

Election 2012: Schadenfreude With a Smile

By Doug Bandow – 11/12/12

To listen to some of my friends, the world is about to end. With the reelection of Barack Obama the Communization (or was that Islamization?) of America now is inevitable.

I'm not thrilled with President Obama's victory. I am a classical, not a modern, liberal. That means I believe in limited government, civil liberties, peace, and social tolerance. At most the president represents the latter, but even there he is suspect. Religious liberty is not high on his list, especially after the decision to force faith organizations to underwrite insurance coverage for contraception.

Still, I have to admit that Mitt Romney's loss left me with at least a half smile on my face. Mostly it's a result of schadenfreude, one of the baser human emotions, I admit. But I just can't help it.

Leaving neocons out of power, unable to start new wars. There was no group lusting for a return to power more than the neoconservatives. It has been four long years since they've been able to bomb another country, invade another nation, or occupy another people. So many foreigners who deserve to die, so little time in which to kill them!

Until early Tuesday evening the neoconservatives were still maneuvering for positions in what they expected to be the new administration. Granted, at the final debate two weeks before the election Romney declared himself to be a peacenik. All he lacked were flowers in his hair and a tie-dyed T-shirt. But the neocons weren't worried. They had listened to Romney shout "We Are Number One!" for five years and remained true believers. Then the election returns popped the bubble. Horrors! We really are out of Iraq. The troops really are coming home from Afghanistan. We really aren't going to invade Syria. Maybe we won't even go to war in Iran. For neocons, America has entered the Night of the Living Dead.

Highlighting the "strange new respect" among conservatives for Romney. The Right long has complained that conservatives come to Washington, where a "strange new respect" sets in as they morph into liberals. There's some truth to the charge. The longer legislators stay in Congress, the more money they vote to spend. Critics of agencies turn into defenders. Some conservatives end up looking a lot like, well, liberals.

During this campaign many conservatives were horrified at the prospect of Romney winning the GOP presidential nomination. They didn't trust him because, frankly, he was untrustworthy. He had taken just about every position on every issue. He said whatever he thought would help get him elected. It wasn't clear that he believed in anything other than the candidacy of Mitt Romney. Thus, conservatives warned that the world would end if he was selected.

Yet after he won the nomination many of the same people announced that Romney embodied conservative values was the guardian of Western civilization. The world would end if he was not elected. Now these conservatives have reverted to their original position. Romney never was a conservative and lost because he was not a conservative. As they had previously warned, of course.

Rejecting the Symbol of Corporate America. Mitt Romney clearly was the pro-business candidate. He was not so clearly the pro-free market candidate. The difference is critical. Far too many Republicans confuse the two. Market capitalism is inclusive, providing opportunities for all and using competition to constrain abuse. That's good for society, but not for businessmen who would prefer to make money the old-fashioned way -- through government.

Romney attacked the Obama administration for "crony capitalism" and might have turned out to be a born-again disciple of Milton Friedman dedicated to unfettered markets. However, Romney's unprincipled pragmatism and corporate deal-making raised big red flags. Some of his investments at Bain Capital benefited from government support. He favored continued subsidies for clean coal, ethanol, and nuclear power on top of massive past subsidies for clean coal, ethanol, and nuclear power. President Obama may be worse, but he made no pretense of being a market-friendly guy.

Dismissing Disconnected Elitism. By all accounts the private Romney was a good man. Nevertheless, he demonstrated early and often that he, as has been said (not always accurately!) of the rich, was different. It might not have mattered if he was president. Nevertheless, comments like his gaffe about the 47 percent created real cause for concern. Dependency on government is an important concern, but explicitly writing off nearly half of the population was more than bizarre. Other comments suggested that he lived in a rarefied world into which most of us never enter. Oblivious would be a kind description.

The contrast with Ronald Reagan could not be stronger. Reagan had achieved much and lived well by the time he was elected president. But he still had a common touch and never forgot his roots. He appealed to people throughout society in a way that Romney could not. I don't mind if a rich guy with a privileged upbringing is elected president. But I would prefer that, whatever his ideology, he has some idea what life is like for the rest of us.

