



# WHO'S IN CONTROL?

POLAR POLITICS AND THE  
SENSIBLE CENTER

RICHARD  
DARMAN

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*Polar Politics  
and the  
Sensible Center*

Richard Darman

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# Prologue:

## Missing in Action

AMONG POLITICAL OBSERVERS and sports fans—that is, among most Americans—there is a tendency to observe cycles. Cycles, of course, vary in importance and significance. Some may be profound; others trivial. And somewhere in between are countless observations like this one: Every four years, in the fall, attention to elections surpasses baseball as America's pastime. That observation might well be dismissed as uninteresting if it were not for a related curiosity. In 1996, it seemed that things might be different.

As the last presidential election before the turn of the century approached, the presidential contest promised to command less interest than baseball's pennant races. It was not that baseball was so exciting. Indeed, many found it boring. It was that enthusiasm for presidential politics seemed remarkably low.

It had become customary for about half of America's eligible voters not to go to the polls. But even among those who did intend to vote, large numbers were disenchanted. There was a widespread feeling that the political process was letting the public down.

The country was strong in many fundamental respects. Still, it had real problems, for which politicians offered few credible solutions. As usual, their rhetorical posturing combined promise and partisanship. But political language had lost much of its meaning. It was notoriously unreliable as a guide to post-election performance. Worse still, in 1996, the choice between the major parties' presidential candidates left much of

the public highly uncertain about what might actually follow in the way of governance.

Indeed, governance itself had been in abeyance since 1994, the midterm election year. Who or what was in control—if anyone—had become unclear. America's politics had become polarized.

For most of the post-World War II era, it had been otherwise. The rhetorical positions of the two major parties had differed, of course, as had their policy leanings. But, in practice, the parties had shared a large amount of common ground in the broad middle between ideological extremes. And they had routinely come together in order to govern.

In recent years, however, they had been pulled apart—like continents shifting toward the poles. One party was led by a President who was prone to drift away from the center when elections were behind him. The other was moved by a Speaker of the House who consciously fostered a clear divide—not just in rhetoric and ostensible ideology, but in political practice. As he did so, as the practical divide was widened, inhabitants of the more temperate zones of policy and politics were left on increasingly tenuous ground. It was in these zones that the processes of constructive compromise had ordinarily been managed. But in the world of polar politics, compromise was denigrated as unprincipled behavior. And without compromise, the American system did not function. The result was not the triumph of one extreme at the expense of another. It was simply an unbridged gap, an unproductive stalemate.

Arguably, the increased ideological separation had begun in 1980 with the election of President Ronald Reagan. But in practice, the “Reagan Revolution” had been more a matter of rhetoric than reality. Though ideologically committed, President Reagan had understood well that pragmatic compromise was necessary in order to govern. It was the rise of the less compromising Newt Gingrich to the speakership of the House that moved the ideological divide beyond rhetoric into practice, producing the frozen stalemate of polar politics.

Yet, though Gingrich's rise crystallized differences between Democrats and Republicans, the extent to which these differences were mirrored by the parties' presidential candidates in 1996 was blurred. Both candidates were naturally inclined toward compromise. And both knew that they had to appeal to

the center in order to win. So, from time to time, as the election approached, it appeared that the ground in the center was being reclaimed. But the public was understandably skeptical.

The issue of interest was how each candidate would govern, not how he might campaign. And for many, that issue was hard to assess. Would a reelected President Clinton become the New Democrat he had claimed to be in seeking election in 1992? Or would he, the former McGovernite, take another sharp turn to the left, as he had done in 1993 after winning the presidency? Would a newly elected President Dole define what he thought was best for the country, separate himself from righter-than-right factions, build the coalition necessary to govern, while drawing on the strengths of character that had guided most of his life? Or would he yield to congressional leadership by a reenergized Speaker Gingrich, as he had done in 1995? It was amazing, in a way, that with such well-known candidates, the answers to these rather basic questions could seem so uncertain. But they did.

And there was this further complication: It was not entirely clear what was really at stake. Was there a serious threat that American government might turn toward one extreme or another? Was the future of "big government" fundamentally at issue? Many people acted as if answers to such basic questions were obvious; but at least as many others were far from sure.

To me, one point did seem clear. To begin to answer such questions sensibly, one had to step back from the candidates, the rhetoric, and the partisan posturing. One needed a broader perspective with which to frame the issues that the country was facing. Not knowing the future, I tried to look at the recent past. My hope was that a bit of history might yield a more meaningful sense of where the American political system was headed—and what that might mean for people's choices as they thought about exercising a right that was once widely treated as precious.

