

Kevin P. Phillips. *Arrogant Capital: Washington, Wall Street, and the Frustration of American Politics*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1994. 231 pp.

David Frum. *Dead Right*. New York: Basic Books, 1994. 230 pp.

The Democrats suffered a crushing defeat in the 1994 midterm elections. For the first time since 1952, the Republican Party won a majority in both houses of Congress. In the House of Representatives alone, the Democrats lost over 50 seats—the sharpest swing at the national level since 1946. The losers included several of the party's leading figures, among them Speaker Tom Foley and the powerful chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, Dan Rostenkowski.

The Democrats' setback was heaviest in the South, where earlier they had been strongest, and where Republicans had scarcely been visible on the political map. Of the 125 House seats customarily regarded as southern, the Republicans now hold 62, as against the Democrats' 63. In the Senate, the Republicans now have 14 of the region's 22 seats—a change of historic proportions. The conservative voters of the South, who had traditionally cast their vote for the Democrats, have now switched party on a grand scale. What we are now witness to could well be a permanent change in the relations of strength in American politics, which may spell an end to the Democrats' automatic majority status and the beginning of a period marked by frequent shifts of power.

How can this electoral outcome be explained? How could the Republicans advance so strongly just two years after they lost the presidency to Bill Clinton by a convincing margin? The traditional economic explanations no longer suffice. The US under Clinton has experienced high economic growth, low inflation and unemployment, and a falling federal deficit. Such things normally favor the party in power. Not this time.

Other explanations are thus needed. Perhaps the most common one, aside from those focusing on the unpopularity of the President and the indecisiveness of his administration, have to do with the frustration felt by voters over the development of society, and their anger over the arrogance of the central government. There is a widespread feeling in the American electorate of powerlessness and uncertainty as to what the future holds in respect to jobs and the economy. There is also a growing discontent—some use the word “rage”—with the failure of those in power seriously to tackle such pressing problems as health care, crime, the deterioration of the big cities, and the drug culture.

Bill Clinton and the Democrats had two years during which to do something about these problems, but the results have been mixed. The cornerstone of Clinton's program—the great health care reform initiative—never won the approval of Americans, because it was too bureaucratic and complex, and it

could easily be painted as "state socialism" by unscrupulous adversaries with millions of dollars at their disposal. The American mass media, moreover, have scrutinized Clinton with a critical ardour they have not displayed since Nixon's second term.

Poll after poll confirm the people's dissatisfaction with the deadlock in Washington. In the mid-1960s, no less than 75 percent of the people trusted government to do what is right all or most of the time. Only 19 percent shared this opinion in January, 1994. When asked which power center or actor really controls the federal government in Washington, 57 percent replied "lobbyists and special interests," while only six percent named the President, and 16 percent the Democrats in Congress.

Dissatisfaction with government, then, has increased markedly since the 1960s. This is also clear from Kevin Phillips' new book, *Arrogant Capital*. Phillips is one of the great prophets of contemporary American politics, and he has a special capacity to foresee new trends and to formulate fitting metaphors. The media line up to hire his services at election time. His book—which alertly enough came out just before the November election—is a popularly written analysis of how the struggle for power in the capital has developed and changed since 1945.

For changed it has, and generally for the worse, if Phillips is to be believed. His thesis is that the two-party system no longer works, and that the institutions of government—Congress most especially, but also the courts and other agencies—have lost their capacity to alter and improve conditions for ordinary people. Washington today is characterized by a destructive interest-group politics, in which well-heeled lobbyists paralyze the decision-making process and block all significant legislation. Phillips estimates there are now upwards of 90,000 lobbyists in the capital alone, and another 50,000 in the states. Of Washington's 60,000 lawyers (!), many work as lobbyists for domestic or foreign clients. The congressional staff has also grown rapidly since the war, and today consists of 20,000 persons.

Phillips' purpose with these figures is to shed light on the decay of American democracy. In terms virtually apocalyptic, he describes the formation of an elite culture that undermines democracy and ignores the needs of ordinary people. The apocalyptic element lies in his comparison with other capitals which once grew mighty and great, but which declined and lost their influence at last (Rome, Madrid, the Hague). So will be Washington's fate as well, he warns, if the governing groups do not reform the political system speedily and thoroughly.

I believe the author is quite right that the two-party system in the US has outlived its day. It is an absurd thought, actually, that the entire spectrum of political views in so large a country could fit within just two parties. If the United States had a multiparty system of a West European type, the Democrats

would dissolve into three or four parties, and the Republicans into two or three. The two-party system today reflects but a fraction of all the movements and opinions that flourish in American politics, on both the national and local levels. It is not so strange, then, that growing numbers of voters feel increasingly alienated from the system, and abstain from political participation altogether.

Throughout most of US history, Phillips notes, the genius of American politics was that ballot revolutions every generation swept away failed establishments and created new ones. Now that can no longer happen; "permanent Washington" has dug in, leaving every new congressional majority with an antiquated structure that is almost impossible to penetrate or reform. If it is to work again, the author contends, Washington must be "purged and revitalized." This is most likely an accurate diagnosis, but one can reasonably question whether the medicine Phillips himself prescribes would lead to any lasting changes. The problems of American democracy cannot be solved by moving Congress out to the provinces during part of the year, or by making it easier for representatives to spend more time in their districts. Nor can one expect any miracles of such reforms as national referendums or term limits.

