

Commentary Michael Costello Think times are bad now?

Michael Costello/Lewiston Tribune

Alexis de Toqueville predicted this. He almost predicted the date.

Toqueville was a prominent French historian and social scientist who traveled through the nascent United States in the early 19th century because he wanted to observe and document this radical experiment in self-governance. He was impressed by the idealism of the new nation, but doubted that the country could long exist: "A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates promising the most benefits from the public treasury with the result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship. The average age of the world's greatest civilizations has been 200 years."

He may have been off by a decade or so, but after this last week's election results, can anyone doubt the accuracy of his prophecy?

Franklin Roosevelt showed Americans how to vote the contents of the treasury into their own pockets. It's hard to imagine this now, but Roosevelt actually campaigned against Herbert Hoover's profligate federal spending. He promised to restore fiscal responsibility. He learned quickly that he could purchase a loyal majority with money taken from others or simply borrowed.

Roosevelt's example has been followed by every president since. Richard Nixon balanced the federal budget once, before learning that Americans preferred goodies over balanced checkbooks. Bill Clinton had a couple of accidental balanced budgets after claiming that such feats were impossible. His balanced budgets were the result of unanticipated wealth pouring into the treasury as a consequence of the dotcom bubble.

Since that bubble burst, three presidential terms have been marked by increasingly irresponsible federal spending.

After he was elected in 1992, Clinton began a conversation with himself over how to construct a lasting legacy. His publicly stated goal was to create some bold new entitlement program that would make the American middle class beholden to the Democratic Party for decades, much as Roosevelt did with Social Security.

The key part there was that he wanted to give the middle class a tangible reason to vote Democrat.

But while Clinton was riding the dotcom wave, a callow junior state senator from Illinois was plotting a very different path toward creating a governing majority. And it had nothing to do with elevating or strengthening the middle class. Barack Obama saw impoverishment as the path to power. In a speech at Loyola University in Chicago, Obama boasted that "I actually believe in [wealth] redistribution."

He then went on to explain how Democrats could create a "governing majority" of welfare recipients and "the working poor."

His stated goal was to create an America in which an impoverished majority would look to Democrats for a lifetime of welfare and who would elect and re-elect politicians who promised to subsidize their meager existence with the earnings of others.

Obama seems to have succeeded. He became the first president since the aforementioned Roosevelt to cement his power by spreading poverty and dependency.

Obama has created food stamp recipients at a far faster pace than he has created jobs. More Americans have dropped out of the workforce than have found careers during his reign.

Under Obama's recovery, family incomes have fallen farther and faster than they did during George W. Bush's recession.

Obama has forced enough people into the economic strata that he believes will provide Democrats with a "majority coalition" large enough to win re-election.

Whether this is a stable condition remains to be seen. A growing number of private economists predict a recession next year. And it will be difficult for Obama to blame this one on his predecessor. Will Obama's newly created poor look to him for sustenance or will they hold him responsible for their misery? At some point, it seems likely that Obama's coalition will grow weary of poverty. Certainly the productive class will grow weary of supporting the dependency class.

Or is Obama seeking to achieve radical leftist Francis Fox Piven's dream of bringing down the entire U.S. government by overburdening it with welfare recipients?

Either way, the re-election of Obama cannot be explained by people seeking to improve their lot in life through hard work and opportunity. My prediction is that Obama's second term will do for Republicans what Hoover's one term did for the Democrats.

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