

Buchanan turns to the Reform Party: a new stage in the breakup of the US two-party system

Martin McLaughlin
18 September 1999

Extreme-right Republican presidential hopeful Patrick Buchanan announced September 12 that he is preparing to quit the Republican Party and seek the presidential nomination of the Reform Party. He used the forum provided by the NBC program *Meet the Press* to outline his dissatisfaction with the Republican Party and blast its nomination process as "rigged."

Buchanan said that he would make a final decision by October 15, but close aides told the press that the decision was a foregone conclusion. A committee to draft Buchanan as the Reform Party's nominee has already been established, headed by multimillionaire William von Raab, US Commissioner of Customs in the Reagan administration.

According to some press accounts, Buchanan has already received the backing of billionaire H. Ross Perot, founder of the Reform Party and its presidential candidate in 1992 and 1996, and the outgoing chairman of the party, Russell Verney. Perot's 1996 running mate, economist Pat Choate, has publicly hailed Buchanan's likely bid for the Reform nomination.

In his *Meet the Press* interview Buchanan emphasized that he would not endorse George W. Bush if the frontrunner won the Republican presidential nomination. He criticized Bush's political views as essentially identical to those of the Clinton-Gore administration on both foreign and domestic policy.

Describing the Democrats and Republicans as Xerox copies, Buchanan said, "I think what we have is a one-party system in Washington, DC, that is masquerading as a two-party system. And I think what we need is a real opposition party, a party that can become a second party and maybe a first party."

Buchanan's impending split from the Republicans was widely advertised in the right-wing press in the month since his fifth-place showing in the Iowa straw poll, where he placed behind Bush, magazine billionaire Steve Forbes, Elizabeth Dole, and even religious right activist Gary Bauer, his main competitor for the mandate of the Christian fundamentalists. Buchanan blamed his poor showing in Iowa and his low standing in the polls on the huge financial resources available to Bush and Forbes. "Right now, in the Republican primaries, you've got two candidates with almost \$100 million to spend by February [2000]," he said.

In his 1996 campaign, Buchanan collected 21 percent of the total vote in all Republican primaries, second only to the eventual nominee Robert Dole. Republican National Committee officials and congressional Republican leaders expressed concern that a third-party bid by Buchanan could siphon off right-wing votes and elect the Democratic presidential candidate.

The likely defection of Buchanan is a significant indication of the internal crisis of the Republican Party. The extreme right and Christian fundamentalist elements who have played such a prominent role in the party over the past 20 years are increasingly dissatisfied with the record of

the Republican-controlled Congress in promoting social issues like abortion and school prayer, as well as its failure to push through the impeachment of Clinton.

While some figures in the religious right, like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, have declared that George W. Bush is acceptable as a Republican presidential nominee, there are a half dozen rivals for the Republican nomination seeking to appeal to fundamentalist, racist and neo-fascist sentiment. One of these far-right candidates, Senator Robert Smith of New Hampshire, has already broken with the Republican Party and declared he is running as an independent, focusing on social issues like abortion and gun control. Now a second candidate, Buchanan, with much greater public notoriety, is preparing to follow suit.

Similar subterranean tensions also played a role in last week's announcement by New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman that she would not seek the Republican nomination for the US Senate seat from New Jersey being vacated by the retiring Democrat Frank Lautenberg. Whitman, while a hard-line conservative on tax and budget issues, is pro-choice on abortion and considered soft by the ultra-right on other social issues. She faced both a far-right opponent in the Republican primary and the likely candidacy of radio talk show host Bob Grant, who is expected to run as an independent on an extreme right-wing program.

The reaction of the party establishment to the prospect of Buchanan's defection shows once again the extraordinary degree to which the Republicans are dependent on what once would have been considered the lunatic fringe of American politics.

Buchanan's political views are a rancid mixture of bigotry, nationalism and anticommunism. He is the closest thing in big business politics to an outright fascist. This is not a recent conversion, as Buchanan grew up in a household where the Spanish dictator Franco was considered a hero. And he is notorious as the man who convinced Reagan to travel to the Waffen SS cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, and declare that the Nazi killers were "victims" just as much as those they murdered in the Holocaust.

