

DECISION FOR THE DECADE

By Rabbi Baruch Cohon

Meet a budding political dropout. Me. I don't contemplate this move lightly. After all, I'm proud to say I cast my first vote for Harry Truman. For the succeeding 59 years I voted in every election I could. I believe in our system, despite the fools and scoundrels we sometimes put in office, and I believe everyone eligible should take part in it. I cheered when they lowered the voting age to 18, remembering the days when I was considered old enough to risk my life for my country but too young to vote. Or even to buy a drink. So what changed?

Recently I saw a TV news feature entitled "Disaster Politics." What an ultimate redundancy, I thought. Politics today IS a disaster, from California to Iraq and back again.

The media reinforces the negative impression, indeed contributes to it. Spend 5 minutes reporting on a rescue effort in a flooded town, and an hour debating the next attack on the government. Placing the evacuees is much less interesting than placing the blame. I mean, if Al Gore was in the White House, there would be no flood, right?

Flailing Democrats confront floundering Republicans. And 200 million Americans get lost. We are trying to wage a war against an unacknowledged enemy, without an adequate tax base or manpower base – let alone a workable strategy. This is not a "war against terrorism" because there's no such thing. Terrorism is a method, not an enemy. The method is what we still have no counter-strategy to defeat. However, there is also a real enemy out there, with real fighters, real weapons and a real goal – to destroy us. That enemy is the Muslim world. That includes Saudi Arabia and Syria and Iran. Big Oil's buddies. We can't win this struggle until we identify the enemy.

What about our officially enunciated goals in the Middle East? Exporting Democracy is a fine idea, isn't it? Sure, assuming a receptive importer is out there. Elections in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia produce results that disprove our theory. Then we see Gaza. Hamas Arabs kill some Fatah Arabs and drive the rest out. So Israel and the West rush to reward Fatah for their defeat by subsidizing what's left of Arafat's gang, in the idiotic hope that a futile fellow like Abbas will be a legitimate peace partner. Peace conference today; suicide bombing tomorrow. What about winning the war first, and holding a peace conference afterwards?

And now we come home. Locally, regionally or nationally, our leaders and would-be leaders are busy condemning each other and excusing their own scandals. Whether it's the mayor of L.A. or Arnold the Great, or various officials in other states and in Washington, we see influence-peddling and corruption and injustice that we'd like to think is limited to the proverbial Third World. It's not.

The run-up to next year's national election features multiple choices and not very good ones. Competing candidates canvassing for cash. Sure, I know – money is the life-

blood of politics. Arguably that eliminates the best qualified candidate in each major party, and I'm talking about Bill Richardson and John McCain, both of whom are getting sidelined by the louder voices and the fatter wallets. Surveying the rest of the field, I find myself turning my back. Mute the TV. Ignore them all. Enough already.

My top problem is that staying home on Election Day will solve nothing. Wasn't it Winston Churchill who called democracy the worst form of government ever invented – except for all the others? Our own tradition in *Pirkey Ovot*, the Teachings of the Fathers, reminds us to “pray for the welfare of the government, because without it every man could swallow his neighbor alive.”

Yes I am tempted to drop out. Daily I am tempted. But chances of it happening are slim. I know myself and I know my country. So this whole exploration of the more repulsive side of politics is not meant to convince you to boycott the process. What I really would like to do is to challenge all of us to find some serious and deserving candidates to support. In a more perfect world we'd have a viable third party. But we don't. So let's forget parties and find policies that make sense. Here's my shopping list. You won't find anything here about Global Warming or Abortion. But these issues are at least as urgent.

- We need National Health. Not because some hysterical filmmaker says so but because our current system is broken. Health care is a medical matter, not a bean-counter's fief. We need a system where doctors are responsible to patients, not to insurance companies. Great hospitals aren't there to produce profits; they must produce cures. Granted, no government controlled process is very efficient. But no other single payer system is even possible. It works pretty well in Israel, given the option to go outside Kupat Holim and consult private doctors at private fees for those who need them and can afford them. In a larger country, Canada has a workable system – not perfect either, but more reliable and more affordable than ours. Given the fact that insurance company lobbyists in Washington alone reportedly outnumber both houses of Congress, no current candidates are saying much about this issue. Let's find one who does.
- We need Excess Profits Taxes, on Big Oil for starters, and then maybe on some other war profiteers. We know what's happening at the gas pump, and we know about the obscene profits the oil companies are declaring. They are the only ones winning the war. So let them pay for it. And reduce the astronomic national debt in the bargain.
- We need to overhaul our national security and foreign policy. Once and for all we need leadership that recognizes we are at war and who the enemy is. Then we need to develop a strategy to defeat that enemy – even if it means a draft. That is a bad word for all the candidates, and for the mothers of America as well. But nobody joined the National Guard to police the streets of Baghdad. One tour of duty after another for these hapless volunteers is totally unfair. Such a policy only exaggerates the average citizen's indifference or opposition to the whole

war effort. If we truly face a national danger – and I believe we do – then it is every American's duty to fight it.

One more word about our war policy. As those of us who experienced the 40's remember, we had four words that helped us win World War II. Two of those words were "total war." Everyone was involved, whether in the armed forces, in a war plant, as an air raid warden, selling war bonds or knitting Bundles for Britain – it was your war. The other two words were "unconditional surrender." When an SS squad burned a Russian village, or a kamikaze sank an American ship, Roosevelt and Stalin did not invite Hitler or Tojo to a peace conference. We cannot afford to treat Al Qaeda or Iran any differently.

All three of my issues are controversial, of course. In politics everything is. Help some, hurt others. But survive! That's the bottom line, and it is our job to find leadership that will work for that goal. Once we gain that goal, we might have the breathing room to deal with our other issues, like overdue immigration reform and like our labyrinthine tax system.

Let's look for the right potential leader, come up with our few bucks each, and make our voices heard.

Above all, let's not leave politics to the politicians. Look what they did with it so far.