

Editorial

The Hamlet principle

Abraham Lincoln's famous quip: you can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time, is relevant to the political fate of Newt Gingrich and Phil Gramm. The 1994 congressional sweep by neo-conservatives (better described as neo-fascists) testified to the stupidity of those who voted them into office; but the repudiation of Gramm in the Republican Presidential primaries by these same voters, shows at least their partial return to sanity.

Nonetheless, the level on which the primary fight is being conducted shows no cause for congratulations. The American people today have become foolish. They are willing to tolerate elections conducted as sales campaigns, because, essentially, they still wish to vote for the politician who offers them an apparently "good deal." They are willing to traffic in slogans, such as getting rid of "big government," or the need for "free trade." They are willing to allow the electoral process to be turned into just another soap opera, run by media experts.

What they have not yet been willing to do, is to take seriously their responsibilities as citizens of a republic. And this, unfortunately, is the stuff of which tragedies are made—the failure of a people to reflect upon, and then correct, their errors in judgment.

In a crisis period such as today's, it is not sufficient that the electorate is no longer willing to buy a Newt Gingrich or a Phil Gramm; we need an informed population prepared to support a President who will make urgently needed sweeping changes in policy, such as abolishing the Federal Reserve System. People recognize that they have been fooled; they must take the correct action necessary to change the situation.

The most serious problem that President Clinton faces is the low level of culture in the United States today, compared with that of even two generations ago. Whereas President Franklin Roosevelt, faced with the reality of the Second World War, mobilized the United States on a scale hitherto undreamed of, a similar mobi-

lization today is far more problematic.

The American people, even in the earlier part of this century, were far less educated than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Americans were the most educated citizenry in the world. William Shakespeare was the favorite author of Presidents John Adams and Abraham Lincoln, and soliloquies, such as Hamlet's famous "To Be or Not To Be," were memorized in the schoolroom. These plays became a point of reference for the necessary self-reflection which enables men and women to live up to their responsibilities as citizens.

Shakespeare, in his tragedy *Hamlet*, tried to arouse the English people to avert the calamity of a succession to power of James Stuart, following the reign of the pathetically indecisive Queen Elizabeth I.

We can easily imagine that the model of the moral coward Hamlet, was on Abraham Lincoln's mind as he assumed office, facing the question of whether to go to war or to accept destruction of the Union. Lincoln was able to rise above the cowardice of those who urged compromise on the question of defending the Union. The function of tragedy is to educate the audience, so that they can ponder the momentous consequences of acting, or failing to act, when history demands that the citizen rise above his or her fears, or merely private needs and considerations.

Tragedies occur when people stubbornly refuse to take actions which are dictated by reason, but which flout conventional wisdom. For Hamlet, this stubbornness was exemplified by his unwillingness to avenge his father's death in the face of a popular opinion which might condemn him for regicide.

Today, it is exemplified by the banality of the American people, most of whom are still willing to accept comfortable slogans in place of facing the implications of the present harsh reality. It is not enough that the voters have recognized how Phil Gramm and Newt Gingrich have fooled them; they must come to understand what it was in them which allowed them to be so fooled.