One of his most recent diatribes included the claim that there too many Asians and Jews at Ivy League colleges, and a suggestion that these elite institutions should establish a quota system reserving 75 percent of their admissions to "non-Jewish whites." None of the other Republican presidential candidates made any criticism of this open anti-Semitism or suggested that Buchanan's ranting made him unwanted or unacceptable in the Republican Party. All pleaded with him to remain within the party and several, including Bauer, Forbes and Alan Keyes, openly appealed for the support of those who share Buchanan's prejudices.

Buchanan's turn towards the Reform Party demonstrates not only Buchanan's own cynicism—he supported Bush and Dole in 1992 and 1996 against Reform candidate Perot—but the hollowness of the Reform Party itself. Reform is a political structure without a significant mass base, but

with two important political assets which make it an attractive target for a takeover: ballot recognition in many states, and \$12.6 million in federal cash for its presidential nominee.

The control of Reform is divided between two factions. The old guard around Perot, including outgoing chairman Verney and 1996 vice presidential candidate Pat Choate, has embraced Buchanan. Choate, an economist identified with policies of protectionism and trade warfare, penned a commentary for the right-wing journal *Intellectual Capital* which gives a glimpse of the thinking of Perot's inner circle: "While his position on social issues neither qualifies nor disqualifies him for the nomination, Buchanan's platform is similar to the party's on campaign reform, trade, national security, education, and federal debt, among other issues."

The rival faction in the Reform Party is headed by Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura, the former professional wrestler who is the party's sole major elected official. Ventura has identified himself more closely with a libertarian position on social issues, rejecting government restriction on abortion, as well as opposing the prejudice against gays and lesbians which is a staple of the Christian fundamentalists.

Ventura's supporters won control of the party leadership at its recent convention, but the chairman elected there with Ventura's backing, Jack Gargan, does not take office until January 1. For several months Ventura has been seeking an alternative to another presidential campaign dominated by Perot, first suggesting the candidacy of former Connecticut Senator Lowell Weicker, a "moderate" by the current standards of big business politics, who quit the Republican Party and was elected governor of Connecticut as an independent. More recently, Ventura's political aides met with Warren Beatty, the actor and longtime liberal Democrat who is toying with a presidential bid, as well as with multimillionaire Donald Trump. The real estate and casino developer confirmed Wednesday that he had discussed a possible presidential run with Ventura, and he attacked Buchanan, calling his political views "prehistoric."

The very fact that the fascist Buchanan and the liberal Beatty, who describes himself as a "Roosevelt-Truman-Stevenson-Kennedy" Democrat, are both engaged in secret discussions with party leaders about possible presidential campaigns demonstrates the amorphous character of the Reform Party. It also shows how false is the notion that Reform represents some alternative to the unprincipled backroom maneuvers of the two major capitalist parties.

While Buchanan declared that he would continue to campaign on right-wing social issues like abortion, despite the Reform Party's official pro-choice position, it is significant that he chose to emphasize economic nationalism and opposition to international institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization as the reasons for his defection from the Republicans. In a press release issued just before he appeared on *Meet the Press*, his campaign posed the question, "Why would Buchanan break ranks with the Republican Party? If he does, the break point will almost surely be US foreign policy."

Combining ferocious chauvinism with isolationism, Buchanan opposed both the Persian Gulf War and the US bombing of Serbia, on the grounds that these actions were diversions from the military defense of North America. He advocates annexation of any Canadian province which wants to become an American state, while declaring that the most critical threat to US national security is the entry of immigrant workers across the US-Mexico border. (All positions quite similar to those of Perot.)