Part of the process of gaining perspective required a look at the candidates' performance in 1996. But it soon became obvious that looking at 1996 alone was not likely to provide much help. That should have been expected, perhaps, because election years are typically strange and often misleading. Yet the start of 1996 seemed unusually bizarre to me. Distorted images

floated over and through each other across the screen. It was surreal.

Four things, in particular, were striking. First, there was the change in Bill Clinton. He had always had a remarkable capacity to adapt to his audience and to transform himself to gain political appeal. But as he took center stage for the semiofficial start of his reelection campaign, on January 23, he reached a new level. For one compelling hour, as he delivered his State of the Union address, he seemed oddly like a cross between a President and a Mighty Morphin Power Ranger—a Mighty Morphin President.

Like most Americans, I watched from afar via television. In prior administrations I had had a front-row seat, and had come to appreciate the show. It had degenerated into a sporting event that some thought a bit grotesque. But it was still an important annual rite of renewal. It commenced with the President's triumphal entry as a conquering hero through a cheering crowd: the proverbial man in the arena. There was little danger, however, other than the risk of boredom. The only bull that entered the ring showed up as lines moving across a TelePrompTer. The scene was, in fact, more like raucous theater than any athletic challenge. Yet, as a sometime aficionado of this peculiar art form, I had to admit: President Clinton put on a first-class performance.

He had not always looked or performed so well. But he and his handlers had managed a fantastic transformation. About a year before, his advisers had persuaded him to stop being seen in public doing the Clinton shuffle. Until they did so, he had jogged almost daily before attendant TV cameras. His style was not that of a classic runner. And his rest stops at McDonald's did not accentuate his athletic prowess. But that was not the problem. His advisers felt there was something more basic that was wrong with the image he was communicating. That image was somehow internally conflicted. In doing his special shuffle, the President wore a baseball cap with one or another middle-American advertisement on the visor. He also wore a distinctively short pair of short-shorts, which commentators tended to mock. In its way, this combination was fitting. It was consistent with the new breed of yuppie populism that the Oxford-and-Yale Arkansan had cultivated. But Americans

seemed to want a bit more dignity in a President of the United States.

So, after the crushing congressional electoral shift of 1994, President Clinton was persuaded that he had to seem more like a strong American leader. At a minimum, he had to look more like a composed and conventional adult. The short-shorts suddenly went the way of his late-night saxophone. They disappeared. And the President who, for his first two years, had appeared routinely in casual attire underwent a sartorial metamorphosis. In public, he was seen almost exclusively in buttoned suits, dressed like a bona fide grown-up.

I had had a year to adjust to this newfound presidential appearance. So, seeing the President look dignified as he delivered his address was not what seemed surreal. What seemed odd was more fundamental. What caused the clash of images was the character the President had chosen to adopt for this occasion. Along with most other Americans, I had seen him advertise his youthful connection with President John F. Kennedy, and then consciously mimic JFK's distinctive hand gestures and cadences. But superimposed upon the Kennedy image was something new. On national television, in prime time, with a straight face, President Clinton did a full-fledged imitation of none other than the President whose policies he had long ridiculed, Ronald Reagan.

It wasn't merely that he adopted such Reagan techniques as saluting heroes carefully placed in the House balcony. It was the substance of what he had to say. This alleged role model for the profligate star of the best-selling political novel *Primary Colors* presented himself as a stern protector of traditional values. And this recent advocate of one of the most interventionist policy proposals in American history, the Clinton-Magaziner health plan, elicited applause from both Republicans and Democrats with a line that was as disingenuous as it was popular. It became the headline for the speech: THE ERA OF BIG GOVERNMENT IS OVER.

The line played like a declaration of victory in a long and difficult war. It was blazoned across newspapers throughout the land. And amazingly, it was taken seriously. Even the leading conservative journal of opinion, *The Weekly Standard*, featured

the line on its cover. "The Era of Big Government Is Over," it repeated, along with this attribution: "Bill Clinton, announcing the surrender of modern liberalism." This was the subtitle to the *Standard's* even bolder declaration: "WE WIN."

For me, this was the second major oddity of 1996. I liked and respected the *Standard's* editor and publisher, Bill Kristol, a smart and sophisticated analyst of the American political scene. Yet I wondered what on earth he may have had in mind in declaring, "We win." Who was the "we"? Conservatives were not exactly one big happy family. And what was the "win"? The federal government's share of gross domestic product (GDP) was almost identical to what it had been when Ronald Reagan took office, promising to reduce it radically.

The accompanying *Standard* editorial noted that the Clinton "concession" was "rhetorical and insincere." "But," it went on, "rhetoric matters." This was a respected tenet among merchants of language. And I happened to agree with it. Still, I thought, reality matters as well!

