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USA

USA: an end or beginning?

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We print here a "letter from the editors" of the magazine *Against the Current*, published by the US socialist organization *Solidarity*.

At last it's over. For what it's worth, by the time this issue reaches our readers, we'll know the identity of the occupant of the White House for the next four years. As this issue of "Against the Current" was frantically completed on election night, it looked like Bush would win narrowly, but unlike 2000, without the stigma of a blatantly stolen election - barring a reversal of fortune in Ohio that throws the outcome to contested provisional ballots. This editorial, then, reflects the assumption that Bush is the near-certain winner. This was the first election since 1968 in which war was the fundamental and defining question. Much has changed since, but then as now, the pro-war Democrat lost to the pro-war Republican as the antiwar movement futilely chained itself to the lesser evil.

There are numerous other issues, of course, from so-called "values" to the economy to the raw memories of the stolen election of 2000; but the debacle that Iraq has become was the factor that made the Bush gang so vulnerable. It's been astonishing to see, on the one hand, the genuine energy and voter mobilization growing out of the popular anger over Bush's disastrous war; and on the other, the Democratic Party establishment's display of cynical contempt for its core antiwar supporters in running a "better war" campaign.

The politics of John Kerry fit snugly into what used to be called, when such a thing existed, the moderate wing of the Republican Party. Perhaps this election's greatest irony was the desperate effort of the U.S. peace movement to rescue Kerry. And in return for their efforts on his behalf, the leaders of this movement got from Kerry exactly what they asked: nothing, absolutely nothing.

Might a Democratic candidate running against Bush's war, instead of a dubious plan to wage it better, have had a better showing? That's an abstraction; the Democratic Party is a party of imperialism, which doesn't oppose war when the guns are firing, regardless of what its constituents think. Could the antiwar movement have had a greater impact with an independent strategy, conceivably by backing Ralph Nader's independent campaign or the Green Party? The answer to that, sadly, we'll never know.

The Democrats had the antiwar vote, which they took for granted. The Republicans, on the other hand, had the great bulk of the evangelical vote, which is a secret of success in this respect: Some millions of working people (mostly though not exclusively white), vote on religious grounds for the party that is most firmly committed to screwing them on issues of health care, living wages and social security. As they say, only in America.

The broader striking feature of this presidential election was the gulf between the campaign and the profound crises confronting this society and the world. Consider the Middle East alone: the intractable mess of occupation and incipient civil war that imperialism has produced in Iraq; the just-under-the-radar threat of a U.S. or Israeli "pre-emptive" strike against Iran; the destruction of Palestine; mass murder, population removal and starvation in Darfur.

Add to this the devastating impact of runaway corporate globalization and catastrophic climate change; the profound growth of inequality in Latin America as hundreds of millions become poorer while a thin elite grows affluent; China's extraordinary economic growth and equally explosive social struggles and ecological crisis; the virtual implosion of Russia; the ravages of HIV/AIDS in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, and the threat of avian flu or new global plagues.

War and chaos

It was in mid-September that Kerry's inner circle brought to his attention startling new polling results, showing that a decisive majority of likely voters (sixty percent, plus or minus three percent with a .95 confidence level) strongly preferred a candidate who showed tangible signs of being physiologically alive.

By failing throughout August to display such evidence, Kerry had fallen so far behind that it was looking like Bush would win the election without even having to steal it. Responding in the nick of time, the Democratic nominee delivered himself of a major critical address on the subject of Bush's mishandling of Iraq and the "war on terror."

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/36205-2.jpg>]

In 47 minutes, Kerry discussed the administration's diplomatic debacle in the United Nations, the weapons inspectors, the United States' international allies and the government's own intelligence estimates on prospects for post-conquest Iraq.

The astonishing feature of this speech was what Kerry never mentioned: Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo; the torture and humiliation of prisoners, including cases of fatal beatings and the rapes of children in detention. The omission wasn't accidental, as the subject was not broached during the supposedly "pivotal presidential debate" of September 30 on foreign policy.

In a properly functioning democracy, every official up the chain of command that presided over the Abu Ghraib atrocities, up to and including the Secretary of Defense, would be finished, and the government itself would be forced out over these revelations. In the United States of America, the power that presumes to show Iraq how to build democracy, not only does the government not fall but the opposition party refuses even to make such crimes an election issue!

