

The US elections

Al Gore's campaign: the death rattle of American liberalism

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In the course of this year's election campaign, the question that has most perplexed the media pundits has been the apparent inability of Al Gore to capitalize on what should have been an overwhelming advantage. Proceeding from the assumption that the United States is currently enjoying unprecedented prosperity, the very real possibility of the Democratic candidate's defeat seems to violate conventional wisdom, i.e., that the presidential candidate of the incumbent party wins "when times are good." More often than not, the defeat of the incumbent party has been directly attributable to an unfavorable economic conjuncture. In 1920, 1932, 1960, 1976, 1980 and 1992, the incumbent party's defeat was foreshadowed by an ongoing or only recently ended recession.

There have been some notable exceptions to the rule. Election results do not always conform to the business cycle. The 1912 schism in the Republican Party enabled Wilson to capture the White House despite an expanding economy. In 1952, dissatisfaction with the course of the Korean War facilitated the victory of Eisenhower, who had the added advantage of being a victorious general. Similarly, the Vietnam War discredited the Johnson-Humphrey administration and led to the election of Nixon in 1968.

However, despite the fact there is neither a war nor a particularly credible opponent, the Gore campaign is obviously badly wounded as it staggers toward the finish line. Why?

The analyses offered by the corporate media are generally shallow, focusing on one or another personal characteristic that undermines Gore's popular appeal. While there may be some degree of truth in these observations, they contribute very little to a deeper understanding of more profound political and social processes.

What are the more essential reasons for the parlous state of the Gore campaign? First, let us consider the media's underlying (and all but unquestioned) assumption: that this is an era of unparalleled economic prosperity. This article of

faith is less a reflection of reality—which is more complex and troubling—than of the highly privileged financial status of media opinion makers.

While unemployment figures have fallen over the past decade, that statistic expresses only one aspect of prevailing socioeconomic conditions. For the overwhelming majority of Americans, the 1990s has been a decade of economic uncertainty and stress. Job security has all but disappeared as an operative social concept. Wage levels have barely kept up with inflation. Tens of millions of working class families are deeply in debt and anxious about their ability to cope in the event of an emergency. A sudden layoff carries with it the potential for catastrophe.

Basic social needs—medical care, decent education, economic security in one's old age—are beyond the reach of the more than 40 million Americans classified as poor. Indeed, they are problematic for the majority of working people. A downturn in the economy—even a so-called "soft landing"—would quickly expose the extremely precarious position of the working class.

When considered in the context of a more serious appraisal of socioeconomic conditions in the United States, the real reasons for the crisis of the Gore campaign begin to emerge. Notwithstanding the occasional bursts of pseudo-populist demagoguery, Gore is the representative of a political party that has nothing of programmatic substance to offer the working class.

Much has been written about Gore's wooden demeanor—or, in the words of a more thoughtful commentator, "the vice president's inability to give a direct, unequivocal answer to almost any question put to him..." But this trait stems less from a personal failing than from the basic contradiction of the Democratic Party. Its efforts to pose as the defender of working Americans continuously clash with the overriding need to reassure its corporate patrons. Circumstances beyond Gore's control compel him to speak continuously out of both sides of his mouth. Ringing promises to "save Social

Security” or improve education are offset with sober declarations in support of “fiscal responsibility.”

This problem did not begin with Gore. In fact, what is manifested in his campaign is the terminal stage of the protracted decay of American liberalism.

As everyone who follows American politics knows, liberalism has been transformed in the course of the last 20 years into the political equivalent of an expletive deleted—the dreaded “L word.” The fact that no Democratic candidate for national office would dare identify himself or herself as a liberal means that there exists, within the framework of bourgeois politics, no viable basis for a program of social reform.

This is by no means a new development. Indeed, the crisis of liberalism predates the victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980—an event that is often, and falsely, described as the major turning point in American politics. A more careful review of history reveals that the decay of American liberalism as a credible instrument of social reform can be traced all the way back to the first decades of the twentieth century. The Achilles heel of liberalism, as a bourgeois political tendency, was its organic inability to advocate solutions to social problems that overstepped the bounds of what was acceptable to the capitalistic profit system.

In the mid-1930s, the great American philosopher John Dewey acknowledged that liberalism, while proclaiming its fidelity to the ideals of democracy, had, in practice, degenerated into an increasingly shameless defense of the vested interests of the capitalist class. It was Dewey's sincere hope that liberalism could somehow free itself from its historical subservience to capitalism and thereby revive itself as a credible trend of deep-going social reform.

In a statement typical of his writings in the 1930s, Dewey declared: “The tragic breakdown of democracy is due to the fact that the identification of liberty with the maximum of unrestrained individualistic action in the economic sphere, under the institutions of capitalistic finance, is as fatal to the realization of liberty for all as it is fatal to the realization of equality. It is destructive of liberty for the many because it is destructive of genuine equality of opportunity.”

Dewey's efforts to articulate a philosophical foundation for a viable program of liberal social reform—in opposition to a class-based program of socialist revolution—were unsuccessful. With the entry of the United States into World War II and its transformation into the major imperialist power, the evolution of American liberalism assumed a starkly reactionary character.

The most graphic manifestation of liberalism's movement to the right was its enthusiastic endorsement of the Cold War against the Soviet Union, combined with anticommunist witch-hunting at home. The outcome of the orgy of red-

baiting, politically and intellectually legitimized by the leaders of American liberalism, was the persecution and suppression of all forms of socialist and anti-capitalist dissent within the United States, especially within the newly formed industrial unions.

As for the relationship between liberalism and the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, it must be recalled that the struggle against desegregation took place largely in opposition to the Democratic Party. It was an ugly fact of American politics that national Democratic Party campaigns, as late as 1960, depended upon an unholy alliance of Northern liberals and Southern segregationists. This alliance was shattered by the eruption of mass struggles that the Kennedy administration was unable to control.

In the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon Johnson unveiled his “Great Society.” The legislation introduced by Johnson, however, represented not the renaissance of liberalism, but rather its last gasp. Johnson's “War on Poverty” fell victim to the War in Vietnam. None of the social goals proclaimed by Johnson were realized. The last 30 years of American political history have witnessed the systematic repudiation by both Republican and Democratic administrations of not only the general social aspirations proclaimed by the Johnson administration, but also the specific programs it introduced.

The political trajectory of the Democratic Party has been determined by objective socioeconomic tendencies—above all, the concentration of economic power and wealth in the hands of an ever more isolated elite for whom any alteration in the social structure upon which its privileges depend is anathema. The Democratic Party functions as an instrument of that corporate and financial aristocracy. The barrenness of its platform is a measure of the intolerance of the ruling elite for any measures that might impact unfavorably on its economic position and interests.

In the final analysis, Gore's “woodenness” is an expression of the class discipline and constraints within which he is obliged to operate.



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