

# The Bush-Cheney ticket: the politics of plutocracy

Barry Grey  
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The combination of Texas Governor George W. Bush and Richard Cheney as the Republican presidential and vice-presidential candidates epitomizes the open domination of American politics by the representatives of wealth and power.

Who is Richard Cheney? As has been widely acknowledged in the press, Bush's running mate is a consummate Washington insider, ideologically aligned with the extreme right, whose specialty is matters related to military actions and intelligence operations. He is without question one of the most experienced state operatives, who enjoys the confidence of powerful sections of the ruling elite. He is in the select company of those who move effortlessly between the highest levels of the state and the boardrooms of major corporations.

From his early 30s, when he served as President Ford's chief of staff, to his years in Congress and his term as President Bush's secretary of defense, Cheney has functioned in the corridors of power. With the end of the Bush administration he moved into the top levels of corporate management, making millions as chief executive officer of Texas-based Halliburton Company, one of the world's leading oil engineering and construction firms.

George W. Bush, whose father served as CIA director and later as president, is an oil millionaire and governor by virtue of family ties. He has now been complemented by another oil millionaire, who received his business post as a reward for his role in the Persian Gulf War, which, as then-President Bush himself acknowledged, was fought to protect the interests of American oil companies in the Middle East.

It is difficult to recall a presidential ticket in which corporate power was so shamelessly flaunted. That the Republican Party should fashion a ticket of Texas oil millionaires, at a time, moreover, of skyrocketing gasoline prices and soaring industry profits, is a remarkable

testament to the chasm that separates the political establishment from the broad masses of people. The Bush-Cheney ticket is a concentrated expression of two critical and interrelated political phenomena—the continuing rightward shift of the American two-party system, and the increasingly narrow base of the entire political superstructure.

The very fact that the Republicans can put forward Cheney, a man who has opposed every social reform of the last three decades, including such widely popular measures as Head Start, federal aid to education and equal rights for women, testifies to the insularity of the political establishment.

While avidly supporting the reactionary social agenda of Reagan and Bush during his years as the sole congressman from Wyoming, Cheney was privy, as a member of the House Intelligence Committee, to the covert operations of American imperialism abroad.

As President Bush's secretary of defense from 1989 to January, 1993 he oversaw the invasion of Panama and the dispatch of US troops to Somalia. His main claim to fame, however, was his role in the Gulf War of 1991, when he worked closely with then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Collin Powell to carry out the carpet-bombing and invasion of Iraq. The legacy of that war is the death of millions of Iraqis and the physical and mental crippling of thousands of American veterans.

Highly significant is the response of the news media to the selection of Cheney. Not one pundit has stressed the anomaly of running a ticket of oil millionaires. Even Cheney's dubious health—he suffered three heart attacks before the age of 48 and had to undergo quadruple bypass surgery—is given only the most superficial attention. Yet the health of the vice president is a critical question for the state, in as much as his primary Constitutional function is to replace the president, should the latter become incapacitated.

There are other considerations, aside from questions of health, which would appear to make Cheney an unlikely choice as running mate. He is relatively unknown to the American public, and he comes from a state so small that it carries a mere three electoral votes.

The main purpose for his selection, it seems, is to reassure the corporate elite that its strategic interests will not be left in the hands of an inexperienced bungler. Bush himself, at the official announcement of his vice-presidential choice, seemed relieved to have Cheney at his side.

The press speaks of the selection of Cheney as an effort to lend a certain “gravitas” to the Bush ticket. This is a tacit acknowledgement that the Bush candidacy is based on little more than family connections and that the presidential candidate is largely ignorant of world affairs.

The “gravitas” rationale only underscores the artificial character of the Bush campaign and the candidate's lack of a genuine base of social support across the country. It points up the reality that Bush is little more than a front man for higher-ups in the state apparatus.

The Republican ticket represents the narrowest of social interests, but the situation is essentially no different in the Democratic camp. Al Gore, the Democratic presidential candidate, is himself the son of a senator who made his millions with the aid of Occidental Petroleum. He is, moreover, running on a platform of fiscal austerity and the promise to maintain the course that produced record profits and soaring share values on Wall Street.

The most significant aspect of Gore's campaign is his inability to distinguish himself from his Republican opponent. There is no reason to believe that the outcome of the Democratic nominating process will be substantially different from that of the Republicans. Neither party is capable, or even desirous, of making a broad appeal to the social concerns of the electorate.

The most that can be said of the conflict between Bush and Gore is that it involves certain differences on matters of trade, military policy, taxes and other questions that are being fought out by contending factions at the highest levels of business and the state. In no way is the broad public a party to these disputes.

Even from the standpoint of American bourgeois politics as it was traditionally conducted, the present campaign reflects a growing disconnect between the political establishment and the electorate. For many decades, when the two parties were able to maintain a substantial base of popular support, the main function of the vice president was to lend the presidential ticket the

appearance of diversity, while reconciling opposing factions and projecting geographical balance. It was considered necessary to balance the ticket between a spokesman for Midwestern agrarian interests and a representative of the Eastern establishment, or between the Northern liberals and Southern conservatives.

Even in 1996 Republican candidate Bob Dole, a senator from the agricultural state of Kansas, picked Jack Kemp, a former professional football player and congressman from the industrial region around Buffalo, New York, in an effort to widen the appeal of his campaign in the more populous regions of the East and Midwest. No such considerations can be perceived in the choice of Cheney.

Indeed, only at the last minute did the Republican establishment realize that the Constitution prohibits electors in a state from voting for a president and vice-president from that same state, forcing Cheney change his voter registration from Texas to Wyoming.

The indifference of the parties to such political and constitutional questions is a measure of their estrangement from the general population. They have become so much the property of a narrow elite, they are not even conscious of their own isolation.

The political system in turn reflects the enormous polarization of society between a privileged few and the vast majority of the people. In line with the growth of social inequality, political life has become the preserve of an upper crust that aims above all to increase its own share of the national wealth.

Whatever the outcome of the November elections, one thing can be said with certainty, the American political system is unprepared for the social shocks and political upheavals that are coming.



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