To me, the reality did not seem to be one that conservatives should have been celebrating. Bill Clinton was in the process of rehabilitating himself yet again. Often criticized for shuffling back and forth on matters of policy, he was now seen as staking out a firm claim to the broad middle of the American political spectrum. Indeed, with his Reaganesque act, he had just successfully stolen a march to the center, where American presidential elections are won or lost.

And while President Clinton was reclaiming the center, the Republican party seemed to be tearing itself apart, with internecine warfare over who and what were righter than right. Respected moderates shied away from the fray. Jim Baker, Dick Cheney, and Colin Powell—leaders in the dramatic Gulf War victory—had decided to forgo a primary contest for the Republican nomination. So had Jack Kemp, a confessed "bleeding heart conservative." He had found himself at odds with the House Republicans' one-dimensional focus on cutting government spending. But the remaining field of would-be presidential contenders was hardly shy about cutting itself to pieces. Ronald Reagan's eleventh commandment—speak no ill of fellow Republicans—was but a nostalgic memory, if that.

Malcolm S. (Steve) Forbes, Jr., started the bloodletting in

New Hampshire and Iowa with a barrage of negative advertisements. Its size and concentration were unprecedented for these states. Forbes, like Ross Perot before him, was a multi-hundred-million-dollar populist, who could finance his own campaign. His ads attacked the respected Republican Senate Majority Leader, Bob Dole, conservative Texas senator Phil Gramm, and former Tennessee governor Lamar Alexander. Their offense, according to Forbes, was that they had all participated in raising taxes.

Forbes proposed to scrap the current tax system and substitute a 17 percent flat tax on earned income. His proposal seemed simple. And its in-your-face, anti-government boldness attracted a popular following. But whatever popularity the flat tax might have had was soon limited by counterattacks from almost all visible Republicans—ranging from Alexander, who criticized it as “nutty”; to Dole, who expressed concern about its effect on the deficit; to Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who dismissed parts of the Forbes plan as “nonsense.”

As if this were not enough, Pat Buchanan advanced his own, very different, brand of populism—nativist, protectionist, and isolationist. He was consciously running against much of what mainstream Republicans stood for. As was increasingly common, he claimed to be adamantly against government—except that he saw the need for government to thwart immigration, stop imports, and impose his own set of values. He was, in fact, against Washington government more for its being out of touch with the concerns of ordinary Americans than with its “bigness.” His message appealed to many working Americans, who were sick of political hypocrisy, alienated by modern liberalism, and fearful of the forces of change. That was no small number of Americans. But for every American Buchanan attracted, he scared many more.

He and Forbes were very different in their policy orientation, with Forbes being much more market-oriented and tolerant. Together, however, they made a powerful assault on the conventional Republican establishment. For some time, that establishment had failed to communicate that it really understood the economic worries of the middle class and the fears associated with the breakdown of traditional values. It did not seem adequately to care. Nor did it seem energized for a serious



fight to restore the American Dream. Clearly, these were fatal flaws for a group that meant to govern. The establishment did, indeed, need a wake-up call.

But the Buchanan-Forbes wake-up call amounted to more than just a telephone ring or the hum of a clock radio. Theirs was a full-blast air-raid warning. Indeed, they meant to do more than just warn; they meant to complete a disabling attack.

Their first target was the natural Republican front-runner, the distinguished and dedicated Senate Leader, Bob Dole. Buchanan showed surprising strength by winning the New Hampshire primary. Conventional wisdom correctly said that neither he nor Forbes could be the ultimate Republican nominee. Still, they had significant effects.

Bob Dole and Lamar Alexander were then the leading Republican candidates who defined themselves as alternatives to the "extreme." But while separating themselves from the polarizers, they were also tilting further to the right. Both Dole and Alexander were, in fact, moderate personalities with centrist balance. Yet the primary process made caricatures of their better selves. Dole, whose character and leadership abilities were proven strengths, was made to play defense on others' turf. And Alexander, who was capable of thoughtful advocacy, felt obliged to pose as a plaid-shirted populist. Buchanan and Forbes dismissed both derisively. If, as some claimed, the purpose of this conflict was to elevate discussion of policy ideas, such elevation was not the dominant impression. Alexander, who was normally temperate, was reported to have likened Buchanan to the discredited Senator Joe McCarthy. Buchanan then termed Alexander's newly acquired campaign chairman, the conservative Bill Bennett, a "Beltway blowhard." The quality of debate did not seem to be helping advance anyone or anything.

By forcing the Republican party to the immoderate right, the polarizers allowed candidate Clinton to occupy the abandoned middle ground without much contest. And by framing a stark, sometimes scary, contrast, they were making it easy for the newly presidential Clinton to appear as a moderate and reassuring presence. They were making his reelection campaign so much easier that *Wall Street Week's* iconoclastic TV host, Louis Rukeyser, suggested that Bill Clinton himself must have been behind all this.