

RED, WHITE, BLUE AND YOU

Or, The Color of Politics

An Essay by Charles Ebeling

Presented at the Chicago Literary Club

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Dedicated to the memory of my good friend and neighbor

Marshall J. Goldsmith

Who was my guest at the Literary Club, October 24, 2011

Some of us recall a great 1986 film called “The Color of Money,” and no, cynics, it wasn’t about politics. That film earned Paul Newman the Oscar for Best Actor as a pool hustler and stakehorse, who enjoyed a glass or two of J.T.S. Brown Kentucky bourbon, my favorite beverage from college days.

But, unless I’ve missed a documentary or foreign film along these lines, I haven’t yet seen a dramatization called “The Color of Politics.” Yes, there is such a thing as “The Politics of Color,” but as social commentary, not as a film title.

“The Color of Politics” is equally real though, and has a long history. I first dabbled in the palette of politics on election eve, 2008, when I presented before the club on that occasion an essay I’d titled “One Collage Too Many,” painting a picture of the many problems inherent in the Electoral College system for electing American Presidents, an issue which still haunts us today.

I began that essay by reflecting these thoughts, and I quote myself: “Light begets color. And colors fan emotions. Facts and emotions churn together, and the resulting political party leanings are reflected in a patchwork painting – a colored collage of states on the map of America.” I discussed how that collage of strongly Republican red and equally reliable Democratic blue states left a relative handful of so-called purple battleground states where the election would really be fought out. As we all know from following the news, in this regard at least, over four years, nothing but the candidates has changed.

So now, amidst the final flames of another Presidential battle, I’m inspired to turn on a different political light – and I did say light, not right – and guide us into taking a closer and hopefully non-partisan look at the history and power of color in politics, not the ethnographic “Politics of Color,” but the just plain graphics of the “Color of Politics.”

We learned in school that the primary colors are normally thought of as red, green and blue. And what is color, you may be thinking? Victoria Finlay, author of a recent book called “Color: A Natural History of the Palette,” says this: “Color – like sound and scent – is just an invention of the human mind responding to waves and particles that are moving in particular patterns through the universe –

and poets should not thank nature, but themselves, for the beauty and the rainbows they see about them.” She goes on, “Just as a prism shows us a multitude of different wavelengths --- which our brains call colors – so each color has produced a spectrum of personalities.”

Color psychology is about how color influences human behavior. How people respond to color stimuli varies from person to person. Each of us can think about how we respond to various colors. How about you? One study on the emotional reactions to colors by Americans shows that 35 percent prefer blue, followed by 16 percent green, 10 percent purple and just 9 percent red. The study’s author believes that the dominance of blue and green may be due to a preference for certain beneficial environments in the ancestral world. Other evidence shows that color preference may depend on ambient temperatures. If that is the case, preferences for cool colors like blue and green should have been on the upswing this year of record heat waves across our land, while warm colors like red and yellow could be on the wane. Some research also indicates that women respond more positively to warm colors and men to cool. I wonder if a woman did that study.

Color psychology is based on several key principles. The first is that color can carry a specific meaning, and that is either based on learned meaning, as in use of red for stop signs, or biologically innate meaning, such as studies that show that facial redness is associated with testosterone levels in humans and that male skin tends to be redder than female.

The next principle is that perception of color causes instant evaluation by the person who sees it. Hence the placebo effect in pills. “Hot-colored” pills work better as stimulus and “cool-colored” pills seem to work better as depressants. The evaluation process forces color motivated behavior. Red is believed to increase appetite, and is thus commonly used in fast food restaurants, hence McDonald’s long use of hungry red in its rooftops together with the richness of gold in its architecture. Color usually exerts its influence automatically. Red seems to make time pass more quickly and blue more slowly. Lastly, color meaning and effect has to do with context as well. Red lighting in casinos is part of a strategic

plan to keep customers inside longer. Athletes wearing red uniforms have been found to win more often than those in blue, even in the Olympics.

The power of color in politics might have begun with the Roman cult of purple, the hue associated with the ruling elite of ancient Rome. But it didn't begin there, because the history of color and its association with power politics goes back much, much further.

Color and power go all the way back. Ochre – iron oxide – has been used for its symbolic purposes on every inhabited continent. Forty thousand years ago, natives in Swaziland mined red and yellow pigments for body painting. The word “ochre” comes from the Greek, meaning pale yellow, but somewhere along the way, the meaning shifted to suggest something more robust – earthier, browner and redder. Red became the first colored paint, and the most secret. Royal Aztec mummies were not only painted in ochre, but buried with pounds of it, for its magical power. The first white settlers in North America called the indigenous people “red Indians,” because of the way they painted themselves with ochre as a shield against evil. Red had for many centuries heralded the divine. Red still appears across Europe as a favorite color among the pageantry of the royals.

Mix energetic red with stable blue and there is the Roman or imperial purple, the symbolism of which is as associated with power and prestige as the color of royalty, and of the highest vestments of the clergy. Its presence at the center of both sexuality and power was played out at Cleopatra's elaborate dinner feast for Caesar in 49BC, marking his victory in a key battle at Pompey. Her whole palace was lined with purple porphyry stone and satiny purple fabrics in what was described as “luxury made mad by empty ostentation.” On returning to Rome, Caesar had designed for himself a totally purple, sea-snail-dyed, full-length toga. Soon anyone else found wearing purple might be killed for their impertinence, and as time went by, at least considered militarily or politically important or perhaps just wealthy.

