Restoring the Faith

By Amitai Etzioni

OME INAUGURATION day, as far as one can foresee, the next President will not be preoccupied by a war, a cover-up or a recession, the three major immediate sources of the nation’s self-doubt, loss of direction and crisis of confidence. Dealing with the deeper sources of the waning of legitimacy of our political system is much more difficult. Indeed, according to Max Weber, once the stock of legitimacy with which a political system is endowed by its charismatic founders begins to run out, it cannot be replenished from within. Internal breakdown becomes inevitable. Eventually, a new charismatic movement arises which, in turn, evolves and legitimates a new regime.

Other social scientists — myself included — have argued that a political system can legitimize itself from within through reform movements. Examples, however, are admittedly few and not completely compelling. When Queen Victoria, successor to two weak kings, was crowned, the British monarchy was widely regarded as nearing its end. Victoria, under the influence of an intra-institutional charismatic, Disraeli, became a powerful leader, setting both a domestic climate and a foreign posture. Similarly, de Gaulle restored part of France’s lost legitimacy. Churchill revived British democracy, paralyzed by Baldwin and Chamberlain. Andrew Jackson and FDR have been given similar credits in American history.

But these “precedents” have a common catch: the great leader, precisely by being charismatic and hence powerful, used means which undermined the government of laws while helping shore up other elements of its legitimacy and power. Victoria’s main service was to the monarchy, not to parliamentaryism; de Gaulle restored France’s sense of national pride but helped weaken its parliamentary system; Churchill was viewed as a great wartime leader but too powerful to be kept in office after the war; Jackson was charged with “populism”; Roosevelt, with dictatorial tendencies.

AND YET the new President could contribute greatly to the government of law and constitutional democracy if he were to invest his charisma in support of the rules of the game rather than charging gung ho toward any specific substantive program goals.

In a democracy, how a government accomplishes whatever it does is as fundamentally important as what it accomplishes. Acting within the framework of Constitution and laws, disclosing relevant information on the making of governmental decisions — these are rules of procedure, not substantive ends like having the world’s strongest army, abolishing poverty or landing on Mars. Democracy requires a willingness to employ only licit means in pursuit of goals, no matter how great one’s stake in the outcome or how worthy the purpose.

Curbing the government will not suffice — those who seek to influence it must also be made to play by the rules. Thus, a major drive to impose “law and order” on the big boys — the powerful institutions whose unrestrained pursuit of self-interest had led them to illegal campaign contributions, bribes, etc. — would be compatible with a democratic charismatic presidency. In contrast, a singleminded drive toward any specific policy goal would, at the very least, neglect our urgent need to shore up the rules of the game. Worse, the greater the devotion to the substantive goals the greater the risk that a charismatic President would again cut constitutional corners or permit allied private interests to put themselves above the law.

Concretely, a presidential program to restore respect for democratic procedures could focus on enacting and effectively implementing a series of measures often discussed but little practiced. These include stern curbs on lobbyists and interest groups, watchdog commissions to oversee the intelligence and policy agencies, “sunshine” laws to open up government’s decision-making procedures, severe penalties for politicians or administrators who succumb to corruption or abuse the powers of their offices.

The point then is not simply to catch the crooks but to restore the credibility of a government of laws, not to dwell on past transgressions but to reflect on them long enough to learn what they can teach us about how to make the democratic rule of law rather than of men more of a reality for the future. To forgive and forget before this is achieved will invite new scandals, likely to exhaust much of the legitimacy our form of government has left.

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