



Max M. Kampelman Papers

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THE DEMOCRATIC CENTER: STABILITY WITH CHANGE
BY MAX M. KAMPELMAN

A core concern of the "Center" in American life is the reconciliation of stability with change. Is it possible to blend a desire for stability with a recognition of the imperatives of change? Can social change help stabilize political institutions? Those in the Center answer with a conditional yes -- only if the Center holds. The search for consensus, within the framework of a free competition of ideas, is the genius behind the Center's approach to the apparent dilemma posed by the desire for stability and the need for change.

Too many on the far right are too readily prepared to sacrifice change for the sake of stability. In celebrating stability in the extreme, they tend to be like ancient artists who attempt to confront death by stopping time, freezing the moment in eternity like Egyptian mummies of the pyramids.

Those on the far left seem willing to trade stability for change. To champion change above all else is to be like Goethe's Faust. He must yield his soul to the devil only when finished with an ambitious and reckless pursuit of change that eventually forces Faust to beg for the passing moment to remain.

In contrast, those in the Center try creatively to utilize existing institutions to effect the appropriate doses of social change while preserving the institution that facilitates the change. Its virtue is in the simple idea that there is more that unites the vast majority of us than there is that divides us. We are united in support of the notion that, since each of us is at any time a member of a majority as well as a member of a minority, we must organize ourselves to respect differing views and, if possible, to seek to harmonize them. Thus, I am white (majority in the United States), Jewish (minority), and a Democrat working for our common values in a Republican Administration. We each have our own variations on this theme.

In his classic work Political Man, sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset creatively links overlapping memberships to political moderation. Such situations create cross pressures and thus lead to centrist rather than extremist tendencies.

Furthermore, self-preservation has loudly proclaimed that, with fluctuating identities moving each of us in and out of the majority category, we had better respect the minority's right of expression and platform, or ours may tomorrow be in jeopardy.

Responsible minorities also have learned the lesson taught to us by James Madison in the Federalist Papers. No minority can prevail in our system without the support of other minorities. To achieve social change, majority support, and to become part of a national consensus requires coalition building. Blacks effectively used stable institutions, such as free speech and assembly. They drew upon the support of liberal whites and religious groups to achieve social changes that paradoxically reinforced and stabilized the institutions themselves. The quest for coalitions pushes groups in pursuit of social change to the Center in American politics.

But this tendency is not one which automatically or inevitably renews itself. There are two constant and profound threats to the tendency to move toward the Center.

The first is the threat to the Center arising from the very nature of intense ideological convictions. I do not here refer to the holding of ideas or ideals, both of which are indispensable and, fortunately, sui generis to the human being. I refer rather to the sense in which the convictions of the ideologue are so deep that the need for them to prevail becomes more important than the need to preserve the stability of society by seeking broad consensus. Compromise to the ideologue becomes a form of a Faustian bargain with Mephistopheles.

This must be distinguished from the fierce, combative debate and excessive rhetoric that, for example, is part of our periodic political campaign theater. These do not threaten the stability sought by the Center. It is where an extreme combat spirit and the attendant lack of civility continue after the decision and flow into violence, fear, and coercion that there is a threat to stability. We know from our history that we have had such moments and we have survived them with dignity and renewed self-assurance. We must continue to teach our young and the dispossessed that the Center's dedication to the democratic process is the surest path to a change that does not threaten stability.

A more serious danger today stems from excesses of political partisanship -- not new in our history -- that in its current form may threaten our national security.

No society, including our own, has discovered the law of perpetual motion to assure its future. We cannot be sanguine that our political system can survive. The contradictions in the nature of man and the complexities arising out of our extraordinary ability to expand the horizons of our minds threaten stability everywhere. New technological and scientific discoveries and the revolutions that inevitably flow from them require social changes that are potentially destabilizing to societal institutions. It is understandable that these large movements should unnerve bodies politic and those governed by them everywhere. We here in America cannot escape their consequences as we see anti-democratic forces elsewhere mobilizing to become a part of those historic forces.

Our country today faces a serious external threat. The Soviet Union represents the most direct danger in this century to our society and its values. The depth of that danger lies in the Soviet ability to camouflage its totalitarian commitment, its imperialist intentions, and its powerful military machine with words of peace, change, and democracy. Soviet authorities have no illusions as to what they seek and what and whom they oppose. They understand the need to mobilize all of their resources in order to win; and they do not shy away from the word "win."

The battle is being joined in all areas of the world. In Europe, 1983 is a year of the missile. War in the Middle East remains imminent. In Asia, blood continues to be spilled to satisfy Soviet ambitions. In Africa, storm clouds are not far from the horizon as the Soviet Union fully appreciates the strategic position occupied by the continent. And in Central America, the danger to us is increasingly obvious.

Differences between the United States and the Soviet Union are profound ones. Our systems and our values conflict. Our cultures are different. Our perceptions of human nature diverge. The task of overcoming these problems without war and violence merits all of the patience, perseverance and ingenuity we can muster. To preserve peace and our values requires the strength that comes from unity and determination.

A 19th Century de Tocqueville discussed the vitality of democracy and its institutions. He predicted the United States would realize its maximum growth through the exercise of the freedoms that were inherent in our democratic system. He suggested, however, that we would face a serious challenge from growing aristocracies. With

uncanny accuracy, he juxtaposed the freedom of the United States with the servitude of a Russia growing stronger.

We must today ask ourselves whether a democratic society can mobilize its resources to meet the danger to itself emanating from strong authoritarian and totalitarian societies that are not "encumbered" by open debate, internal divisions, frequent free elections, and the need for full public disclosure of all affairs of state.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt intuitively anticipated this danger to democracy as he faced the Nazi threat and forged his innovative version of a bipartisan approach to foreign policy. The need is for a strong Center.

In foreign policy and national security affairs we cannot afford the polarity and divisiveness that frequently become a characteristic of partisan politics. A modern bipartisanship limited to vital questions of our national security will not diminish in any way the opportunity for free debate and criticism, which is, after all, the essence of our democratic system. There is a renewed tendency for Republicans to oppose the policies of a Democratic President and for Democrats to oppose the foreign policy of Republican President. This instinctive partisanship is destructive to the unity upon which our strength depends, and counterproductive to the cause of peace. It leads to the weakening of the Center. Let us support or oppose foreign policy positions not on the basis of whether we are Democrats or Republicans, but on the basis of our own individual intelligence and rational thoughts as citizens.

It is the task of the Center to remind us that we can be proud of the virtues of our free society. The Center must declare the need unmistakably to champion and defend our society and its values. This requires a vibrant domestic society which, committed to stability and change, meets the evolving needs of its people. It also requires a strong national defense to avoid nuclear escalation, deter aggression, and discourage coercion.

A strong Center requires a bipartisanship in national security policy that is more than lip service and symbols. It requires intense collaboration on all levels of foreign policy formulation and implementation. The Center must today respond to the challenge of whether our democratic government can successfully meet, short of war, the external challenge of totalitarianism while being attentive to the need for economic development and social change in the less developed areas of the world.

Freedom House understands these challenges. It pledges itself to the revitalization of an intelligent, creative, and dynamic Center in American life, one that is wholeheartedly committed to human values and to the values of liberty and democracy. Only with such a Center can we continue to blend a desire for stability with a recognition of the imperatives of change. With this process, social change can help stabilize political institutions. Change and stability are not only compatible, they are indispensable. But only if the Center holds. That is our responsibility.