

Democracy Cannot Have One Hand Clapping!
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When our country was being created, our first president, George Washington, tried to avoid having political parties. He saw that as factions, something that created many problems in old Europe. However, political parties were inevitable. Great minds may agree to disagree on matters of policy, yet do so using the democratic principle of voting.

The first parties were represented by Thomas Jefferson, a Democratic Republican (ancestor of the Democrats) and John Adams representing the Federalists (later Whigs). Their election campaigns against each other were nasty, used deceptive press gossip and rumors, and resulted in Jefferson winning dirty as the third president. Adams had won the second presidency and the two men did not speak for decades, until in their last decade, they forgave each other and were fast friends, even dying the same day: the 50th anniversary of the 1776 country's birth.

Our two parties have traditionally represented two moderate positions: one of them progressive (willing to try new things) and the other conservative (supporting stability and tradition). Our country has always needed both positions, which serve to keep each other from going off the rails.

Over time, other political positions came to life, positions that were extreme, such as the States Rights South defense of slavery and the No Nothings in the North who hated immigrants, Catholics, and banks. The South remained in the Democratic Party until the Civil War when they seceded from the union. After they lost the war, the South rejoined the Democratic Party, voting with other democrats on a range of issues except for their unyielding opposition on Black civil rights. Many of these conservative southern politicians had distinguished careers cooperating with many Presidents on issues of national defense and social justice.

The Republican Party, successor to the defunct Whig party, became a staunch defender of keeping the union united and emancipating the slaves. For the rest of the 19th century, they grew into a conservative party that supported industrialization, built the cities and railroads, supported the robber barons, and believed in free trade. They were fine with the immigrant hordes coming to America to work, ignoring their "know-nothing" populists, who never managed to win an election.

Throughout the 20th century, Democrats and Republicans compromised on laws and pulled together in the face of wars. For much of the period beginning with FDR and the years afterwards, mostly Democrats but some Republicans alternated as presidents, but the Democrats presided as a majority in Congress and the Supreme Court. Republicans, however, were not excluded from governing. They often provided a voice of conservative reason when the Democrats overreached. They worked together.

But then a terrible thing happened when politics changed from a pragmatic process of mutual respect and became a battleground. I largely blame Newt Gingrich for this change, which proclaimed that the Democrats were the enemy, not the colleague or rival. After President Johnson pushed the voting rights act badly needed by Southern Blacks, the Southern wing of the Democratic Party converted en masse to Republican. And the turmoil of the Vietnam War and the emergence of equal rights demands by not only Blacks but by women too (followed by all the other "identity politics" groups) split mainstream Democrats from radical extremists, a problem still with the Democrats.

Today, we are watching the possible dismantling of the Republican Party, in a struggle between the mainstream and the new populist wing brought in by President Trump and his ideological demagogue, Steve Banon. It was sad watching Senate Majority Leader McConnell standing with President Trump at a press conference. McConnell looked like a victim in a hostage video, blank faced, as the president alternately trashed him and then said what great friends they were.

I almost felt sorry for McConnell. Almost, but only until I remembered his words the night Barack Obama became president: "We must not let this president succeed or have a second term." That is ugly. We have witnessed a period of one hand clapping, and it is not working. We need two parties, not one, and we need bipartisan cooperation following vigorous debate. We can do this again.

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