DEFINING THE DEMOCRATS

by Ross K. Baker

A public philosophy is the ectoplasm of a political party. Candidates represent the party, but, in a larger sense, they are epiphenomenal; if the party's principles and organizing concepts are shopworn, even the most presentable candidate will have difficulty transcending them. In such cases victory is not impossible, just unwarranted.

By the late 1970s the public philosophy that found expression in the New Deal and had delivered into the hands of the Democrats the loyalties of the greater part of the American electorate was dissolving. Increasingly, Democratic members of Congress were discovering that the standard party appeals for more and better federal programs, for elimination of all social risks, and for amiable accommodation to an international order in which the United States was just another player were not going down well in their states and districts.

This was not merely the grumbling of the right wing of the party, although there was a good deal of sullenness in the Henry Jackson/Max Kampelman/Jeane Kirkpatrick faction—a disaffection even, that lured many of these neo-conservative Democrats into the world of Reaganism. The gut-wrenching problem was that many of the party's most attractive young officeholders were convinced that the party had marched into an intellectual cul-de-sac from which no effective policies could emerge.

This conviction was in some measure well founded. But at least as serious as the staleness of the existing Democratic public philosophy was the absence of any party figure willing to synthesize a new philosophy out of the various conceptual fragments floating through the party in the late '70s. Because Jimmy Carter had no ties to any of the major constituency groups in the party, the early betting in 1977 was that he might provide that synthesis and was intellectually capable of such an undertaking. While it is un-fashioned to point to the Carter years as anything but the reducto ad absurdum of New Deal liberalism, the first critical step in forging a new Democratic public philosophy is traceable to the years 1977–81. The Carter administration was, paradoxically, the mortuary of the old public philosophy and the nursery of the new.

The area of greatest intellectual innovation for the last Democratic administration was in the field of foreign policy. The introduction of the human rights standard into the formulation and application of American foreign policy was a change of the first magnitude. There were two problems with it: first, that it was applied mindlessly; second, that its accouchement was Jimmy Carter.

As to the first, the human rights test was applied with such rigidity that it tended to produce ludicrous results and displayed an embarrassing tendency to equate greater and lesser violations. Holding up other nations to a human rights standard—if it is to be more than a hypocritical ploy—necessitates the rendering of judgments on friend and foe alike. Because information about relatively open societies is more readily available than intelligence on the activities of dictatorships, the former are somewhat less successful than the latter in keeping their troublemakers away from TV cameras and the snooping of Amnesty International. Consequently, one heard a great deal about hunger strikes at Ulster's Long Kesh prison and about Israeli interrogators cuffing Palestinians but rather little about Syrian and Argentinian thugs who were gleefully torturing opponents of the regime or pushing them out of airplanes. For all of its limitations, however, adherence to human rights was a reasonable test on which to base this country's willingness to favor another.

Inherent in the human rights approach was a subtle policy for containing Soviet expansionism: Since cruel and repressive societies, or those in which hunger and want were the norm, were breeding grounds for extremist opposition groups. This approach admitted, then, that one could have legitimate grievances against an authoritarian ally of the U.S. without, ipso facto, being a Communist. And, somewhat optimistically, it also held that a Marxist society did not necessarily have to gravitate to the Soviet orbit. We shall probably never know whether this approach would have worked with the Sandinistas. It worked with Zimbabwe because there never was any danger of Robert Mugabe becoming too intimate with the Soviet supporters of his long-time antagonist, Joshua Nkomo. While insurgent groups such as Namibia's SWAPO and the anti-apartheid African National Congress were not openly embraced by the Carter State Department, South Africa was publicly cold-shouldered. There were important tactical differences between Zbigniew Brzezinski and Andrew Young on Africa, between the National Security Council staff and the U.N. delegation, and, to be sure, a very personal animus.
between Secretary of State Vance and Brzezinski. But the lineaments of a distinctively Democratic foreign policy were beginning to emerge.

While not scrapping realpolitik in its entirety, it was a foreign policy markedly more relaxed toward the USSR while, at the same time, using reform and cooptation of leftist movements as an inhibitor of Soviet expansionism. Its attitude toward the Third World group that frolicked at the United Nations was, in the words of Lincoln’s favorite humorist, Petroleum V. Nasby, “of an exceedingly accommodating nature.” The danger there was one of getting too much into the spirit of the occasion. The administration tried to write off the notorious U.S. vote against Israel in the U.N. as a blunder. It was not. Neither was it an elaborately planned rebuke by the group of diplomats that New York’s Mayor Koch delights in calling “Arabists.” It was just another example of Carter going too far. In this case he sought reconciliation with the Third World but ended up propitiating it by offering up one of our allies.

