

# Campaigning for the dream vote

What must surely be the longest presidential campaign in US history is taking place in an unlimited media environment, yet not since the 1920s has academic opinion so despaired of the educative value of democratic politics. Historians Rick Shenkman (*Just How Stupid Are We?*) and Susan Jacoby (*The Age of American Unreason*) document degrees of public ignorance appalling for a society that makes schooling compulsory.

Philosopher Noëlle McAfee's *Democracy and the Political Unconscious* enlists psychoanalysis and semiotics to explain American hysteria after the trauma of September 11, while Kelly Bulkeley, past president of the International Association for the Study of Dreams, locates the key to political motivation in *American Dreamers: What Dreams Tell Us about the Political Psychology of Conservatives, Liberals, and Everyone Else*.

Do Democrats lose elections because they are more rational than Republicans? Those who say so are enjoying a special vogue. George Lakoff's *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* and Drew Westen's *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* bring out the science behind the misinformation campaigns waged by conservatives. Professor Westen teaches psychology at Emory University, where he runs a political consulting firm. An article in the current issue of *Political Psychology*, co-authored by Joel Weinberger at Adelphi University, argues for the efficacy of subliminal stimulation in political advertisements. Professor Lakoff teaches cognitive science at the University of California, Berkeley, advises Democratic candidates and blogs at "The Huffington Post".

The lies surrounding the Iraq war have inspired the dire mood in academe. The spectacular collapse of the financial system is sure to aggravate it. Are leading US institutions hopelessly irrational? Are citizens really the best judges of their own interests? Today's sceptics are heirs to research generated in the 1920s, when studies of propaganda techniques in the First World War, carried out against the background of new psychological theories that emphasised unconscious emotional drives, taught Charles E. Merriam, Elton Mayo, Harold D. Lasswell, Thurman Arnold and Walter Lippmann to distrust the ethical force of public opinion. Only a political psychology that resolved democracy into a question of power was viable in the modern era.

John McCain's presidential campaign, in which moral degeneration and political success appear to fit hand-in-glove, warrants the scepticism of the professors. Last month, the online magazine *Slate* asked its readers to share their dreams about McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin, and received

nearly 500 responses in the first week. A star was born, knowledge and experience be damned.

That the election may be decided in the unconscious may not be bad news for Democrats after all. The phrase "American Dream" first appeared in the 1920s, the same decade that buried classical democratic theory. Since then, Martin Luther King Jr has not been the only progressive political leader to divine its inspirational value. "She doesn't always know what to make of me," Barack Obama writes of his wife, Michelle, in his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*. "She worries that, like Gramps and the Old Man, I am something of a dreamer." Dream on.

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