As much as the Democrats genuinely wanted to defeat Bush, they remain a loyal party of U.S. imperialism. They could not afford, and did not wish, to label the Bush gang's acts in Iraq what they actually are: war crimes and crimes against humanity (the bombing of civilian neighborhoods and torture of prisoners), committed in the course of an invasion openly described as illegal by the United Nations Secretary-General.

Whatever their critique of "this administration's colossal error in judgment," Kerry and the Democrats couldn't and wouldn't open a discussion before the U.S. public on the present real condition of the Iraqi adventure. The "optimistic" scenario is that Iraq might barely hold together, with a ramshackle quasi-parliamentary system and a "strong man" regime backed up by the U.S. military. The more likely outcomes are a disaster almost beyond imagining, with the country more or less dissolving or imploding in 1970s Lebanon style.

Behind the debate on "errors of judgment," the Democratic opposition actually serves as part of the filtering mechanism that keeps most of the truth from slipping through. The truth is this: To carry out the exercise of an election in Iraq scheduled for January will require a "coalition" military offensive that will claim, probably, Iraqi civilian lives in the thousands. But if that long-touted election were to be deferred, Iraq might disintegrate.

The Democrats, hoping that John Kerry would "succeed in the mission in Iraq" by getting major military and financial support from U.S. allies, couldn't say what most of the world knows, which is that no Middle Eastern government or European military power in its right mind would sink into that mess. (As George Bush might remind us, "You forgot Poland." Our point exactly.)

Homeland Insecurity

Inevitably, wars of imperial conquest have fed back into our own society. The culture of fear that the Bush regime has so crudely exploited since 9/11 has enabled this government to shred the Bill of Rights through the USA PATRIOT Act, indefinite detentions in Guantanamo without charges or trials, and the return of ethnic and racial profiling.

Ironically, from the standpoint of the long-term health and stability of American capitalism, this administration may be remembered as the most destructive in history. Outrageous tax giveaways to the rich and corporate America have brought on a structural budget crisis with half-trillion dollar annual federal deficits stretching into the indefinite future. It's difficult to imagine what fiscal options will be available to whatever government is in office during the next economic downturn.

"Suppress the Vote"

Within the contests over control of the White House, Congress and the courts, struggles of equal or even greater ultimate importance were raging over the future of democratic politics in the United States. On the right, obviously, Republican operatives and government machinery were flagrantly mobilized to "suppress the Black vote" - as Michigan Republican official John Papageorge openly put it, before his party leadership had him bound, gagged and stuffed in a closet for the duration of the campaign.

On the Democratic side, this election was about not only defeating Bush but also, they hoped, wiping out permanently any independent challenge from the social justice movement. That's why the Democrats unleashed a four-year Hate Nader campaign right after the 2000 election, and in 2004 expended as many resources to keeping Nader off state ballots as in trying to stop Republicans from stealing the election.

The Democrats' strategy of running as moderate conservatives depends critically on the absence of alternatives challenging corporate power. The vacuum on the left enables the Democrats to take labor and especially Black votes for granted as they chase the ever-rightward-moving "center."

The importance of such an alternative - and of giving it an expression through a solid and well-rooted new political party - is above all why Ralph Nader, Peter Camejo and their supporters deserve credit for their courage and perseverance in seeing the campaign through to the end. We repeat now what we said in 2000: If you agreed with Ralph Nader's message (or that of the Green Party) but voted Democratic to defeat Bush, you have wasted your vote. Now comes the even harder part. First, in a difficult post-election climate, there's the urgent need to remobilize the antiwar movement on many levels - from mass protests as Iraqi population centers like Falluja are pounded to dust, to giving moral and legal support to military resisters, to building upon the deep-seated popular fears of the return of the draft.

Second, the gulf that opened up in the Green Party between supporters of Nader/Camejo and David Cobb/Pat LaMarche must be bridged. At its best, the Green Party has the potential to become an authentic third party with a substantial African American and Latino leadership. To accomplish this will require both a spirit of reconciliation and willingness to grapple with structural problems that left many Green activists feeling disenfranchised this year. Finally, the left in the United States needs to confront a difficult political period realistically, but without panic. A government headed by right-wing extremists has been returned to power, to preside over a divided country and a potential for real catastrophe in Iraq. Our first priority as always must be building the movements, from the ground up. How the movements respond will determine whether the end of this election marks the end of the hopes inspired in 1999 by Seattle, or a new beginning.