

Biden and Harris Call for Unity. But Does Their Discourse Unify?

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Much of the United States was in a celebratory mood on November 7. The major news networks had projected the Biden-Harris ticket as winners in the states of Pennsylvania and Nevada, giving it the necessary majority in the Electoral College. Thousands of young people were in the streets, obviously happy and for the most part behaving themselves, many carrying American flags. It was an image that itself was a powerful call to the nation for unity and healing.

In the evening, Vice-President-Elect Kamala Harris and President-Elect Joe Biden addressed the nation and the world. They stressed the need for the unity of the people in confronting such problems as the pandemic, an economy crippled by the pandemic, system racism, and threats to the environment. They pledged that they will govern for the benefit of all the people, not just those in their political band; and they pledged to seek cooperation with the opposition party. Such words provided a welcome emotional relief from the divisive and confrontational discourse coming from the White House during the past four years.

However, the discourses of Biden and Harris were shaped by an ideology that is historically dated, and therefore it has a limited capacity to unify the people. The newly elected President and Vice President stressed a view of the nation as a land opportunity, where there is no limit to what individuals born in modest circumstances can attain. They acknowledged that some social sectors historically had been denied opportunity. But as a result of the struggles in recent decades by women, blacks, Latinos, immigrants, and gays, the American promise of equal opportunity is today being fulfilled. They proclaimed the results of the 2020 presidential elections to be a confirmation of this fulfillment.

The idea of equal individual opportunity can no longer serve as the ideological foundation of democracy. It once had its day as a progressive idea, guiding the American Republic as an advanced expression of democracy. The concept was central to the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian Revolution of the period 1774 to 1840, in which it was understood that the full realization of democracy required the containment and gradual abolition of slavery as well as a wide distribution of land to individual agricultural producers.

However, during the course of the nineteenth century, the concentration of banking and industry occurred, driven by natural tendencies in the development of capitalism as well as by the illegal and unethical practices of the Robber Barons. The emergence of monopoly capitalism established the need for a reformulation of the meaning of democracy beyond the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian concept of individual liberty and opportunity. Now it became a question a strong state rather than a limited state, a state that directs the economy in defense of the rights of the people and the needs of the nation, a state that regulates and controls the great corporations, constraining their demonstrated disregard for the rights and

practical needs of the people.

State direction of the economy, however, is not easy to accomplish. The problem is that the concentration of productive enterprises is to some extent natural, that is, resulting from the greater productive efficiency of large scale in many industries. So the state, which has the duty to promote the growth of the economy in order to better satisfy the material needs of the people, has to discern how to induce the corporations to produce in economic sectors of national need and to pay just wages, without restricting the continually expanding productive capacity of the corporations.

The progressive movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to break up or regulate the trusts, in defense of the rights and needs of the people. The Interstate Commerce Commission was created and the Sherman Anti-Trust Act was enacted, but both were cynically designed by politicians in response to the clamor of the people, and they were not effective in regulating the trusts. In the 1912 presidential campaign, third party candidate and ex-president Theodore Roosevelt and Democratic Party candidate Woodrow Wilson proposed significant anti-trust reforms. Wilson's package of 1913-1914, enacted by the Congress, may have been sufficient to accomplish the effective regulation of the trusts, but the laws were not implemented, as a result of the nation entering World War I.

The casting aside of Wilson's program by World War I demonstrated that war favors the interests of the corporations, undermining the interests of the people. War upsets the delicate balancing act that the state must play, in which it has to regulate the corporations without undermining productive capacity. War gives the corporations a nearly free hand, inasmuch as it establishes an urgent need for the rapid production of arms and war supplies.

Thus, World War I consolidated corporate dominance in the United States, which the New Deal reforms did not confront, and which was reinforced by World War II. A military-industrial complex emerged, justified first by the Cold War ideology and later by the ideology of the War on Terrorism. State expenditures for the military became the easiest to rationalize; arms became the nation's strongest industry.

The militarization of the economy and society was intertwined with imperialism. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, and regardless of which political party was in power, the United States has pursued imperialist policies, that is, policies that seek to control the governments of the world in order to attain access to natural resources, cheap labor, and markets for surplus U.S. goods, in accordance with the interests of U.S. corporations. In all regions of the world, when anti-imperialist popular movements took control of states, and when such states acted to defend their sovereign right to control their natural resources and their economies, the U.S. government acted against said governments, portraying them as a threat to democracy, and imposing economic sanctions and/or military interventions. After World War II, all U.S. wars have been imperialist wars, justified by fundamentally false claims that ignored the historical and political developments unfolding in the nations under attack.