The basic problem is of a different character. The US has the world's oldest constitution still in force, and it is revered by most Americans. The separation of powers, however, which the Founding Fathers devised over 200 years ago, has long since been overtaken by developments. Today, it is perhaps the foremost hindrance to the realization of the popular will. As the governmental system is presently constructed—with institutions that counteract and obstruct each other—all significant change is virtually impossible. Indeed, the point of the Founding Fathers' design was precisely to discourage changes of this kind, for they feared the power of unchecked popular majorities, and sought to guarantee that no branch would be able to wield more power than another. This system has led to the result today that politics has lost its capacity to improve conditions for the man in the street. Fundamental constitutional changes are needed, together with a comprehensive reform of campaign financing. Phillips, unfortunately, has little constructive to suggest in this area.

The reader of Phillips' book would find nothing surprising in the outcome of the November election. But one seeking a sense of what the new Republican majority might do with its power should consult another recently published book, *Dead Right*, by the journalist David Frum. Frum has a background as a conservative author, and at present is a columnist for the business magazine *Forbes*. Frum followed the so-called "conservative revolution" of the 1980s from a seat in the gallery, and the fruits of his labor may now be inspected in what is surely one of the most intelligent accounts of the Reagan and Bush years that has been published so far.

Ever since its formation in the early 1950s, the conservative movement in the US has been animated by two leading ideas: the menace of anticommunism abroad, and the need for a radical reduction of the federal government at home. The first principle was set at nought by glasnost and the fall of the Soviet empire. Ironically, twelve years of Republican rule in the White House (1981-93) helped to undermine the other. Contrary to prevailing wisdom, the 1980s were a time of disappointment for American conservatives, according to Frum, for it was then that it became clear that leading conservative politicians and intellectuals were not, despite their high-flown rhetoric, prepared to put their principles into practice. During the years they controlled the White House, the Senate, and the federal courts, they never dared even to begin the dismantling of the welfare system that had built up under Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson.

During Reagan's presidency, Frum reminds the reader, hardly a single federal entitlement program was abolished. And this for a very simple reason: Americans may be individualists, but the system of social protection that has been created through Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid has a very strong backing in public opinion, which is something no administration that wishes to survive can overlook. These programs were therefore allowed to continue growing under both Reagan and Bush. Since, at the same time, defense expenditures were enormously increased and taxes were heavily cut, the result was a gigantic federal budget deficit.

In practice, Frum claims, the American right has not—when it has held the reins of government power—stood for any other policy in welfare questions than its criticized liberal opponents have done. Government spending has continued to soar regardless of the political color of those in power. In the Reagan years alone, spending exploded from \$808 billion to an inconceivable \$1,144 billion (as reckoned in 1990 dollars). David Frum sighs despairingly over these figures, and deplors the emergence of what he calls "big government conservatives."

To conceal its ideological retreat, the right abandoned economic issues in the 1980s and instead began talking loudly about moral and social issues (abortion, prayer in schools, sexual instruction, affirmative action). In these areas, the state was not to be passive or neutral; on the contrary, in order that free abortions might be ended and the schools purged of offensive literature, these self-same conservatives wanted (and still want) the state to be extraordinarily active, and to intervene in the most private aspects of citizens' lives.

Here Frum puts his finger on the moral conservatives' most sensitive point: they want the same government towards which they feel such a strong aversion in economic matters to intervene and to legislate in family and moral questions. But why should government meddle in people's private lives but

refrain from taking responsibility for how the nation's economy fares? Why should lawmakers decide which women can have abortions but avoid regulating corporations that pollute the environment? And does not state intervention in private life entail a curtailment of just those values of individualism which conservatives otherwise defend so heatedly?

The objections to this contradictory position are many; the answers, in the degree they can be found at all, are often evasive. Frum realizes that a continued fixation on moral questions is no winning strategy for American conservatives. Instead, he places his hopes in finding a "mean guy," who can lead the fight against suffocating government and start cutting the holy entitlement programs. A conservatism that just administers the welfare state does not deserve its name, he avers.

For a moment one could believe Frum had a crystal ball when he wrote these lines, for Newt Gingrich of Georgia, the new Speaker of the House, has emerged as the new hope of the American right following the November election. Gingrich has long been something of a congressional "bad boy," and he has relentlessly attacked lax and costly social programs. His overriding goal in politics is to abolish the welfare state as it now exists in the United States, and to replace it with a system based on charity and voluntary contributions. So he has said, at least.

But will Gingrich and the new right-wing majority actually move from words to deeds? Will they dare to challenge the interests which have everything to gain by the status quo? The opening stages of the new Congress hardly so indicate. Among the first things Gingrich took up after the election was a proposal to institute compulsory school prayer, i.e., just the type of question moderate Republicans desperately want their party to stay away from. He has since managed to back away from several of his more far-reaching economic policy positions and radical social recommendations, explaining that they are not "written in concrete." If this retreat continues, Gingrich will soon sound like any other ordinary politician, and David Frum and his friends will have to search around for a new saviour.

Even if, against all expectation, the Republicans actually try this time to implement their proposals for radical change, they will undoubtedly meet with the vociferous resistance not just of the opposition and the President, but of the media and the citizens as well. In less than two years it is election time again, a fact not known to increase the boldness of politicians. The realities of electoral politics increase the risk that, by that time, Newt Gingrich, Senator Bob Dole, and other Republican activists will have been tamed beyond recognition by the machinery of compromise and deadlock that makes life so frustrating for American lawmakers.