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Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

January 11, 2005

Section: MAIN

Edition: ONE-THREE

Page: 9A

BRING BACK MODERATION

EXTREMISM ON EITHER POLITICAL SIDE DIVIDES AND WEAKENS AMERICA
BOB PERKOWITZ - SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

Most of us have lived under moderate American presidents for our entire lives. From Truman to Clinton, presidents got elected by moving toward the political center. Extremists, like Goldwater and McGovern, got slaughtered at the polls. In the 2000 election, even George W. Bush appealed to moderates with his promises to be a "compassionate conservative," protect the environment and provide a restrained foreign policy.

It appears that the era of moderation is over. Bipartisanship is out. We are officially polarized. This phenomenon did not happen overnight. The political spectrum has steadily shifted to the right since the 1970's, and with the 2004 election we crossed a tipping point. Nixon's "Southern Strategy," followed by Reagan's calculated melding of religion and politics and Newt Gingrich's party loyalty tactics, have made the new Republicans dominant. Once blue states are now red, and the politicians from the former Confederate states have taken over the Union.

It is hard for many of us to understand the political polarization that divides America today. Every other week I leave my home in Charlotte, spend a few days working in San Francisco and experience this polarization directly.

Here in North Carolina we tend toward the conservative Republicans. Conversely, most people in San Francisco are progressive Democrats.

In North Carolina, most people like President Bush's obvious Christian values and are impressed with his steely resolve in the war against terrorism. We know where he stands on the issues. Bush believes the business of America is business, and we believe he is putting America on a path to a safer, morally better, more financially prosperous future.

In San Francisco, people are terrified of Bush. They believe Bush is the "Great Misleader" in his pronouncements and his policies. They believe Bush's war on terror is misdirected against Iraq, draining our country of about a billion dollars and 20 American lives each week. They believe Bush is bankrupting the nation and destroying our natural heritage and environment to boost the fortunes of his financial backers.

In 2004, Bush energized his base instead of appealing to all Americans. The election was

political warfare. Bush and his constituencies won. Whether you believe President Bush is saving or destroying America, you can be certain that he will not flinch. The next four years may well be more productive or destructive, depending on your perspective, than his first term.

With Republicans controlling the Congress and presidency for an extended period, we have time to watch the resulting events unfold. Will Iraq evolve into a prosperous beacon of peaceful democracy, or will it remain a fiasco with the U.S. military holed-up in regional fortresses propping up a makeshift government? Will the economy collapse or has Bush stimulated strong growth that will wipe out his federal deficit? Will global warming change our climate, causing a multitude of problems, or is it just a massive fabrication by environmental fanatics? Will other nations around the world see just how right America is and begin following our lead, or will they form countervailing regional economic and political alliances and let us go our own way alone?

Whatever happens, President Bush and the new Republicans deserve the credit or blame. We are unlikely to see the results of the global warming issue in Bush's second term, but his economic and foreign policies should produce some interesting results. While we wait, there is at least one thing each of us can act on that might make things better for all of us.

We can be more moderate. With their redefinition of marriage and seeming insensitivity for the sanctity of human life, the extreme left goes too far. With their intellectual dishonesty, greed and intolerance, the extreme right goes too far. Extremism on either side of the political spectrum serves only to divide and eventually weaken America. We all should work to rein in the more radical elements of our political persuasions.

Moderate leadership made America the strongest nation in the world, bringing us prosperity, clean air and water, and the Freedom of Information Act. Let's hope we are not now moving away from this progress. Bipartisanship works. It would be great to see a thaw in the polarization, get away from the "follow-the-spin" divisive conversations, and get back on that moderate path together.

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