Defeating an Unprincipled Pragmatist. On a straight-up comparison I suppose I should prefer the unprincipled pragmatic centrist to the principled liberal activist. The former is likely to at least occasionally come close to my views, though admittedly more out of inadvertence than anything else.

Still, I just don't get the unprincipled pragmatic centrist. What is politics without principle? I understand what makes President Obama act, admire his commitment to a cause, and respect his success in transforming politics more in his image. We mostly disagree on the end-points we desire, but we both want to move the nation and the world in another direction. As for Romney? He just wanted to, well, do something. But I had no idea what.

Of course, he talked a lot about things he wanted to do, but experience indicated that what he said didn't matter. After all, he has been for and against lots of the same things throughout his career, including abortion, Ronald Reagan, and health care mandates. He was for whatever felt good at the moment. Or, more likely, what he believed was likely to make others feel good. It is easier for me to respect political leaders who believe in something.

Preserving Balance in the U.S.-Israel Relationship. Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of the Romney campaign was its emphasis on Israel. At times it wasn't clear where Romney thought he was running for office.

There is much to admire in Israel and no one who visits Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial and museum, can forget the monstrous crimes that gave such an impetus to the creation of the modern state of Israel. It helps explain the "never again" determination, especially in light of tyrannical misgovernment throughout the Arab world.

Nevertheless, Israel is not without fault. In particular, its occupation policy in the Palestinian territories -- essentially a mixture of colonization and Apartheid -- has created a huge barrier to peace. And extremists like Foreign Minister Avignor Lieberman advocate treating Palestinians as second class human beings.

Israel needs America to be a real friend, which means giving sometimes unpopular but necessary advice. Unfortunately, Romney announced that he would essentially ask Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu for permission to use the bathroom. President Obama has not stinted on his support for Israel, but refuses to contract out American Middle Eastern policy to the most radical elements of the Likud Party. Balance is essential in the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Punishing Hubris. The best evidence that there is a god is Romney's defeat. No doubt there was arrogance on the president's team. Still, President Obama at least had reason to be confident: a prior presidential win, proven "ground game," steadier campaign, and persistent lead in most swing states.

Romney came into Election Day with a genuine chance to win, but objectively looked to be the underdog. He could triumph, but no one thought victory was certain. Except, apparently, Romney and his staff. He reportedly was "shellshocked" by his defeat. His aides didn't bother to prepare draft concession remarks in case he lost, and the campaign had purchased fireworks releasing red, white, and blue smoke for use when his victory was confirmed. It makes one wonder in what other areas Romney was blind to reality.

The Romney dream world enveloped much of the conservative movement. Although a few brave souls admitted that they were pessimists, on November 6 the Right's echo chamber filled with claims of record turnout, predictions of a swing state sweep, and belief in a potential landslide. The certitude expressed even caused me, who expected a narrow but decisive Obama victory in the Electoral College, to wonder: What am I missing?

There is little more satisfying than seeing the arrogant, whoever they are, get their comeuppance. Romney and those around him undoubtedly are decent people. Still, after the candidate had trouble connecting with people, ran a gaffe-prone campaign, identified with the policies of the previous, discredited Republican president, and took whatever positions seemed convenient at the time, you would think someone in the campaign would have realized there was at least a chance he might lose! Maybe this experience will cause the bright people who surrounded Romney to exhibit a little more realism in the future.

Of course, November 6 was about more than schadenfreude. After all, there are some possible positives from President Obama's reelection. He no longer has to convince the electorate that he is tough, so maybe he will rediscover the value of civil liberties. He could keep the Justice Department out of Colorado and Washington, in which voters approved initiatives to legalize recreational marijuana use. He might accelerate the military departure from Afghanistan. In a version of "Nixon goes to China" President Obama could lead the campaign to reform entitlements. Still, I'm not going to hold my breath. I expect a reprise of the first administration: a flood of spending, more needless war-making, little concern for civil liberties, and many other disappointments.

Even so, when I think of the election result a small smile appears. It could have been worse!