

US presidential race: Buchanan quits Republicans to run third-party campaign

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Right-wing media commentator Patrick J. Buchanan, a three-time candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, announced October 25 that he was leaving the Republican Party and seeking the presidential nomination of the Reform Party, founded by Texas billionaire Ross Perot.

Buchanan's defection marks a further stage in the crisis of the American two-party system. It came after more than a month of efforts by Republican Party leaders, including presidential frontrunner George W. Bush (the son of the former president), to keep Buchanan from carrying out his well-publicized threat to run a third-party campaign.

The formal announcement came at a campaign rally at a hotel in Falls Church, Virginia, where Buchanan was introduced by Perot's 1996 vice-presidential running mate, economist Patrick Choate. More than half of the state chairmen of the Reform Party were in attendance to welcome him. Perot himself has been publicly silent, but his aides have worked closely with Buchanan's inner circle to arrange his entry into the party.

Buchanan and Perot have clashed previously, with Buchanan supporting the elder Bush in 1992 and Robert Dole in 1996, against Perot's two presidential campaigns. They come together now on the basis of economic nationalism and chauvinist attacks on the strategic rivals of American imperialism, the two most prominent themes in Buchanan's October 25 speech.

The former speech writer for Nixon and Reagan, who enthusiastically backed the prevailing "free trade" policies of big business and American military intervention overseas while serving as a White House aide, has now become an ardent protectionist and, by his own description, "America first isolationist." In his remarks October 25 he denounced the North American Free Trade Agreement, GATT and the World Trade Organization, and accused Democrats and Republicans of "appeasement" in their policies towards China.

Buchanan's self-proclaimed isolationism has a highly belligerent content. In his speech he repeatedly attacked what he termed "the godless New World Order"—political

code words which resonate with neo-fascist and militia groups. He identified the "New World Order," and the supposed loss of sovereignty by the United States, with the expansion of the European Union, which he described in apocalyptic terms as "a super state that pays homage to the god of Mammon."

In language which suggests the sinister direction of his political trajectory, Buchanan declared, "America needs a Government of National Union and Reconciliation that draws from the best of all parties, and I promise you, I will create that kind of government." This type of pledge to establish a government of "national unity" which will stand "above parties" is a hallmark of Bonapartist and fascistic movements.

Despite Perot's apparent backing, Buchanan is not guaranteed the Reform Party nomination. Real estate and casino mogul Donald Trump switched from the Republican Party to Reform the same day as Buchanan, and has already formed a committee to explore a Perot-style independent presidential bid. Trump is being encouraged to run by the wing of Reform aligned with Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura, who has been at war with Perot over control of the party leadership, and who opposes Buchanan as too conservative on social issues like abortion and gay rights.

In a transparent effort to mollify such critics, Buchanan made a certain shift in rhetoric, but not substance, in his speech on Monday. Long identified with the Christian fundamentalist right wing of the Republican Party, Buchanan did not use the word "abortion" in his speech, and there was only one passing reference to the subject. Nor was there any mention of homosexuality, school prayer, or the need for a "culture war" against immorality.

Similarly, he repackaged his opposition to immigration. When Buchanan announced his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination last March, he called for a freeze on new immigration to the United States, declaring, in openly racist language, that America should not be "some polyglot boarding house for the world." Eight months later, as a newly minted Reform Party hopeful, Buchanan

reiterated the call for a freeze on immigration but with a different rationale. "Any man or woman from any continent or any country can be a good American," he said, but added, "we need a time-out on legal immigration, to ease the downward pressure on workers' wages."

The rally Monday was a display of the charlatanry which characterizes contemporary American politics. Buchanan depicted his campaign as a populist crusade by a "peasant army" against the influence of "the money boys and the Beltway elites." The would-be guerrilla leader is himself a longtime member of the Washington establishment, as a top White House aide and then a millionaire media pundit.

As for "money boys," Buchanan has his own, among them South Carolina textile billionaire Roger Milliken, perhaps the most ferociously anti-union boss in that industry. Moreover, Buchanan sought the approval of the billionaire Perot before setting foot in the Reform Party.

The media coverage of Buchanan's break with the Republicans has focused only on the most immediate aspect of this political shift—its potential effect on the outcome of the 2000 presidential election. But there are more fundamental questions. Buchanan has seized on major social and political issues—declining living standards and lower-paying jobs for working class families, the corruption of American politics by corporate interests, the growing trend toward far-flung military interventions overseas—and sought to exploit them for reactionary purposes.

When Buchanan denounces the two-party system and declares that the Democrats and Republicans are "two wings of the same bird of prey," when he condemns transnational corporations for shutting plants and abandoning workers, he is saying what tens of millions of working people instinctively feel. But neither Buchanan nor the Reform Party offer any solution to the deepening social crisis. Both defend the capitalist profit system and the domination of American society by the giant corporations and banks.

The criticism of Buchanan in the media, for the most part, has been superficial and even reactionary. Buchanan is attacked, not so much because he presents right-wing, nationalist solutions to the social crisis in America, but because he addresses the social crisis at all. Perhaps the most revealing commentary—for its complacency and banality—came in the editorial by the *New York Times*, which suggested that the economic grievances to which Buchanan appealed in 1992 and 1996 were ancient history. "Does anyone believe that Mr. Buchanan's 'peasant army' really exists?" the *Times* sneered.

This is the self-satisfied voice of a privileged section of the upper middle class which closes its eyes to the evidence that the long-ignored social crisis in America has reached the point where a political explosion is on the horizon. (The

same issue of the *Times* carried a front-page report on the proposal by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani that homeless parents be compelled to work in return for shelter, and have their children taken away if they refused!)

There is an enormous vacuum in American politics, created by the abandonment of any pretense of social reform on the part of liberalism, the effective collapse of the labor movement and the drastic shift to the right in both of the major capitalist parties. Working people, the vast majority of the population, are disenfranchised and unrepresented under a political system completely subservient to corporate wealth.

Buchanan seeks to exploit this vacuum with policies that scapegoat immigrants and foreign workers as the cause of unemployment and deteriorating conditions of life. While attacking the use of American troops in the Persian Gulf and Kosovo, he advocates a ferocious brand of American militarism which would proceed unilaterally rather than through multinational institutions like NATO and the United Nations.

As a political figure, Buchanan at this point commands little public support. He is not the leader of a mass movement, but rather a transitional figure, drawn from the Washington establishment, whose break with the two-party system has a definite significance. Elements within the ruling circles, concerned over the intensifying social antagonisms in America, are seeking to impart a right-wing nationalistic, if not outright fascistic, character to any popular opposition to the existing political structure.

Such a rebellion is historically inevitable, but it is hardly predetermined that it will take a right-wing form. The central issue posed to working people is the necessity to build a genuinely independent political movement of the working class, which opposes to the nativism of Buchanan a strategy of uniting working people of all countries in a common struggle against the profit system, and for the socialist reorganization of society.



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