But a spectacular U.S. economic ascent obscured the corporate betrayal of the people and the nation. The economic ascent of the United States from 1776 to 1968 was made possible by various factors, including: the commercial relation with the slave system of the

Caribbean; the economic relations of the manufacturing Northeast with the slave South; the conquest of the indigenous nations of the North American continent; imperialist policies, especially with respect to Latin America and the Middle East; and profits and economic development from two world wars. The ascent, although driven by elite interests, had residual benefits for the people, inasmuch as it resulted in a higher standing of living for the nation as a whole.

However, beginning around 1965, the spectacular economic ascent came to an end. To some extent, this was driven by domestic factors, such as overspending in relation to productive capacity, including the maintenance of military bases all over the world. But it was also driven by global factors: the world-economy has reached and overextended the geographical and ecological limits of the earth, thus eliminating the possibility to conquer new lands and peoples, which functioned as its historic engine driving economic expansion; and at the same time, the neocolonized peoples of the world have emerged to demand a New International Economic Order. The U.S. power elite, with the support of most of the political establishment, responded to the system global crisis with an ideological and economic attack on the rights and needs of the people, an era initiated by Reagan and continuing to the present. In the past four decades, economic opportunities have stagnated, and inequalities have increased.

Thus, a vision of democracy as individual economic opportunity has been made outdated by developments of the past nearly two hundred years. Democracy today has to be understood in a different way, as popular control of the state and the utilization of the power of the state against the interests concentrated corporate power, against war, and against imperialism. Political leaders today, if they were to stand with the people, would politically educate the people with respect to the historic popular struggle against concentrated corporate power, and call the people to the fulfillment of the unfinished American popular revolution.

Because it is out-of-date, the Biden-Harris discourse cannot connect to the actual needs of many of the people. In stressing individual attainment by sectors that have been historically excluded, the discourse sets aside the popular struggles against corporate power; and it ignores the increasing anxiety and insecurity of the people in the face of rapidly expanding corporate power. To be politically effective, celebration of gains against blacks, Latinos, and women have to be framed as a dimension of the historic struggle of the American people for democracy and as a call to all sectors of the people to participate in its renewal.

The key to Trump's success in 2016 was the fact that he took on the political establishment in the name of the people. And he followed up in practice. His administration took steps to preserve manufacturing in the United States, to rectify the unfavorable U.S. balance of trade, and to eliminate what it considered to be unnecessary government regulatory constraints on manufacturing. However flawed his assumptions, and however offensive he was to many people, his project appealed to many who felt betrayed by the political establishment. In spite of the administration's astonishing mismanagement of the pandemic, Trump received more than 47% of the vote in the 2020 presidential elections, including a solid majority of white voters, and a greater percentage of black and Latino voters than he received in 2016.

A truly democratic discourse from the progressive side, capable of galvanizing enough popular support to forge a governing consensus, would take on the political establishment and its betrayal of the nation and the people during the last four decades. A truly

progressive movement would politically educate the people with respect to the concept of the decisive role of the state in protecting the social and economic rights of all citizens (such as affordable health care and education). Here it would have to acquire political intelligence, avoiding the appearance of special treatment for any group, except for those most vulnerable or most in need. And it would have to propose measures for the protection of social and economic rights as a dimension of a long-range and comprehensive economic plan, demonstrating its mastery of practical economics.

A discourse capable of marshalling a governing popular consensus would base itself in the unfinished revolution of the people against corporate power, calling the people resist corporate power in all of its manifestations, including its control of the political process, the media, and the educational system. It would be firmly against imperialism and imperialist wars, standing on the principle of the sovereign right of all nations to control their natural resources and their economies. It would propose a comprehensive and long-term economic plan, that intelligently seeks to gradually wean the nation's economy from its dependence on imperialist penetration of other lands, on the arms industry, and on ecologically unsustainable forms of production and distribution.

A politically-effective discourse, capable of marshalling a governing consensus, can emerge from dedication to the long-term political education of the people, which itself can only be based on the conviction of the fundamental decency of the people, of all the people.

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