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The American president: One of us, not over us

by Abraham Unger

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In the late 18th century, the American presidency was a radical innovation in political history. Neither emperor nor king, the president of the United States was supposed to be “one of us”: a member of the rank-and-file electorate, voted by fellow citizens into executive office and bound, like all Americans, by the rule of law. A statesman above any sort of base partisanship by career and example, the founders envisioned that the president would be a leader unifying the country with a sense of shared purpose under the flag of persuasion rather than by force of authority.

If the framers of our Constitution were alive today to witness the sense of entitlement, the amount of money, and the seeming distance of presidential candidates and their campaigns from the folks in the American street, they would be heartily disillusioned.

All those who wish to be elected (or re-elected) as president come Nov. 6 have misplaced political values. They seem more worried about short-term, fickle ideological positions and outlandish fundraising than about engaging in a substantive policy dialogue with America, reflecting upon what it means to be a sustainable democracy in a fragile world.

We are living in a time unprecedented in history. Due to technology, the world is moving forward at a speed previously undreamt of. Revolutions started on computer screens result, just weeks later, in street riots. Massive, abstract Wall Street stock trades bring down major banks. A war against terror is being fought across the face of the entire planet.

Americans are barely keeping up. We are exhausted just trying to hold on to a rapidly diminishing First World economic advantage that has witnessed the breaking of our middle class. America has finally become what she sought to escape: a class-based society.

Sometimes, there is a faint whisper reminding us that our main goal as Americans is democracy. Whether as extremist in each of their ways as the Tea Party or the Occupy movement, those polarizing flip sides of the same coin of citizen frustration tell the majority of us in the center that something’s got to give.

Clearly, our politicians are no longer resonating with the electorate. Their incremental movements, whether rightward or left on all the major issues, whether about taxes or education, are so cautious and filled with so many thousands of pages of pork-smeared fine print that they keep America moving nowhere.

Where is the boldness and outsized vision of the Founding Fathers? Where is the readiness to take giant steps forward? Even the most strategic politicians of the previous century — FDR, LBJ, Ronald Reagan — understood the importance of action over incrementalism, of political courage over expediency.

The current crop of presidential candidates represents a dramatic decline in those classic values of the American presidency. They are combination bureaucrats and elitists, partisan and valueless, with one feature in common: a lack of earnest statesmanship.

On this Presidents Day, let's take a moment as Americans to recall how extraordinary is the idea and ideal of a national leader, elected democratically, embodying by his or her very office the vision and hope of a representative democracy called, at its founding, "the Union."

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