

Buchanan and the crisis of the US two-party system

Martin McLaughlin
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Two weeks ago ultra-right media commentator Patrick Buchanan indicated he was preparing to bolt the Republicans and seek the presidential nomination of the Reform Party. The response in both the Republican Party and the media has demonstrated the nervousness within the American ruling class over any political challenge to the two-party system.

Buchanan is a long-standing advocate of extreme right-wing and fascistic views. A fervent admirer of Joseph McCarthy and the anticommunist witch-hunt of the 1950s, he served his political apprenticeship as a speech writer for Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. After the collapse of the USSR put an end to the Cold War, he was at the forefront of those within the political establishment seeking a new ideological basis for right-wing politics to replace the global struggle against the Soviet Union.

In bids for the Republican presidential nomination in 1992 and 1996, Buchanan broke with the conventional free trade position of the party establishment to advance a program of protectionism and trade warfare against the foreign economic rivals of American capitalism. He demagogically presented his policy of economic nationalism as the answer to widespread plant closures and declining working class living standards. (A multimillionaire, Buchanan has long been backed financially by southern textile magnate Roger Milliken, as well as other rabidly anti-labor businessmen.) Buchanan combines America-first chauvinism with the extreme-right social agenda of the Christian fundamentalist groups—a ban on abortion, prayer in the schools, abolition of welfare, a halt to immigration—and vitriolic anticommunism.

Over the years Buchanan has made repeated and provocative attacks on blacks, Jews, Hispanics, gays and lesbians and other targets of prejudice. He specializes in the use of code words which make his bigotry apparent to the most backward and fascist-minded elements, while sufficiently preserving appearances to allow moguls such as CNN's Ted Turner to continue promoting his highly paid media career.

In a recent column Buchanan complained about the high percentage of Asian and Jewish youth admitted to elite Ivy League colleges in the United States. He denounced this trend as discriminatory and suggested that 75 percent of all admissions slots to these prestigious schools should be set aside

for "non-Jewish whites." This statement was criticized by Jewish groups, but ignored by Buchanan's rivals for the Republican nomination.

Not until Buchanan raised the possibility of seeking the Reform Party nomination, thus threatening to siphon off votes from the Republican Party, did some Republican politicians and media pundits declare his political views to be beyond the pale.

Significantly, the attacks focused on Buchanan's latest book, a screed on foreign policy, entitled *A Republic, Not an Empire*, which was published last week. His critics singled out a few paragraphs in the book, in which Buchanan suggests that Hitler was not a military threat to the United States and that America should have remained neutral in the war which erupted with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will in future articles examine in detail the political record and chauvinist views of Buchanan. For the present it need only be said that his latest book is far less explicit in its bigotry and sympathy for fascism than many other statements and articles which Buchanan has produced over the last 25 years, none of which aroused any significant protest in Republican circles or in the media. The book has become the target of widespread criticism not because its extremism represents a new departure, but because of Buchanan's threat to break with the Republican Party and run a third-party campaign.

Even this criticism of Buchanan has been muted or vague, concealing more than it reveals about the nature of his politics. Senator John McCain, who took the lead among the Republican presidential candidates in attacking Buchanan's views on World War II, denounced him as unpatriotic, but made no reference to the fascist and anti-Semitic character of his political outlook.

While McCain called for Buchanan to leave the party, the Republican National Committee (RNC) issued a statement that "Senator McCain speaks only for himself." On September 29, RNC Chairman James Nicholson met with Buchanan at his home, appealing for him not to run a third-party campaign on the grounds that it would aid Democratic candidates in next year's elections.

Far from being chastened by the sudden barrage of criticism, Buchanan seemed to welcome it, both as an opportunity for media publicity and as a demonstration to potential supporters

of his anti-establishment credentials. "You keep going out there," he said. "If you stay with it, and ... keep going back at 'em, and back at 'em, and let them keep hitting you and go back at them, and then it sort of fades away and you are standing there smiling. They say, 'That guy won the fight.' And that is what the people see."