Watch David North's remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

Buchanan seeks to build up China as the new bogeyman of American foreign policy and the basis for a new anticommunist Cold War. He has been in the forefront of Republican howling about alleged Chinese nuclear espionage and illegal campaign contributions to the Democratic Party, and links this to his protectionist trade policy. Buchanan hopes to capitalize

politically on the expected decision by the Clinton administration to support China's entry into the World Trade Organization, clearing the way for more Chinese imports. "This would be like dealing me a full house," he told the *Wall Street Journal*.

Whatever individual motives of careerism and ambition are involved—to say nothing of the personal hatreds and vindictiveness which play a particularly pronounced role in American political life—Buchanan's break with the Republican Party must be understood as an attempt to develop a broader social basis for extreme-right-wing politics, by appealing to genuine economic and social grievances of masses of working class and lower middle class people, and diverting them in a reactionary direction.

Hence Buchanan's concentration, despite all the media triumphalism about the prowess of the American economy, on the plight of those who are not sharing in the stock market boom. Unlike the more conventional right-wing candidates, Buchanan makes a direct appeal for support from workers whose lives have been devastated by corporate downsizing and plant closings, or who are struggling to survive in low-wage dead-end jobs.

This appeal is cynical and false. Buchanan is no prophet for the dispossessed, but a lifelong Washington insider and political operative, who became a multimillionaire as a media commentator and pundit, including a long stint as the co-host of the *Crossfire* program on CNN, the network founded by billionaire Ted Turner.

The current issue of the liberal magazine the *Nation* gives an account of the deliberations within the Buchanan camp which led to his decision to bolt the Republican Party. Besides his sister and two campaign aides, the Buchanan inner circle includes two multimillionaire capitalists who are longtime financial backers, William von Raab and Roger Milliken. The latter is a South Carolina textile baron, notorious as a defender of right-to-work laws.

The *Nation* article continues:

"According to sources familiar with Buchanan's thinking, ... [he] sees three key constituencies that, added to social and religious conservatives, will make up his 'new coalition' for the third-party effort: Perot independents, Buchanan Democrats and old-line, Meany-style trade unionists. To cement that coalition, Buchanan wants to have as his Reform VP candidate a labor Democrat with anticommunist and protectionist views ... there have already been preliminary discussions with one such prominent Dem, but the identity of that person is a closely held secret)."

Buchanan is not making a genuine appeal to the working class, but rather to the trade union bureaucracy, which feels its social position threatened by the development of globalization. Buchanan has already been endorsed by the Independent Steelworkers Union, a company union at Weirton Steel with over 20,000 members. His political views—economic nationalism, hostility to immigrants, anti-communism, and open racism—are right in step with the real sentiments of the privileged union officialdom.

The maneuvers between Buchanan, the Republicans and the Reform Party demonstrate the fragile and decayed character of the official political structure in America, in which two virtually identical right-wing parties, both controlled by multimillionaires, enjoy a monopoly of political power. As social conflicts within the United States emerge, reflecting the widening gulf between the fabulously wealthy elite and virtually everyone else, it will become increasingly difficult to contain political life in the narrow range between conservative (Clinton) and ultra-conservative (the Republican Congress).

Whatever the immediate outcome of Buchanan's campaign, the political trajectory of the extreme right is toward the creation of a mass fascist movement in the United States. These forces clearly anticipate the collapse of the financial boom and the eruption of social convulsions in this country, under conditions where the established parties have become completely discredited. And they expect, and will receive, support from

sections of the trade union bureaucracy.

Up to now the public opposition to the two-party monopoly has come largely from the right, or from elements, such as those in Reform, who claim to find political running room "up the middle," in the infinitesimal space between the Democrats and Republicans. However, the real political vacuum in America is on the left. The working class is effectively disenfranchised and entirely unrepresented in the present political order.

To the extent that right-wing demagogues like Buchanan get a hearing among workers it is only by default, because of the absence of an independent political movement of the working class, the rightward shift among the liberals and their abandonment of social reform, and the virtual collapse of the trade unions. The right wing has been given an open field, but it cannot provide any genuine solution to the crisis, which is only possible on the basis of a political struggle of the working class against the profit system.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact