

# **L707 Analysis of the 2012 Election**

## **Session 3**

### **National Will**

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The Constitution provides a political framework for forming a “more perfect union,” “establishing justice,” and “promoting the general welfare.” What role do these phrases imply for the federal government in ensuring distributive justice? There is a big divide among the political parties on this issue. In the most general sense, the Romney/Ryan ticket appears to have adopted the “rugged individualism” ideology. This ideology calls for a little role for government, emphasizing individual responsibility for one’s welfare. This seems to reflect the well-known ideology of Ayn Rand, an intellectual mentor of Paul Ryan. The recent *Tapes* of Romney’s remarks at Boca Raton reflect this view. The Obama team clearly favors a “communitarian” approach, continuing the “progressive” ideology dating back to Teddy Roosevelt, but brought to fruition by FDR and the New Deal—and further implemented by LBJ, and to a lesser degree by Nixon. The current Republican ads featuring a 1998 tape of Obama advocating “redistribution” to ensure everyone has an opportunity, reflects, I believe accurately, Obama’s ideology. As I indicated in the first session, I believe this election, at its core, presents the American people with a choice between these two ideologies. The events of the recent week confirm my view.

The choice between the sharply contrasting views of what our society will look like will have an important, if not decisive impact on whether we will remain a cohesive society where individuals will sacrifice for the common good. This is the focus of this lesson. The following is a summary of five major factors that affect national will. As you read it, relate it to what you observe in the United States today, especially the competing visions represented by the two parties. I will directly distribute additional readings that will amplify the distinctions between the two parties.

### **Introduction**

An essential element of national power is the willingness of the people of a country to subordinate, when appropriate, their individual welfare to that of the nation. Without this element of power, the other elements of power, e.g., economic, military, are limited. National security involves more than military security--it also includes economic, social, and political security and well-being. The people must also be willing to sacrifice to meet threats to those elements of national security as well. Too often, we think only in terms of unity as it pertains to patriotism in times of war--a willingness to serve one's country in face of an external threat to its physical security. The kind of unity we are talking about here goes beyond that. The nation is facing a multitude of threats to its security, e.g., economic conditions, crime, drugs, social discord. When we talk of cohesion then, we must keep this broader context in mind. It may be just as critical for people to work harder, have higher quality output and productivity, save more, accept a lower wage, and pay more taxes, as it is to serve in the military in wartime. What, then, are the factors that determine national cohesion, what is the current “State of the Nation” with regard to cohesion in the U. S., and how can we influence conditions to ensure that we have

enough of it? In this paper, I will discuss five factors that have been identified as impacting on cohesion: 1) Tradition; 2) trend of recent experience, 3) crises, 4) leadership, and 5) equity.

## Tradition

In general, societies that have homogeneous cultures—religious, ethnic, racial, language—tend to be more cohesive. Without doubt, the United States is one of the most diverse countries in the world, and getting more so every day. Several years ago, it was pointed out that Fairfax County, Virginia had 153 different nationalities. One high school had students from 73 different nationalities. Presumably, we are a “melting pot” where people of diverse backgrounds somehow blend into a compound. While this has occurred to a certain extent in the past, currently we are more of a “tossed salad” than a compound. What does this cultural diversity mean in terms of cohesion? Will we make personal sacrifices for the common good without a crisis involving an external threat? We are not likely to find the answer until we face a crisis. The need for cohesion is more likely to be to face internal problems rather than external threats, and research indicates that cohesion to face internal crises is more difficult to achieve. The current debate about immigration illustrates this issue, as does the economic crisis.

What common values cause us to work together and make sacrifices for the common good? We have made a concerted effort to build a cultural stock that offers national identity. We have a flag, a national anthem, monuments, holidays, and a plethora of myths and legends that are designed to create a common heritage that defines nationhood. As historians have pointed out, we started out as thirteen “sovereign” States and many, if not the vast majority, of citizens identified themselves with their State in terms of loyalty. There is some evidence that the term “The United States *are*” was common until after the Civil War. Subsequently, the verb *is* has been used, connoting a more unified political entity. There are segments of the current polity, e.g. the Tea Party, which has brought that connotation into question.

Some argue that one essential cultural condition must be a common language. Others dispute that contention. One can say I am French, German, English, Japanese, Chinese, etc., and it carries an ethnic/linguistic/national identity. Most of us don’t know what our ethnic blend is and while most speak English and profess the Christian faith, those hardly identify us as “Americans”. There is a body of thought that says the most solid basis for solidarity in the United States is commitment to the Constitution—its stated values and the process it provides for meeting the goals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble. As we will see below, one of those goals is to “establish justice”. For many, this proposition has some validity; for others, it has little meaning. For the latter, it connotes a “welfare state.” The Constitution, its content and process, certainly serves as a basis for what “We the People” value. Whether this is *sufficient* to define our nationhood is a moot point; for many, that is an essential condition. Common values/ethos, are also an essential ingredient.

## Trend of Recent Experience

“Nothing succeeds like success” is a well-known phrase that expresses a theoretical principle in common language. Recent success of any group gives confidence that the group is on the right track and future expectations tend to be high. People are therefore willing to make sacrifices for the common good. When things have not been going well, the reverse is true unless there are indications (e.g., new, charismatic leadership) that conditions are going to be better in

the future. National leaders often manipulate this variable during crises, such as wartime, in order to raise morale. Can a leader do the same for internal crises, such as a recession/depression? Current polls show that the public believes we are on the wrong track, but they are confused as to which ideology is best suited to get us back on track.

## Crises

Crises, especially those that threaten the survival of a group, cause people to cohere and make sacrifices. External threats are most effective. Internal threats often lead to squabbling and scapegoating. As will be seen in the discussion below, some believe it is impossible to create a sense of community at the national level that will elicit sacrifice unless there is a clear and immediate external threat. Thus, to declare a “war on poverty” to elicit sacrifice (e.g., more taxes) is doomed to failure. Others, of course, take a different view. For a crisis to create cohesion and self-sacrifice, even in wartime, assumes a sufficient cohesion already exists. People must believe there is something worth sacrificing for, even if it is an external threat to their existence as a country. When the external threat is ill-defined, e.g., Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, it is difficult to maintain a sense of sacrifice over a lengthy period. This problem is compounded when there have been questionable rationales for going to war, e.g., the Tonkin Gulf incidence and the WMD threat of a “mushroom cloud.”

When the threat is internal, the crisis can create discord and partisan bickering. The current economic threat, specifically the national debt, illustrates this dynamic. There is much evidence to suggest that it will be extremely difficult to elicit the required sacrifice that is necessary, to include a willingness to accept deep spending cuts and increased taxes. To get elected, candidates promise to avoid these inconveniences and instead, promise painless bromides.

## Leadership

For the Constitution to serve the purpose of unifying the people, they must have trust and confidence that it is indeed meeting their needs. Of all the factors that impact on cohesion, the quality of leadership stands out as the most critical. People must have confidence that their leaders are competent and must trust them to serve the public rather than pursue selfish goals. This trust and confidence is at the heart of people’s willingness to make personal sacrifices. The Founding Fathers emphasized this factor and predicted that the great experiment on which they embarked would succeed only if public servants were competent and had a “public service” ethic. As Paul Volcker once said:

**“There are those who think we bureaucrats are—or at least should be—an endangered species. My message tonight is that this is not true...it takes people to run government, inevitably a lot of people. To do the job at all well requires professionalism, impartiality, strong ethical standards and a commitment to public service...our basic goal must be to restore public trust. We need a renewed sense of a public service ethic, a code of conduct that emphasizes again the priority of the public interest and dedication to the missions set by the Congress and the President.”**

The term “bureaucrat” has come to carry negative connotations. We don’t want some “bureaucrat” telling us how to live our lives; we don’t want some “bureaucrat” managing our health care, etc. This overlooks the fact that “bureaucrats” exist in all civilian organizations, including health insurance organizations that specify what options are included in a policy. It seems that the term only applies to government civil servants. This attitude evolves into the slogan, “get the government off our backs;” “the government is not the solution, it is the problem.” The solution to a serious economic threat is to “throw the rascals out,” without any notion of what the real solution is. We will discuss this at length in the fourth session. This is a serious problem.

