

The New York Times and the 2000 elections: a contorted attempt to legitimize the two-party monopoly

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On October 29 the *New York Times* endorsed Democratic candidate Al Gore for president. This comes as no great surprise. The *Times* editors had made it clear in recent weeks that they favored the vice president. Their editorial attack on Green Party candidate Ralph Nader on October 26 [see “What accounts for the anti-Nader hysteria of the *New York Times*?”] amounted to a Gore endorsement.

In their editorial supporting Gore, the *Times* editors write that the Democratic and Republican candidates “have delivered a clean, well-argued campaign that offers a choice between two sharply contrasting visions of the future.” This has been the line of the newspaper throughout the election campaign: that there are stark differences between Gore and Bush, both of whom are conducting a substantive contest. As soon as the primary results were known in March, the *Times* went into print asserting that the voters could expect a fierce and captivating race.

The *Times*' glowing portrait of the 2000 campaign reeks with cynicism. It speaks to the dishonesty of the editors, their insularity and their contempt for the American people. Many indicators points to widespread apathy, disgust and alienation within the electorate. The *Times*' own reporters have noted these trends on occasion.

The newspaper's consistent effort to sanitize George W. Bush is especially significant. Even as the editors endorse his opponent, they praise the Texas governor as “the most moderate Republican nominee in a generation.” They congratulate him for “running a largely positive, inclusive campaign” and not playing “on divisive themes as his father did in 1992.”

The *Times* chooses not to mention that Bush is the leader of a party that was engaged for an entire year in an attempt, via the impeachment effort spearheaded by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, to remove a twice-elected president by means of conspiracy, frame-up and media witch-hunting. The *Times* played a critical role in legitimizing this deeply reactionary campaign.

Even from the standpoint of American bourgeois politics, Bush is an individual entirely lacking in the political qualifications traditionally deemed necessary for the presidency. Behind him, although they have been kept out of the limelight for the entire election year, stand the Congressional Republicans and the rest of the crowd that organized the impeachment drive. With Bush in power, they will be back in business, along with the Christian fundamentalists, the National Rifle Association and other sinister political forces. The *New York Times* knows all this, but the editors choose not to explain it to the American people.

They cannot find it within themselves to use the phrase “right-wing”

in their October 29 editorial; the best they can come up with to characterize the Bush campaign is “conservative” and “ideologically driven.”

In legitimizing Bush, the *Times* is legitimizing the ultra-right, fascistic elements in his camp who would exert enormous influence over a Republican administration. The newspaper played the same role during the impeachment crisis, concealing the anti-democratic character of the forces mobilized behind what was in essence an attempted coup d'état. The newspaper's politically sordid role in the impeachment plot is mirrored in its coverage of the 2000 election campaign.

In its attitude toward Bush, the *Times* echoes that of the Democrats themselves, who treat the Texas governor in the most respectful and conciliatory manner and refuse to expose his real agenda. There is no mention by the Gore camp of impeachment, no mention of the hated former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich, no mention of the “Republican Revolution.” A public airing of such matters would arouse social issues and social passions that Gore is as anxious to suppress as Bush.

Significantly, the *Times* gives as one of its first reasons for backing the vice president the fact that he “has struggled impressively and successfully to escape the shadow of the Clinton administration's ethical lapses...” In other words, Gore has given his blessing retroactively to the Starr investigation, through his choice of Senator Joseph Lieberman as his running mate, his repudiation of Clinton throughout the campaign and his overall attitude to the Monica Lewinsky scandal. It is telling that the editors first find cause to endorse the Democratic candidate over an issue on which he has solidarized himself with the Republican right.

A point-by-point examination of the *Times*' rationale for giving the nod to Gore underscores the generally reactionary character of the vice president's campaign. The *Times* praises Gore for having “helped stiffen Mr. Clinton's resolve to maintain the budgetary discipline that erased the federal deficit, stimulated productivity and invigorated the financial markets,” i.e., for having played a right-wing role within the most right-wing Democratic administration in modern history. It is widely reported that Gore urged a hesitant Clinton in 1996 to sign the Republicans' welfare bill, resulting in the destruction of much of the social safety net for millions of people.