If Carter administration foreign policy was promising as the basis for a more general reworking of one element of the party’s public philosophy, why was it such a disaster in practice? Here is where the midwifery of Carter himself explains the Carter response to the invasion of Afghanistan. Similarly, it is difficult to believe that the idea for a Reconstruction Finance Corporation was hatched in the Hoover administration. Unlike any we had encountered before, if for no other reason than that it was foisted on us. We had industrialized our nation and, in the final analysis, even the most obstinate Democrat—any citizen—could see that the nature of the American economy was changing. It was a change unlike any we had encountered before, if for no other reason than that it was foisted on us. We had industrialized our own pace and largely on our own terms; now “deindustrialization,” as it is sometimes callously denominated, seemed to be taking place according to someone else’s timetable.

What was worthy, or at least promising, in the Carter administration’s foreign policy efforts tended to be contaminated by the more general failure of those four years. Indeed, it is rare in American political life that an administration is so discredited that all its ideas are dismissed as useless; yet such is the lingering knell of the Carter years. One is reminded of the many people who refused to believe that the idea for a Reconstruction Finance Corporation was hatched in the Hoover administration. To paraphrase Lord Bryce, in American politics nothing fails like failure.

What was it, then, that was in the trunk when Jimmy Carter drove the car off the cliff? There was, first of all, the insertion of the human rights standard as one determinant of foreign policy and a disposition to flourish that standard at dictators in the manner of a crucifix before a vampire. There was also a commendable restraint about making a too hasty judgment about reading cold war implications into each and every sectarian quarrel in the world—an approach used to very good effect in declining any involvement with Somalia in its war with Ethiopia. There was a recognition that Soviet expansionism continued as a danger but that reform and remediation ought to be the first step and not just an ornamental bauble to hang upon massive arms shipments. There was a disposition to take arms control seriously and even a proposed treaty in SALT II. There was, above all, a very nice assumption of confidence in ourselves and in our system: Not every challenge had to be seen as a thrust at the core values of our nation and, in the final analysis, even the most obstreperous leftist state would have to come to terms with an international financial structure of our design—an advantage that Mr. Reagan chooses to ignore as he pursues the bracing activity of kicking little countries around.

Had Jimmy Carter abstained from the foolish and reckless device of a grain embargo after Afghanistan—a move that chastened no one and cost him dearly in political terms—and concentrated on verbal abuse, he would have been better off. Had he not coupled truculent words with feeble actions on Iran, he might still be around. It is a safe bet that if Walter Mondale becomes president this year, the parentage of his administration’s foreign policy will not be difficult to trace.

**THE HOME FRONT**

Coming up with an organizing concept for domestic politics is, of course, more of a challenge, but even here something of a consensus has already begun to emerge over one point of doctrine: that government has an important role to play in shaping the economy.

In their headlong retreat from Jimmy Carter, the New Deal, social spending, and other expressions of modern liberalism, many Democrats huddled for a time in the lee of conservative economics. As if casting out some unappealing demon, even the most sturdily liberals began to sound like freshmen cramming for Milton Friedman’s economics final. Gone was their faith in the one element that in modern times has set Democrats apart from Republicans: a Hamiltonian state guided by Jeffersonian values.

Any Democrat—any citizen—could see that the nature of the American economy was changing. It was a change unlike any we had encountered before, if for no other reason than that it was foisted on us. We had industrialized our nation and, in the final analysis, even the most obstinate Democrat—any citizen—could see that the nature of the American economy was changing. It was a change unlike any we had encountered before, if for no other reason than that it was foisted on us. We had industrialized our own pace and largely on our own terms; now “deindustrialization,” as it is sometimes callously denominated, seemed to be taking place according to someone else’s timetable.

That the economy of the year 2000 would be qualitatively different from that of 1980 was not in dispute. One might quibble about whether biotechnology or robotics would be the high-flier at the beginning of the third millennium, but that a transformation was afoot admitted of no controversy. Monetarists and post-Keynesians agreed on that. What was very much at issue, and continues to be, is whether this transition is to be guided solely by the forces of the market or by some strategy—presumably an intelligent one. If there were costs and dislocations attendant on this transformation, costs not likely under free market forces to be equitably shared by the whole population, there would be only one agency impartial enough to equalize the burden and maintain the priority of the common good. But having just finished savaging the Federal government for its role as a maladroit social tinker and promiscuous lady bountiful, how could the centrists and liberals marqués turn around and assign to the government the responsibility for what amounts to economic planning?

