

Backyard Democracy

by Tad Daley | CommonDreams

"The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush," said Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago during the second quarter of the 20th Century, creator of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, and chair of an audacious undertaking in 1947 called The Committee to Frame a World Constitution. "It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment."

I didn't see much democratic undernourishment on the afternoon of April 13th, when I ran to be a delegate to the Democratic National Convention, in one giant classroom in Taper Hall at the University of Southern California, to represent the 33rd Congressional District in south Los Angeles—pledged to Barack Obama. Similar caucuses took place at the same time on the same day, in all 53 of California's congressional districts - one in each for Obama, another in each for Hillary Clinton, 106 in all.

I didn't win.

My caucus had 84 filed candidates vying to fill only four slots (three delegates and one alternate). The two top vote getters, Robert Cole and Danny Bakewell Jr., both good and able Democrats, had had their candidacies promoted a couple of days earlier in a full page ad in the Los Angeles Sentinel, the city's leading African-American newspaper (and owned by Danny Bakewell Sr.). Although it doomed my candidacy, I must say that I was delighted to discover that, at least at this place on this day, print media still mattered. It does suggest, though, that what this caucus really measured was not so much whether one could win the support of the people in the room through the power of one's ideas, but instead, about one's success, ahead of time, in mobilizing a network of friends and supporters to be in the room in the first place. "In politics," as Jesse Jackson once shrewdly recognized, "an organized minority is a political majority."

Yet once we did all show up, the caucus itself was an amazing experience. More than 700 citizens, many packed inside the classroom, others spilling out into the Taper Hall corridor, others even onto the USC campus sidewalk outside—cornering each other, lobbying each other, hectoring each other, working the room. It reminded me of a Norman Rockwell painting. It reminded me of a Jimmy Stewart movie. It reminded me of the late great Molly Ivins, who said, "The thing about democracy, beloveds, is that it is not neat, orderly, or quiet. It requires a certain relish for confusion." And it reminded me that this, probably, is what Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and Benjamin Franklin had in mind.

My most interesting conversation of the day was with Marcel, who serves as the teen librarian at the Baldwin Hills Branch Library a few miles west of USC, on La Brea just south of the 10 freeway, where I teach chess to about a dozen little monsters every Monday night (drop by!). Marcel is from Rwanda originally, and grew up speaking French. He follows American politics avidly, including the recent controversy over Senator Obama's remarks about citizens who are "bitter," citizens who "cling" - and the onslaught against him that ensued. "Tell me, Tad," said Marcel, "I am confused about something in your language. In my language, there is this word, and it means someone who is intelligent, distinguished, talented, accomplished. But in your language, tell me Tad, it is a bad thing, for one to be, an 'elite'?"

I told Marcel that this citizen, at least, craves a president who is intelligent, distinguished, talented, and accomplished ... not someone with whom I might enjoy "having a beer."

Finally, Judi, the lead volunteer caucus convener, quieted everyone down, and invited each of the 84 candidates to give a 30 second speech. I had agonized to prepare a dynamite one-minute speech ... and then panicked when I was told that I would have to cut that in half!

But in my time on stage, I managed to hammer (or yammer) away about preventing a new war with Iran and getting serious about getting rid of every nuclear weapon forever and taking on the bloated corrupt militaristic imperialistic profiteering permanent war economy at home and arrogant American empire abroad.

It was a pretty good speech, for 30 seconds.

But it wasn't the best one the audience heard.

I wish I could remember the guy's name. Middle aged. Didn't stand out in the crowd. Clearly wasn't "connected" in any way to the local Democratic Party honchos in the room. Dressed sort of frumpy, like he was in his backyard on a Sunday afternoon.

He didn't win. I don't think he even came close to me in the vote count.

But here is what he said. I remember it almost word by word.

My fellow citizens, our greatest president, who before he took office had been an inexperienced member of Congress from Illinois, gave his greatest speech just a month before he died - in his second inaugural address. In it, he described the post-Civil War attitude he wanted Americans to cultivate, as he urged his listeners, "with malice toward none, with charity for all ... to finish the work we are in, and to bind up the nation's wounds."

My fellow Obama supporters, after Barack Obama defeats Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination, all of us must act, toward our fellow Democrats who supported Hillary Clinton, with malice toward none, with charity for all.

And my fellow Democrats, after Barack Obama defeats John McCain for the presidency, all of us must act, toward our fellow citizens who supported John McCain, with malice toward none, with charity for all.

That is the vision of one America, perhaps even the vision of one world, that I think Barack Obama, and all of us together, at this pivot point in history, now have the opportunity to forge.

That remarkable 30 seconds reminded me that, if Senator Obama pulls it off - wins the Democratic Party nomination, wins the November election, and is sworn in as our nation's 44th president on January 20, 2009 - he will do so just 23 days before the 200th birthday of our greatest president, who was born on February 12, 1809.

And it reminded me of the famous remark by the author, child psychiatrist, and Harvard professor Robert Coles (almost the same name as the guy who won our caucus), who said, "Abraham Lincoln did not go to Gettysburg having commissioned a poll to find out what would sell in Gettysburg."

And it reminded me, finally, of the statement by the archaeologist Howard Winters, who, after a lifetime of the study of humanity, concluded, "Civilization is the process in which one gradually increases the

number of people included in the term 'us' and at the same time decreases those labeled 'them'—until that category has no one left in it anymore."

It was a good thing I had not yet cast my vote.

Because I immediately marked my ballot card down for the frumpy guy from the backyard. I imagine he's back there now.

I wonder how many other such amazing resources America possesses today, in how many other backyards.

It is possibly not hyperbole to suggest that the fate of our republic may depend upon the answer.

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