The Byzantine emperors continued the Roman tradition of the exclusivity of purple. Purple shared with gold the very connotation of triumph. The Greek words for the purple cult of Rome and Byzantium seems, according to author

Victoria Finlay, to have a double connotation of the words “movement” and “change,” which to me seem to have some odd echoes in the political sloganeering of even today. “Movement,” “Change,” even “Forward?”

Then there is blue, derived from ultramarine, and the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli. The stone is found only in Chile, Zambia, a few small towns in Siberia, and most importantly, in what is known as The Land of Blue – Afghanistan. If ever there was to be a country singing the blues, its Afghanistan. Ultramarine paint was so expensive and rare that Renaissance painters, including Michelangelo, had to wait for their rich patrons to give them the paint.

Mohammedan blue replaced the rare celadon in the art of China’s Ming Dynasty. What was called Prussian blue by photographic pioneer John Herschel gave us the modern “blueprint.” By the 1950’s when American children could no longer relate to Prussian history, its namesake blue gave way to what the modern crayon companies called Midnight blue. I repainted my first car, a 1957 Triumph TR3 with three hand-rubbed coats of glimmering midnight blue.

Where does this all lead us? The red, white and blue of the American flag represent our nation. George Washington believed the stars were taken from the sky, the red from the British colors, and the white stripes signified secession from the home country. The Continental Congress passed the “Flag Act,” which ordained a national flag with thirteen stripes, representing the 13 states, in alternate red and blue, with 13 stars of white on a blue background. Our founding fathers recognized the potential of colors to communicate meaning. The white was symbolic of purity and innocence, the red, hardiness and valor, and the blue, vigilance, perseverance and justice. Americans may not know this lineage, but they respond viscerally as the power of these colors evokes patriotic spirit and unity as a country.

You may already be aware that in most other long-established democracies, unlike in contemporary America, the color red represents left-wing and social democratic parties, and blue represents right-wing and conservative parties.

That use of red and blue emanated from the same institution that gave us the political terms left and right. At Westminster, England, the government, which is historically the conservative Tory party, sits to the right of the Speaker, and the opposition Whigs, which was first the Liberals and Socialists, later Labor, sits to the left.

Similarly, those who identified with tradition and the monarchy waved royal blue, while the rabble-rousing reformers waved the red flag. Green in most cultures is almost universally associated with environmentalist parties.

The practice of using colors to represent parties in the United States dates back at least to 1908. That year the New York Times and Washington Post printed color maps, using blue, yellow, red and green to represent state leanings.

While there were some bits of historical use of blue for Democrats and red for Republicans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the simple fact is that today's Republican red and Democratic blue states, that we see, are an invention of the news media. It does not reflect any "official" color choices made by the parties. The advent of color television prompted political news reporters to turn to color-coded electoral maps.

One source says that from 1976 to 2004, the broadcast networks tried to avoid color favoritism by alternating every four years between blue and red for the incumbent party. Another source credits NBC's John Chancellor for asking for a large illuminated map, and when Jimmy Carter won a state it would light up red and when Gerald Ford won one it would glow blue. All the networks followed, using different approaches. NBC's David Brinkley made a telling point when he referred to Ronald Reagan's 1980, 44-state landslide victory as being as blue as "a suburban swimming pool." The accepted contemporary terms red and blue states, as a sort of shorthand for an entire sociopolitical worldview, were finalized in the 2000 election, not by some cosmic decorator, but by the long-term host of NBC's "Meet The Press," the late Tim Russert.

The day of imperial purple may be far from over. The so-called battleground states, lately known as purple states, are swing areas where both Democratic and

Republican candidates receive strong support, without a traditional overwhelming majority for either. As we know so well, these are the states where the most political capital, in every sense of the word, has been spent.

If it weren't for the archaic Electoral College, the entire national electorate would be divided into purplish communities and districts that are much, much smaller than states. As Princeton University's Robert Vanderbei wrote when he unveiled his political map of a Purple America, "The electorate is not so highly polarized by geography. The U.S. is not as divided as the political pundits believe." The so-called red and blue state standards may well be challenged again in this year's election.

Cleopatra may have started something good after all, when she introduced Caesar to purple. With any luck, for the breadth and depth of opinions represented in our sprawling American democracy, that sumptuous blend of red and blue called purple could potentially become the newest and dominant "color of Politics."

Then a bright young Senate candidate, Barack Obama, perhaps put the editorial color chart of America into an appropriately complex context at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, when he described it this way, "We coach Little League in blue states and we have gay friends in red states. We pray to an awesome God in blue states and we don't like federal agents sniffing around our libraries in red states."

So, as modern politics continues to swing through the color spectrum, I hope that tonight's reflections have shed just a little more eye-opening light on the convoluted and still evolving cultural history of "Red, White, Blue and You," while adding some much-needed purple into the mix.

Chuck Ebeling has written and spoken on the need to reform the Electoral College. He is retired public relations executive at leading corporations, PR consultancies and not-for-profits, and the founder of the Ebeling PR-ize for cause-related communications at Bradley University and Loyola University Chicago.

