

The US election

Journalist Christopher Hitchens: from "left" charlatan to mouthpiece for the Republican right

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Christopher Hitchens has been a contributor to *The Nation*, a left-liberal weekly magazine in the US, since 1982. He has also been Washington editor of *Harper's* and book critic for *New York Newsday*, and contributes regularly to *Granta*, *The London Review of Books*, *Vogue*, *New Left Review*, *Dissent* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Hitchens, born in England in 1949 and a graduate of Oxford University, is also the author of a number of volumes of social and political commentary. His most recent book, *No One Left to Lie To: The Values of the Worst Family*, is an attack on Bill and Hillary Clinton.

In February 1999, Hitchens, all the while continuing to style himself an "extreme leftist," signed an affidavit for right-wing Republicans in the House of Representatives alleging that Sidney Blumenthal, an aide to Clinton, had provided him with information disparaging to Monica Lewinsky. The purpose of the Hitchens affidavit was twofold: to help the Republicans hang a perjury charge on Blumenthal (the latter had denied under oath being a conduit of anti-Lewinsky material to the press) and, more generally, to assist in the Republican effort to paint the White House as a cesspool of mendacity and immorality.

At the time, we commented: "Cementing a political alliance with the extreme right, on the one hand; spinelessness, on the other—this is what Hitchens' action amounted to, although it's unclear in which precise proportions." The proportions are still not entirely clear, but recent events demonstrate that the two tendencies we pointed to have become even more pronounced.

On November 15, Hitchens plunged into print on the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, in an article headlined, "Don't Blame Nader for Democrats' Problems." The piece is ostensibly a defense of Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader against accusations by embittered Democrats that he is responsible for Al Gore's electoral difficulties. Hitchens takes up the *New York Times*, Gloria Steinem, Kate Michaelman and others for their attacks on Nader as a spoiler and de facto ally of the Republicans.

The hypocrisy and opportunism of decaying liberalism is a legitimate target for criticism. But it matters a good deal, in these days of increasing political tension, from what vantage point Democratic Party supporters are criticized. The remarkable feature of Hitchens' article is the manner in which it dovetails neatly with the campaign of the extreme right in the aftermath of the November 7 election.

A few facts should be borne in mind. *The Wall Street Journal* is not simply any publication. Its editorial page is one of the centers of ideological reaction in America today. Virtually since the day of Clinton's inauguration in 1993, it has urged his removal as a criminal and a liar. The *Journal* is currently campaigning for defiance of the Florida Supreme Court, local election boards and any other institution or individual that stands between the Republican Party and a takeover of the White House. It is increasingly fascistic in tone and content.

Moreover, Hitchens' article appears at a time when the Republican right generally is raving about a stolen election and the supposed criminality of the Gore camp. By and large, these allegations are echoed uncritically

by a corrupt and ignorant media.

Where does Hitchens situate himself in the current political struggle?

The language he uses, even while making ostensibly “left” points here and there, is most revealing. He begins: “Liberal self-pity is an unattractive phenomenon, but liberal authoritarianism is an even more unattractive one. And the recent blend of the two has afforded us a repulsive spectacle.” Further on, Hitchens writes of the Gore camp that “this crowd ... doesn't mind sounding like a resentful lynch-mob.”

He speaks of a populace “sickened by eight years of Clintonism,” about “the thuggish cast of the Clintonian mind” and “mobbish Democrats.” Hitchens writes: “If I seem to have singled out the Democrats and liberals, it is because I did not read a single attack in a conservative journal, or from a Republican spokesman, on Pat Buchanan's right to run as a ‘spoiler.’ But when the Democrats and the liberals are hurt, they first squeal and then threaten.”

This is extraordinary. Hitchens politely refers to the quasi-fascist right as “conservative,” then proceeds to paint it in sympathetic colors, in contrast to the sniveling liberals. With this portrayal of the situation he extends a hand to the right wing. To whom else could his ranting appeal, except the most unsavory political elements in America?

One could be forgiven for taking Hitchens' piece as a whole, leaving aside its radical ornamentation, to be an example of the fulminations of the ultra-right. The language and tone are strikingly similar. Right-winger Michael Kelly, for example, in an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* (November 22) makes four references to “thugs” in regard to the Gore camp in the course of a pathological attack on the Democrats and the “liberal national press corps.” In a manner that is also increasingly common on the extreme right, Kelly makes an aside that has racist and anti-Semitic connotations, attacking “Jesse Jackson and Alan Dershowitz” by name. Interestingly, Hitchens makes a demeaning reference to “the shocked faces of Jewish retirees in Palm Beach” who mistakenly voted for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan. There is something truly foul going on here.

It is revealing as well that Hitchens makes no mention, except this comment about “Jewish retirees,” to the disenfranchisement in Florida of tens of

thousands of voters. The issue of democratic rights seems not to interest him at all.

Socialists oppose liberalism on a principled basis, from the perspective of building up an independent political movement of the working class. We are hostile to demagogic attacks on liberalism from right-wing political forces, whose ultimate purpose is to overthrow bourgeois democracy in order to replace it with authoritarian and police-state forms of rule.

Hitchens is a free-booter. He feels no responsibility to anyone, certainly not the working class. As commentators have indicated, he hobnobs with officials and journalists of every stripe. A *Washington Post* article in 1999 noted that Hitchens belonged to “a rarefied world where the top pols and bureaucrats sup with the media and literary elite at exclusive dinner parties. It's a cozy little club of confidential sources and off-the-record confidences...”

By appearing in the *Journal* in this manner, Hitchens has made common cause with the right-wing rabble. He is not the first and will not be the last to make the journey from the “extreme left” to the extreme right.



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