



BRITISH EMBASSY,
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FROM THE AMBASSADOR

7 November 1984

The Right Honourable
Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
Secretary of State for Foreign
and Commonwealth Affairs
London SW1

Sir,

THE 1984 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: WHY REAGAN WON

1. The result of the 1984 Presidential Election was as follows: in the popular vote

Reagan 59%

Mondale 41%

This translated into votes in the electoral college as

Reagan 525

Mondale 13 (Minnesota, and the District of Columbia.)

A landslide therefore but not a whitewash. As forecast. Which is why the election, the result of which was never in doubt, seemed boring and interminable. Mondale had been at it since 1981 when he ceased to be Vice-President; the other seven Democratic candidates for the best part of 12 months. The desire to be President of the United States still burns fiercely in American breasts. Mondale, fighting a popular incumbent President presiding over a booming economy and a resurgence of self-confidence and optimism, was on a hiding to nothing. And so it proved.



2. The reasons are obvious. America is at peace abroad and with itself. Americans are feeling good about themselves and about a President in whom they see reflected the virtues that they like to feel they have: self-reliance, belief in family and religion, patriotism. Beirut apart, no foreign policy surprises upset the Republican script. It was a victory of the 3Ps: peace, prosperity and personality. For a man of 73, the oldest President in US history, with no great mastery of detail and without the longest of attention spans, it was by any standards as remarkable an achievement in contemporary politics as one could wish to experience. I suspect it is a "one-off" achievement, since Ronald Reagan is a "one-off" figure, and that in 1988 the United States will revert to more orthodox politics and more ordinary politicians. Charisma cannot be produced to order.

3. In 1984, the power of the man and the power of the moment combined with certain objective characteristics of the American scene to produce the landslide victory. Reagan swam with the tide of those objective characteristics and reaped the reward; Mondale swam against them and paid the penalty. As readers of this column will know, those objective characteristics include a movement of population from the North and East to the West and South and a structural shift in the economy from the smokestack to the high-tech and service industries. This has not only shifted the

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political centre of gravity in America but has also changed its political-ethos. A conservative Reagan (California)-Bush (Texas) ticket was therefore a natural winner; a liberal Mondale (Minnesota)-Ferraro (New York) ticket a natural loser. The West has not only been won, but the Western ethos has won.

4. All this has posed the question of whether we have now witnessed one of those historical, electoral realignments such as happens once a generation in American politics. I believe it does, provided one is clear what one means. The last great shift was Roosevelt's victory in 1932 and the ushering in of the New Deal, which reached both its apogee and the start of its decay in Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society". It was the era of the liberal East Coast establishment based on the Ivy League universities. Nixon's victory in 1968 started the reaction, affirming the virtues of middle America. As America has moved to the sun and to the right, Southern Democrats have switched allegiance to Reagan, thus breaking the old Northern liberal-Southern conservative coalition which elected Democratic Presidents from Roosevelt to Carter. In 1980, Carter took only his home state of Georgia. In 1984 Reagan swept the South as well as the West. The South still remains loyal to the



Democratic Party in Congress (where Southern Democrats still outnumber Republicans by about two to one). But the shift in Presidential voting habits is a trend which may be difficult to reverse: it has received its seal of authenticity from the second Reagan victory.

5. That is not to suggest that the Democrats will for the foreseeable future be excluded from power at federal level. Far from it. We have seen Reagan's landslide, not the Republican Party's - and even the pulling power of a popular President has not swept into the House or Senate a new Republican tide. As we envisaged, his coat-tails proved short. The Democrats have in fact picked up two Senate seats, and lost far fewer in the House than they gained in 1982.

6. But the trend in Presidential voting does suggest that the Democrats will have to demonstrate an ability to learn from their defeat by coming to the correct conclusions about its cause. To regain the Presidency the Democratic Party will have to change its spots and find new leaders with new ideas representative of the America of the present and future. Gary Hart was a harbinger, if not - this time, or perhaps ever - the man. They need not despair. The American system has checks and balances which ensure that, although they are once again excluded from the White House,



they occupy sufficient positions of power and responsibility to give them the necessary experience which could one day lead to the Presidency. They still have 34 out of 50 State Governors. They still control the House of Representatives and are still close - indeed two seats closer - to control of the Senate. There is Democratic talent out there in the sunbelt - Governor Babbitt of Arizona, Mayor Cisneros of San Antonio to name but two. Legitimate political ambition will produce others. Mistakes can be made and those responsible for them swept from office.

7. This time round, Mondale was not only coming from the wrong direction, but made in addition some fundamental mistakes of his own. The first was his choice of running mate. Geraldine Ferraro came from the wrong part of the country, New York, and from the wrong part of the Party, its liberal wing. If the ticket required a woman, Mayor Dianne Feinstein of San Francisco might have been better, geographically and ideologically. And Ferraro failed even to win the support of a majority of New York women, or Catholics, or New Yorkers of Italian descent. Nonetheless, her candidacy marks a breakthrough, as Jack Kennedy marked a breakthrough for Catholics: next time a woman candidate will be just another candidate, and will be judged as such. Mondale's second error was not to evolve a coherent strategy



by operating from a secure base. He travelled tirelessly but, it seemed, inconsequentially. Two further failures. Jesse Jackson may have mobilised some additional black votes, but he certainly also inspired a white backlash, particularly in the South: a probable net loss. Finally, the Unions, Mondale's paymasters, proved to be politically a busted flush.

8. The other losers from the campaign were probably the writing press. If any one person deserves credit for the President's victory apart from the President himself it is without doubt his Deputy Chief of Staff, Mike Deaver, metteur en scene to the White House. He knew his man and ensured that he played to his strengths, informally on television, and avoided his weaknesses, the formal press conference. There was a moment of doubt after the first television debate. It is, of course, a truth universally acknowledged that the television debate gives advantage to the challenger, but the incumbent cannot now refuse without having to answer charges of cowardice. During that debate, Reagan appeared ill at ease, confused and tired. The age and competence issues resurfaced, the writing press had something to seize on and, led by the Wall Street Journal, they seized it. For a few days the President's men looked all at sea; but gradually they regained confidence and composure when it



was seen that the people had not changed their view of their President at the bidding of the media. As James Reston commented in the New York Times: "among the losers in the Presidential election campaign, you will have to include the nosy scribblers of the press. Not since the days of H.L. Mencken have so many reporters written so much or so well on the shortcomings of the President and influenced so few voters". The press were cross at being kept at a distance from the candidate: their response was to paint him 'warts and all', and indeed mainly warts. But the fact is that people have come to prefer the primary source, television, where the candidates can be seen and be seen saying what they want to say, to the secondary source, the writing press, where the candidates' views are filtered and filleted by the political bias or intellectual arrogance of the reporter.

9. The President ran on his record; so the election was as much as anything a popular referendum on the incumbency. It was his last campaign on his own behalf. He will be nearly 74 when he publicly takes the oath on 21 January 1985. What he will do thereafter, at home and abroad, is the subject of a separate despatch. But for the moment he fairly represents America's mood: optimism, self-reliance, patriotism, the ethos of the West. To those of America's friends and allies who find this mood difficult to deal



with, I would say two things. First, our friendly neighbourhood superpower has always been difficult to deal with, and we ought to have learnt how to do so by now. Secondly, since the free world needs American leadership, better a glad, confident America looking to the future, than one beset by Carterian malaise, fixed in the rigidities of the past.

10. I am sending copies of this despatch to HMRR in NATO posts, Moscow, and Tokyo, to the United Nations, the North Atlantic Council and the European Communities, and to HM Consuls-General in the United States.

I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your obedient Servant,

Oliver Wright