The answer is that not all Democrats have embraced what has come to be called “industrial policy.” Charles Schultze, for example, has referred to it as a solution in search of a problem, but it is simply the hottest issue to hit the party since the Great Society. Stripped to its essentials, industrial policy seeks to place in the hands of
the Federal government responsibility for developing a strategy for guiding the economy over the transitional period. Some versions call for industrial development banks to revive declining industries; others shun any "pocket-book" and dwell instead on institutions to foster labor-management cooperation. The underlying assumption in all approaches seems to be that a willy-nilly laissez-faire approach to an economy in the throes of change is socially costly and would not necessarily redound to the common good.

Whatever industrial policy may lack as a set of economic remedies (Schultze says that an enlightened monetary policy and a responsible fiscal policy is all the industrial policy we need), it has political virtues for a party in search of a beacon. In the first instance, industrial policy creates no serious discontinuities with the orientation of the party in years past. Indeed, it stands as a redefinition and reaffirmation of the enduring Democratic conviction that government has some positive role to play in fostering democratic values and in averting a too-stark delineation between haves and have-nots. Government may not be able to pick the economic winners, but it certainly can identify the economic losers and use the agency of government to minister to them. The losers, moreover, have tended to form a large element of the party's traditional constituency.

But the Democrats did not need an industrial policy to win over this constituency. They may not have liked the group that Walter Fauntroy calls "the coalition of the dispossessed," but they had them. The challenge that faced the Democrats in the aftermath of the Carter debacle was that they needed more than that. Even before Jimmy Carter was ousted from the White House, they knew who they needed to broaden the party's base. This is where industrial policy became the talisman.

The Democrats needed the Jerry Brown and John Anderson voters, who were looking for more than social programs for social wrongs. They were younger, more affluent, better-educated people, liberal but also growth-minded, and they wanted a vision of the future that neither major party seemed able to provide. There was something about both Brown—with his trendy sci-fi outlook on politics—and Anderson—with his cerebral and independent perspectives—that created a cache of voters that the Democrats coveted and needed. Industrial policy—with its panoply of pro-growth, high-technology, collaborative elements—was to be the key to this electoral treasure house.

It was the fulfillment of the old Girl Scout slogan: "Make new friends and keep the old; one is silver, the other gold."

Industrial policy, however, suffers from some of the shortcomings of the Carter human rights approach and from a few of its own problems. It also lacks two things the human rights approach lacked: someone to articulate it clearly and appealingly and an administration to apply it intelligently. The articulation of a policy, of course, is not dependent on an administration able to implement it; it might even bring such an administration into office if the theory were expressed engagingly enough to appeal to a majority of the voters.

As things stand now, industrial policy has been featured in a number of major party documents, but it is still very much the subject of insider talk. It has not passed into the public language and is unlikely to be the subject of anything more than marginal mention, unless the Republicans trot it out as proof of the Democrats' secret longing for centralized economic planning. Mondale has spoken approvingly of industrial policy's best-known booster, Robert Reich, but has dealt with the theory itself in only a very circumspect manner.

STAYING THE COURSE

The Democrats' effort to fashion a new public philosophy goes on, but its progress is not visible in the ultra-conventional world of election-year politics. Walter Mondale refrains from mentioning human rights policy because of its unpleasant association with Jimmy Carter. He does not push industrial policy because, frankly, it is as yet a new and untested doctrine around which consensus is emerging in only the most inchoate fashion, and then only among party elites. But should Mondale or any other Democrat prevail in 1984, the work of defining this nascent public philosophy would be accelerated. Win or lose, however, the process of definition and re-definition will continue.

The Democratic party has gone a long way since its defeat in 1980 and even since its modest comeback in 1982, but its future course is not so well set that it cannot stray from that lodestar by which all successful parties must steer. It will not likely take the sharp leftist course that Jesse Jackson advocates, although it will almost certainly take a more inviting negotiating posture with a variety of countries with which the U.S. has differences. It will also not head off into the rightward direction that some Democrats have seen as the only way to appeal to a conservative electorate. No Democrat will propose expending as much of the national treasure on defense as does Reagan, and none will be as socially punitive or as prone to intervening in the area of public morals.

In terms of symbols and rhetoric, the key words—after they finish cudgelling Reagan with "fairness"—will be "growth," "competitiveness," and "cooperation" on domestic and economic policies, and "interdependence" and "negotiation" in foreign policy. Much of their time in 1984 will be spent attacking Reagan, but the tactical considerations of the campaign should not obscure the fact that the party that was assailed as being without ideas now finds things stand now, industrial policy has been featured in a number of major party documents, but it is still very much the subject of insider talk. It has not passed into the public language and is unlikely to be the subject of anything more than marginal mention, unless the Republicans trot it out as proof of the Democrats' secret longing for centralized economic planning. Mondale has spoken approvingly of industrial policy's best-known booster, Robert Reich, but has dealt with the theory itself in only a very circumspect manner.

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