Other Republican hopefuls continued to praise Buchanan's record and appeal for his supporters to remain in the party. A spokesman for Dan Quayle declared—three days before the former vice president abandoned his own presidential campaign—"Pat Buchanan is a good man and should not be driven out of the Republican Party for things he may not have even said and written." Gary Bauer, bidding for the same Christian fundamentalist constituency, called the attacks on Buchanan "a distraction from the issues the country really wants to debate in this election."

Most revealing was the statement issued by George W. Bush, who reportedly discussed with his advisers issuing an attack on Buchanan, then pulled back out of concern that party conservatives would be alienated. "I don't want Pat Buchanan to leave the party," Bush said. "I think it's important, should I be the nominee, to unite the Republican Party. I'm going to need every vote I can get among Republicans to win the election."

The response of Bush, Nicholson & Co. demonstrates the extraordinary degree to which the Republican Party, supposedly the majority political party in America, controlling both houses of Congress and the bulk of state governments, is dependent on a narrow stratum of fascist-minded and Christian fundamentalist elements. The popular base of both the Democrats and Republicans has atrophied over the last three decades, reflected in part in rising voter abstention rates, and the majority of the people are alienated from both of the parties which enjoy a semi-official monopoly of political life. As a result the Republican Party has become increasingly in thrall to ideologically driven extreme-right activists.

Short-term electoral calculations are a major factor in the infighting on the right, with estimates that Buchanan could take a sizable number of votes from Bush or any other Republican nominee. But there are more fundamental concerns as well.

The big business politicians and the corporate-controlled media are instinctively hostile to any political challenge to the existing two-party system, even one by such a proven defender of corporate interests as Patrick Buchanan. They are particularly concerned about Buchanan's linkup with the Reform Party, whose founder Ross Perot polled 19 million votes in 1992 and 7 million votes in 1996, and which has automatic ballot status in many states and \$12.6 million in federal campaign funds as a result.

The *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* have both published acrimonious editorials against the Reform Party, condemning it as narrowly based—as though the Republicans and Democrats enjoyed broad popular support!—and expressing

the fear that Reform could undermine the two-party monopoly and thereby open the way for issues and social forces presently excluded from the US political system to find expression.

The Reform Party itself is a mass of political confusion, and its basically conservative program represents no threat to the profit system. What concerns the ruling class is that the existing two-party system is so flagrantly undemocratic and so distant from the needs and interests of the vast majority of working people, that any significant third-party campaign could precipitate a breakup of the ossified political structure.

Moreover, Buchanan is making an appeal, albeit on a right-wing basis, to sections of working people who have not benefited from the stock market boom, are beset by declining living standards, job insecurity and deteriorating social conditions, and are angered by the enormous growth of economic inequality. Any attempt to raise such issues, even by a right-wing demagogue, provokes alarm in ruling class circles.

One of the more sober analyses of the potential impact of Buchanan's campaign came from Kevin Phillips, longtime Republican adviser and pundit. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, he warned: "International parallels also offer some insights. If Republicans look at party politics elsewhere in the Group of 7, they'll find chilling precedents. Ten years ago, establishment politics dominated virtually all these governments. But the rise of right-wing and populist parties split most of the conservative, business-led coalitions and ultimately led to their defeats. Jean-Marie Le Pen's anti-immigration front played this role in France. In Italy, neo-fascists and northern separatists helped do in the Christian Democrats. In Canada, the governing Progressive Conservatives were routed in a sectional splintering that saw leadership on the right pass to the populist Reform Party, whose leader, Preston Manning, is called the Ross Perot of Canada. A Buchanan candidacy on the Reform Party ticket could play a similar role in the United States, conceivably leading to the GOP's defeat in both the presidential and many congressional races and raising doubts about its future."

The near-panic in Republican circles over Buchanan's threatened departure is an indication of the fragility of the existing political structure. Any significant break in the financial markets, let alone a turn to recession in the year leading up to the election, would rapidly create the conditions for political convulsions in America.



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