

**Henry Jackson Society  
Winter/2011**

**LETTER FROM WASHINGTON/  
In Search of the Center**

**By Lawrence J. Haas**

“It is generally recognized,” Richard Hofstadter wrote in his classic *The American Political Tradition*, “that American politics has involved, among other things, a series of conflicts between special interests – between landed capital and financial or industrial capital, between old and new enterprises, large and small property... The fierceness of the political struggles has often been misleading; for the range of vision embraced by the primary contestants in the major parties has always been bounded by the horizons of property and enterprise.”

Sketching, in 1948, what was then a bold new interpretation of American history, he wrote, “However much at odds on specific issues, the major political traditions have shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition; they have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man... The sanctity of private property, the right of the individual to dispose of and invest it, the value of opportunity, and the natural evolution of self-interest and self-assertion, within broad legal limits, into a beneficent social order have been the staple tenets of the central faith in American political ideologies.”

Though Hofstadter’s description of conflict between “landed capital and financial or industrial capital” seems outdated in post-industrial 2011, his broad point continues to ring true. We Americans are a people of the center, as we have defined it within democratic capitalism. We battle mightily among ourselves, but within shared parameters related to political thought and economic organization.

But, today, within those parameters, the public and its leaders in Washington are increasingly diverging from one another in their outlooks and their priorities. As a people, Americans remain centrist, more pragmatic than ideological, more focused on solving problems than seeking conflict for its own sake. But in the aftermath of November’s mid-term elections, and in a trend that has gathered momentum in recent decades, the two political parties (at least at the federal level) continue to move to the extremes, with an increasingly leftist Democratic Party doing battle with an increasingly rightist Republican Party, with each seemingly more ideological than pragmatic, more focused on seeking conflict than solving problems.

This month, Washington begins a new era of divided rule – with a politically wounded Democratic president, a new Republican-controlled House, and a Senate in which Democrats will enjoy a slimmer margin over the GOP (and in which, under the Senate’s byzantine rules, the GOP has more than the 40 votes needed to block action on anything anyway). That sets up a fascinating dynamic. On one hand, Washington’s growing extremism should push the parties further apart, promoting gridlock. On the other hand, divided rule should bring the parties closer together to find solutions to pressing problems, simply because each party will be accountable

for both the accomplishments and failures of government. The congressional lame-duck session of November and December brought both – continuing confrontation on some issues for sure, but also a surprising burst of bipartisan cooperation on tax cuts, arms control, social policy, and other issues. Whether extremism or cooperation will win out, and on what issues, will be the prevailing storyline of the coming two years.

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