting rolls who have been convicted of a felony but have fully completed their sentences, or require elaborate procedures for those who have been in prison--where, Hacker points out, black men and women outnumber whites by nearly six to one--to be reinstated. There are many other ways of disqualifying black voters, not the least of which is imprisonment itself. After all, the United States imprisons a greater proportion of its population than any other country on Earth, a burden that falls disproportionately on African-Americans. Such obstacles can be overcome, but they require heroic organizational efforts.

**About Chalmers Johnson**

Chalmers Johnson is the author of more than a dozen books, including *Revolutionary Change* (Stanford), *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (Holt/Owl) and, most recently, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (Metropolitan). [more...](#)

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