Trust and confidence of the public is essential for effective government. If this trust is eroded, we are less effective; if it is destroyed, the nation is in peril. As the noted author Sissela Bok puts it:

**“...Trust is a social good to be protected just as much as the air we breath or the water we drink. When it is damaged, the community as a whole suffers; and when it is destroyed, societies falter and collapse.**

**...Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain...”**

Sissela Bok Lying, 1978.

It is not only individuals, but entire institutions that lack trust and confidence. Read the latest polls to see where our institutions stand today. This is a fatal condition; the problems that we face are complex and technical. Few people have the background to understand economics and global dynamics. They rely on trusted sources to provide answers. Too often, these sources are demagogues—talk show hosts, or candidates pandering to voters—who tell their audiences what they want to hear and provide simplistic slogans. Much of it blasts “the government bureaucrats” in Washington.

## **Equity**

The matter of economic equity, or fairness, is at the heart of how we will meet the debt problem. How one approaches national cohesion as it concerns ensuring equity depends a great deal on one's political philosophy. In general, conservatives downplay the concept of a national “community” where the people are united by ties of brotherhood and are willing to share benefits and burdens to insure that justice is distributed nationwide. This is not to suggest that conservatives do not believe in distributive justice; rather, they see this best handled at the local level--and by the private sector. Some argue that distributive justice should be left to the market place, unencumbered by government interference. Liberals tend to see a larger role for the government. Conservatives tend to also view national cohesion in terms of defense of country and use of power in international affairs. These different views are manifest in polls which show that liberals show a greater preference for “America the Beautiful” (which lost out by a narrow margin when the current anthem was designated) as the national anthem as compared to conservatives, who favor the “Star Spangled Banner”. An examination of the music and words of the two reveals the logic of these preferences. Liberals tend to favor a national community, a family where people care for each other. William Schambra quotes LBJ as reflecting the liberal point of view:

*“I see a day ahead with a united nation, divided neither by class nor by section nor by color, knowing no South or north, no East or West, but just one great America, free of malice and free of hate, and loving thy neighbor as thyself. I see America as a family that takes care of all of its members in time of adversity ... I see our national as a free and generous land with its people bound together by common ties of confidence and affection, and common aspirations toward duty and purpose.”*

Pp. 31-32, “The Quest for Community”

Schambra takes a dim view of LBJ’s “Great Society” and its effort to create a national community of brotherhood, in which the Federal Government, particularly the President, was to be the catalyst for creating the sense of community. The attempt to replace the local community did not work. He claims the “new left” recognized this in the 60s and started the move back toward decentralized community. This group was followed by the other end of the political spectrum, who was being alienated by the Federal Government. George Wallace benefited from this movement and Carter and Reagan won by repudiating it.

Why the failure of national community? Schambra says it is not natural. It is difficult to develop a bond of emotional depth beyond the level of family and neighborhood. A crisis can pull people together, as in time of war against a clear enemy, but this is temporary. A “War on Poverty” or an “Energy Conservation” program equivalent to war will not do it. He takes us back to the founding fathers, where the Federalists argued for national community. The Anti-Federalists argued that the conditions necessary for a sense of moral community could not be created above the local level. He identifies those conditions as: General equality of wealth and power; a homogeneous population; a commonly shared, rigorously inculcated moral or religious tradition, etc.

As Schambra points out, Mondale adopted LBJ’s view of America and was soundly rejected. Dukakis and other Democratic leaders have taken that view with similar results. Clinton backed away from that position. Schambra says the notion of community at the national level is passé. He favors a return to local community identification as espoused by Reagan. Schambra rejects the claim that a vote for Reagan was a vote for selfishness, greed and caring only for self; rather, it was a quest for community at the traditional level--the local group. Both Bush I and Bush II favored the Reagan approach. Clinton and Obama favor the FDR/LBJ approach. In a mid-2008 article in “Imprimus”, the Hillsdale College monthly, and the author opined that the election would determine if we would have a Hoover administration or a FDR administration. It seems to me that this stark choice is being offered in the 2012 election.

