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USA

War and the Democrats' Panic

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THE REASON FOR the Democrats' latest debacle in the 2002 midterm elections is obvious: Ralph Nader. It must be. Hasn't Ralph been blamed for almost everything else?

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/03_usdemo.jpg]

On a more serious level, in a country evenly polarized between two capitalist parties, representing the centre-right (Democrats) and hard right (Republicans) with their subordinate factions (respectively, the liberals and the extreme social-religious conservatives) in tow, a small electoral swing produces sharply magnified results.

That's what occurred in November, 2002: a small numerical shift that has given the Republican Party and Bush administration firm control of both houses of Congress and the leverage to carry through their agenda of war, 'homeland security' and tax giveaways to the wealthy, even if much of this package is disliked by a majority of the population. Why? The key factors are generally well-known and not too complex.

- September 11, 2001 transformed George W. Bush's image from illegitimate usurper and international flyweight to organizer of the world crusade against terror. Call it Osama bin Laden's gift from one fundamentalism to another.
- A carefully planned and meticulously implemented war psychosis against Iraq has worked greatly to the advantage of the incumbent Republican administration. This fits the historic pattern in which war and rumour of war benefits incumbents in general, and Republicans more so.
- The Democrats had nothing coherent to say on the questions uppermost in most voters' minds: the war drive, terrorism, the economy, rampant corporate crime. This lack of any meaningful message is both reflected in, and further exacerbated by, the fact that the national Democratic Party has no credible leading figure.
- Turnout was remarkably low even by the apathetic standards of normal midterm U.S. elections.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/04_strawpowell.jpg]

Looking a little more at this last factor in particular offers further insight into what appears to be an uneven but long-term swing toward the Republican Party. This has little if anything to do with any mass turn toward social or political conservatism, we believe, but much more with the two parties' relation to their base. The plain fact is that the core voting base of the Republican Party is far happier with and motivated by their party's politics than the Democratic Party's core voters are with theirs. This reality is not often openly discussed, least of all by the Democratic leadership, because much of it has to do with race.

The single most loyal and unswerving Democratic voting block is the African American community. To a slightly lesser degree, Latino voters also fall firmly into the Democratic camp, along with urban working-class voters from all racial and ethnic groups; but what is absolutely clear is that Democratic victory on the national level and in large states depends critically on an overwhelming Black vote.

It is a striking fact that the African American vote remains overwhelmingly Democratic, despite Republican efforts to make inroads. It's not hard to see why: Can you say "Trent Lott?" [1] And the central question is hardly Lott's personal segregationist nostalgia; it's the demonstrated commitment of the entire southern-led Republican leadership to social policies and judicial doctrines that preserve white supremacy.

Despite the facade created by the prominence of Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, despite the growth of a prosperous Black middle class and professional sector that might be attracted by so-called 'fiscal conservatism,' the Black Republican voting base remains tiny and relatively fixed; the real variation affecting any close election is the African American turnout.

What do these voters get in exchange for their unswerving loyalty? A quick glance at the most recent Democratic administration gives the answer: precious little. Eight years of Clinton-Gore, overwhelmingly and enthusiastically supported by the African American vote, yielded horrible increases in Black incarceration, largely for victimless drug offences; the destruction of welfare; the most draconian 'anti-crime' bill in many decades, even though actual crime rates were falling, mainly to pander to media-driven paranoia among white people over mythical out-of-control Black criminality. (In passing, we highly recommend Michael Moore's brilliant new documentary 'Bowling for Columbine' for a disturbing exploration of this latter theme.)

Undeniably, Black people get one benefit from Democratic victories: keeping the Republicans out. This is ultimately inadequate to inspire a massive turnout in the absence of the all-consuming symbolism of an ideologically charged presidential contest.

An examination of the second (and overlapping) major Democratic voting base, the trade union movement, yields similar results. The Republican party, on the other hand, has its rock-solid core constituencies among white voters in the South and the religious right. (This doesn't mean southern whites are reactionaries en masse, of course; we are speaking here in statistical terms, not characterizing anyone's politics on the basis of their ethnicity or region.)

It must be said that these voters get much better returns on their political investment. To be sure, the Republicans in power cannot deliver on the full program of the religious right and the racists: school prayer, an open assault on Islam, official Nativism and assaults on immigrants and Spanish-speaking communities, outlawing abortion, restoration of doctrinal white supremacy. Tilting too far in those directions would be politically suicidal in both the domestic and international arenas. Nonetheless, the Republicans on the national and state levels are able to deliver important parts of the hard-right agenda: huge rollbacks in affirmative action, bilingual education and immigrant rights; vast expansion of military spending; sharp restrictions on reproductive freedom; imposing ever-more-brutal requirements on people receiving ever-shrinking welfare benefits. Under Bush in particular, environmental destruction has become almost a civic duty. All this in addition to tax cuts for the wealthy, corporate welfare, maintaining an anti-union environment and - perhaps most ominously - packing the courts with reactionary judicial cadres.

