

EDITORIAL: Learning lessons from right & left

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Leave it to a conservative Christian columnist and a liberal Jewish comedian to provide wisdom amidst election-year political upheaval, uncertainty and malaise.

Cal Thomas, the widely syndicated newspaper columnist, TV commentator and former vice president of Moral Majority, wrote one of the all-time great columns in November 1992. It circulated just days after Bill Clinton defeated George H.W. Bush for the U.S. presidency, ending a 12-year run by political conservatives. The streak began with Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and included two Reagan terms followed by a single term with Bush I.

Editor Marv Knox

The Moral Majority provided millions of votes that carried Reagan and Bush to victory. Many political scientists agree Reagan would not have won his first term without near-unanimous support from the Religious Right. Ditto for Bush. And yet, as the sun sat on that political era, conservative Christians had little to show for all their hard work, campaign contributions and earnest prayers. Most vexingly, they had failed to reach their Holy Grail—repeal of the U.S. Supreme Court's [Roe v. Wade](#) verdict, which legalized abortion.

Newspaper readers might have expected Thomas to join his co-religionists and fellow conservatives in loud lament. Instead, he basically upbraided them for idolatry. Rather than place their faith in political parties, they must reassert trust in God. This seemed ironic, coming from a former Moral Majority leader. Churning out the votes was the Moral Majoritarians' forte.

But Thomas acknowledged political force is insufficient to change America. The battle for morality—mostly defined for the era’s conservatives by the legality of abortion—would not be won by political votes or Supreme Court seats, he argued. Rather, reason and gentle persuasion are the allies of justice, he urged, calling upon conservatives to throw down their yard signs, strip off their bumper stickers and make the kind of difference in individual lives that encourages young women not to abort their babies.

Fast forward 18 years, and Jon Stewart, the political satirist and host of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, made a balancing observation on National Public Radio’s *Fresh Air*. It’s been circulating for a few weeks leading up to the 2010 mid-term elections, where conservative Tea Partiers and mainline Republicans are expected to regain control of Congress.

This year, liberals are expressing the same kind of self-doubt, fear and frustration that marked conservatives at the denouement of the Reagan Era. Two years ago, Barack Obama rode a wave of hope for change to presidential victory, but that has evaporated in recession, high unemployment, war and healthcare uncertainty.

Fresh Air listeners might have expected Stewart to fan the flames of fear and hysteria. But instead, he said we’ll be all right. The United States has survived a Civil War and other tragedies, and our democracy is resilient, he noted, stressing, “... we always have to remember that people can be opponents but not enemies.”

Thomas and Stewart both offer good and cautionary words in the days leading up to the 2010 general election. We don’t know how votes will turn out. But whatever the outcome, this is not the end of democracy as we know it. Our nation has survived worse. Most of us who are old enough to vote have survived worse.

Ironically, many Christians will cancel each others’ votes on Election Day.

The Christian conscience compels some of us to vote conservative and others of us to vote liberal. We lean most heavily on different parts of Scripture and theology, but we vote the way we do because that's how our faith compels us to vote. Some of us will vote for winners, and some for losers. But as long as we realize politics isn't ultimate and opponents aren't enemies, democracy still wins.

—*Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard. Visit his [FaithWorks Blog](#).*