Kevin Phillips, also a conservative, sees it differently than Schambra. In his Post Conservative America (Chapter 11, “The Balkanization of America”), he questions whether such small-is-beautiful can keep the nation from being torn apart by parochial interest groups pursuing their self-interests. He suggests that the breakdown of national community has caused Americans to turn to less exalting forms of self-identification such as ethnicity, regionalism, selfish economic interests, sects, and neighborhoods. The several causes of this trend include: Collapse of the “Manifest Destiny” ethos; the general failure of the Great Society; the failure of the “melting pot”; regional competition for economic and political power; racial, sex, and age “rights”; political balkanization; major elements of society pursuing their own narrow self-interests.

Phillips argues that progress and growth have always come from a movement away from the limited, the parochial, to the more general and universal. As a result of the forces toward

balkanization in the U.S., he sees the widening of vertical and horizontal schisms in our society, potential social discord, and socioeconomic disillusionment of the lower class. He asks: Has America lost its *élan vital* and *civitas*? The quest for localism, neighborhood, family, and church has a nice sound, but seems romantic and sentimental. Small-but-beautiful may turn into small-is-divisive or even small-is-dangerous.

Who is more nearly correct? The future of the United States as a powerful nation may depend on the path we take. The dominant religious values in the United States seem to support a community of all mankind. The dominant secular economic, political, social and psychological values seem to support the philosophy individual responsibility. The latter appears to govern everyday behavior more than the former, notwithstanding entreaties from religious leaders. This poses both a moral, as well as a practical, question. Morally, are we obligated to ensure equity at the national level? From a pragmatic viewpoint, do we need it to survive as a strong nation?

Since World War II, patriotism and calls for self-sacrifice have largely centered on anti-communism and a strong military to meet the communist threat. Andrew Bacevich describes this ethos in his book, "The New American Militarism." In the absence of a "clear and present danger", we have not been too successful in mobilizing national will to solve our domestic problems. The crucial question is whether or not we can pull together and elicit the sacrifice to meet these challenges. And, can we do it without a sense of equity among the people?

As Phillips points out, balkanization is not new to U. S. society. The myth of the "melting pot" should not delude us; we are a heterogeneous society. The question is, does this present a problem for national cohesion, national will and national security? I believe it does. My assessment is that the challenges facing the U. S today, particularly in the economic area, will require significant sacrifices on the part of most Americans. Given our current balkanization and dominant societal values, the critical question is whether we will be able to elicit the necessary voluntary self-sacrifice. Many people agree with Schambra and argue that national cohesion is relevant only to national military action and foreign policy. Others argue that, while a sense of national community is necessary, and a perception of equity is a component of that, this cannot come from the national government. Rand Paul (GOP candidate for the senate in Kentucky) and The Tea Party seem to advocate that approach. National programs to ensure equity are labeled as "socialism." Romney seems to endorse this view.

In general, conservatives approve of national government spending, to include deficit spending, when it comes to the military and wars. They decry FDR's domestic spending (the New Deal) to stimulate the economy, but support the enormous spending for WWII, which provided the massive stimulus that revived the economy. Liberals view the domestic spending for roads, schools, forest rehabilitation, etc. as legitimate activities for government to stimulate the economy. This ideological divide is at the heart of the current debate over the Obama stimulus policy. We should have a brisk discussion of this in the classroom.

My purpose in posing these questions is not to sway anyone's political ideology; rather, it is to enhance understanding of the critical moral, and practical, issues involved in domestic policy. This debate was at the heart of the struggle to adopt our constitution. It continues to define the central political divide in this country. What does the constitution say about it? It depends on who interprets it! We need to think this through as we make decisions about policies to meet the challenges we face.