Generally speaking, Democratic resistance to all this is, to put it generously, less than vigorous. And the result is fairly predictable: The Republican base turns out to vote in larger measure than its relatively demoralized Democratic counterpart.

The Homeland Security State

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/04_ustroops.jpg]

Defeat in turn produces defeatism. The electoral outcome has produced an atmosphere of jubilation in the administration camp, a feeling of mandate for war and an expectation of rapid and joyous triumph over Iraq; among liberals and the left the dominant mood is depression and panic.

The immediate short-term prospects indeed appear bleak. We have entered the era of the Homeland Security State, comprising one part bureaucratic boondoggle, one part Big Brother, one part permanent low-level state of emergency

designed to keep the population in constant expectant fear of terrorism, and one part unlimited expansion of the apparatus of high-tech war without end.

The Republican administration has a mission. As we have analyzed in previous issues of this magazine, it is a mission of U.S. world domination, driven not only by crude material and strategic imperialist interests but also by a quasi-messianic ideology, fraught with extreme danger for our society and for the planet; but like it or not, it is a mission that generates unity and team spirit among the administration and its backers.

The Democrats, in contrast, at this point have no mission, no message, no unity. Within a two-year electoral cycle a lot of things can happen, but when a political party's top-rated leadership contender until his December 15 dropout was Al Gore - well, you get the idea.

As for the highly touted selection of Nancy Pelosi as Democratic House leader, this relative liberal is distinguished by her expertise in fundraising more than any fighting strategy.

Fantasy vs. Reality

Where does this leave the left? Much of the liberal-left press these days seems consumed with the problem of what can be done to rescue the Democratic Party from its own conservatism, timidity and incompetence. We believe this question has a simple enough answer: Nothing. The Democratic Party is what it is, a party ultimately responsible to and funded by big corporate capital, continually forced to betray and demoralize the very working class, African American and other core voters on whom it depends to win power. Given this reality, the Democrats in their 'centrist' opportunism have positioned themselves as a permanent junior party that will win power nationally only when the Republican agenda crashes and burns economically or militarily. The Democratic Leadership Council is firmly in control of this rotting mess, and the idea that 'the progressive wing of the party' is going to recapture it is fantasy.

For our part, we found the most encouraging electoral result in November to be the more than five percent vote in California for the Green Party campaign of Peter Camejo and Donna Warren. More than achieving a respectable vote total, this campaign developed important contacts with diverse constituencies from the Mexican, Pakistani and other communities heavily impacted by the anti-immigrant climate yet usually off the political radar screen.

This result is only a beginning, but it suggests a way forward toward an authentic new and independent politics. It is also noteworthy that a number of voices in the African American movement, of which Donna Warren is one, are advocating that the Black community turn toward the Green Party and claim it as their own.

By contrast, a truly pathetic post-electoral expression of progressive cut-and-run panic was the argument presented by Ronnie Dugger, urging Ralph Nader and the Greens to forswear in advance a presidential campaign in 2004: "(T)he Bush disaster, compounded now by the meltdown of the Democratic Party on November 5, is an emergency. We cannot afford another division in our ranks that will bring about the election of George W. Bush in 2004." ('The Nation', December 2, 2002)

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/05_xx.jpg]

Dugger proposes instead "an undertaking by the liberals, progressives and populists of the country . . . to converge behind the nomination of a progressive Democratic candidate for President." Right.

We'd like to offer our own suggestion for a unified progressive candidacy in 2004. Clearly, the logical vehicle for such

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a candidacy at this political juncture is the Green Party (whether this means another Nader campaign or a new candidate). In any case, it is reasonable to propose that the Democratic Party, inasmuch as it stands for nothing, run no presidential candidate so as not to divide the progressive Green vote. This makes more sense, and has a slightly better practical possibility of being implemented, than Dugger's proposal.

In the meantime, with a hideous war perhaps only weeks away and the potential for an economic meltdown ever present, the urgent task of the moment is building our social movements from the ground up.

[1] (Lott recently resigned as Senate Republican leader after remarks he had made praising the segregationist 1948 Presidential campaign of Strom Thurmond.