

Bush Hatred and Obama Euphoria Are Two Sides of the Same Coin

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Now that George W. Bush has left the harsh glare of the White House and Barack Obama has settled into the highest office in the land, it might be reasonable to suppose that Bush hatred and Obama euphoria will begin to subside. Unfortunately, there is good reason to doubt that the common sources that have nourished these dangerous political passions will soon lose their potency.

At first glance, Bush hatred and Obama euphoria could not be more different. Hatred of Mr. Bush went well beyond the partisan broadsides typical of democratic politics. For years it disfigured its victims with open, indeed proud, loathing for the very manner in which Mr. Bush walked and talked. It compelled them to denounce the president and his policies as not merely foolish or wrong or contrary to the national interest, but as anathema to everything that made America great.

In contrast, the euphoria surrounding Mr. Obama's run for president conferred upon the candidate immunity from criticism despite his newness to national politics and lack of executive experience, and regardless of how empty his calls for change. At the same time, it inspired those in its grips, repeatedly bringing them tears of joy throughout the long election season. With Mr. Obama's victory in November and his inauguration last week, it suffused them with a sense that not only had the promise of America at last been redeemed but that the world could now be transfigured.

In fact, Bush hatred and Obama euphoria -- which tend to reveal more about those who feel them than the men at which they are directed -- are opposite sides of the same coin. Both represent the triumph of passion over reason. Both are intolerant of dissent. Those wallowing in Bush hatred and those reveling in Obama euphoria frequently regard those who do not share their passion as contemptible and beyond the reach of civilized discussion. Bush hatred and Obama euphoria typically coexist in the same soul. And it is disproportionately members of the intellectual and political class in whose souls they flourish.

To be sure, democratic debate has always been a messy affair in which passion threatens to overwhelm reason. So long as citizens remain free and endowed with a diversity of interests and talents, it will remain so.

In October 1787, amid economic crisis and widespread fears about the new nation's ability to defend itself, Alexander Hamilton, in the first installment of what was to become the *Federalist Papers*, surveyed the formidable obstacles to giving the newly crafted Constitution a fair hearing. Some would oppose it, Hamilton observed, out of fear that ratification would diminish their wealth and power. Others would reject it because they hoped to profit from the political disarray that would ensue. The opposition of still others was rooted in "the honest errors of minds led astray by preconceived jealousies and fears."

Indeed, the best of men, Hamilton acknowledged, were themselves all-too-vulnerable to forming ill-considered political opinions: "So numerous indeed and so powerful are the causes, which serve to give a false bias to the judgment, that we upon many occasions, see wise and good men on the wrong as well as on the right side of questions, of the first magnitude to society."

In surveying the impediments to bringing reason to bear in politics, it was not Hamilton's aim to encourage despair over democracy's prospects but to refine political expectations. "This circumstance, if duly attended to," he counseled, "would furnish a lesson of moderation to those, who are ever so much persuaded of their being in the right, in any controversy."

As Hamilton would have supposed, the susceptibility of political judgment to corruption by interest and ambition is as operative in our time as it was in his. What has changed is that those who, by virtue of their education and professional training, would have once been the first to grasp Hamilton's lesson of moderation are today the leading fomenters of immoderation.

Bush hatred and Obama euphoria are particularly toxic because they thrive in and have been promoted by the news media, whose professional responsibility, it has long been thought, is to gather the facts and analyze their significance, and by the academy, whose scholarly training, it is commonly assumed, reflects an aptitude for and dedication to systematic study and impartial inquiry.

From the avalanche of vehement and ignorant attacks on *Bush v. Gore* and the oft-made and oft-refuted allegation that the Bush administration lied about WMD in Iraq, to the remarkable lack of interest in Mr. Obama's career in Illinois politics and the determined indifference to his wrongness about the surge, wide swaths of the media and the academy have concentrated on stoking passions rather than appealing to reason.

Some will speculate that the outbreak of hatred and euphoria in our politics is the result of the transformation of left-liberalism into a religion, its promulgation as dogma by our universities, and students' absorption of their professors' lesson of immoderation. This is

unfair to religion.

At least it's unfair to those forms of biblical faith that teach that God's ways are hidden and mysterious, that all human beings are both deserving of respect and inherently flawed, and that it is idolatry to invest things of this world -- certainly the goods that can be achieved through politics -- with absolute value. Through these teachings, biblical faith encourages skepticism about grand claims to moral and political authority and an appreciation of the limits of one's knowledge, both of which well serve liberal democracy.

In contrast, by assembling and maintaining faculties that think alike about politics and think alike that the university curriculum must instill correct political opinions, our universities cultivate intellectual conformity and discourage the exercise of reason in public life. It is not that our universities invest the fundamental principles of liberalism with religious meaning -- after all the Declaration of Independence identifies a religious root of our freedom and equality. Rather, they infuse a certain progressive interpretation of our freedom and equality with sacred significance, zealously requiring not only outward obedience to its policy dictates but inner persuasion of the heart and mind. This transforms dissenters into apostates or heretics, and leaders into redeemers.

Consequently, though Bush hatred may weaken as the 43rd president minds his business back home in Texas, and while Obama euphoria may fade as the 44th president is compelled to immerse himself in the daunting ambiguities of power, our universities will continue to educate students to believe that hatred and euphoria reflect political wisdom. Urgent though the problem is, not even the efficient and responsible spending of a \$1 trillion stimulus package would begin to address it.

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