Gore and Lieberman “promise to maintain fiscal rigor,” the editorial continues, while holding out the prospect of spending the budget surplus “to improve the environment and spend more money to hire teachers and build schools.” Later the editorial writers praise Gore's

meager health care plan and his supposed commitment to Medicare.

Taken at face value, the policies referred to—the word “reforms” is hardly appropriate—are minimal, even when compared to Clinton’s pledge in 1992, ignominiously abandoned in 1994, to introduce universal health care. It is a sign of the rightward lurch of the Democrats and the entire political establishment that Gore, now faced with a budget *surplus*, proposes far less than Clinton did in his first presidential campaign, under conditions of a massive deficit.

The *Times*’ choice of Gore is neither arbitrary nor accidental. The editors see in him a more reliable defender of American corporate interests. “Voting for him is not a gamble on unknown potential,” they write.

There are differences between the two parties, which over the past eight years have at times reached the point of unbridled warfare within the Washington establishment, but they are not of the character claimed by the *New York Times*. They are differences within a narrow ruling elite.

The Republicans represent the interests of the most backward, shortsighted and avaricious elements of the corporate and political establishment. They can barely restrain themselves from blurting out their credo: “Everything for the rich—now!” The Democrats speak for another section of the same social class that is not quite so intoxicated with the immediate accumulation of wealth. They take a somewhat more sober and farsighted view of things and seek to incorporate various social layers, including the trade union bureaucracy and the most privileged sections of blacks and other minorities, in their operations. Both parties are profoundly alienated from the broad mass of working people.

The *Times* editors register their disagreement with Bush and the Republicans as to the best means of (a) maintaining the economic and social climate that has permitted the American elite to enrich itself and (b) keeping in check any government or movement around the world that might challenge US hegemony.

For example, the *Times* criticizes Bush’s plan to dole out more than half of the projected \$2.2 trillion surplus on a tax cut “at a time when the economy does not need the stimulus.” They find such a policy reckless and unnecessary. It endangers certain pillars of social stability, such as Medicare and Social Security, and needlessly accentuates the grossly unjust and unequal bias of US fiscal policy.

The *Times* writes: “We like his [Gore’s] capitalism with a conscience more than the trickle down sound of Mr. Bush’s compassionate conservatism.” As this hypocritical sentence suggests, one of the differences that the editors discern between the two parties is the “sound” of their policies, and the impact this will have on different social forces. The editors and those who think along the same lines fear that the harshness of Bush’s policies, as well as the general insensitivity of the Republicans, have the potential to ignite social opposition that will not be so easy to extinguish.

On foreign policy, the editorial praises the Democratic candidate for his record of support for US military aggression around the world. “He broke with his party to support the war against Iraq in 1991. He was an advocate of military force in the Balkans, and today he calls for a more muscular approach to using American forces to protect the country’s security interests and prevent genocidal conflicts abroad.” Bush’s “repeated objections to using troops for peacekeeping and nation-building do not add up to a mature national-security vision.” In sum, the *Times* believes Gore will conduct a more aggressive foreign policy.

The editorialists suggest that there are crucial differences between

the Democrats and Republicans on abortion rights and civil liberties, and can’t resist once again taking a swipe at Ralph Nader and his supporters for “not simply being delusional when they say there is no real difference between these candidates. They are being dishonest, and dangerously so.”

In reality, the Clinton-Gore record on democratic rights is deplorable. It includes the extension of federal death penalty provisions, weakening of habeas corpus, expansion of police powers, repeated attempts to censor the Internet, attacks on immigrants’ rights, and a general tendency to capitulate to the Republican right wing on any major issue of social policy, including gay rights. During this election campaign Lieberman has launched an open attack on the Bill of Rights and its defense of freedom of conscience, with his efforts to impose religion on the population. The two Democrats, in yet another effort to outflank the Republicans on the right, have proposed giving the entertainment industry six months to “clean up its act,” before moving to some sort of direct state censorship of films, music and video games.

Insofar as they sincerely believe their own arguments, it is the *Times* editors and the caravan of liberals from the National Organization of Women, the National Abortion Rights Action League and the entertainment industry stumping for Gore on the grounds that a vote for the Democrats is the only means of guaranteeing the right to an abortion and environmental protection, who are “delusional.” There is nothing in the political histories of either Gore or Lieberman, or the record of the past eight years, that would indicate any serious commitment to basic rights on the part of the Democratic candidates.

The editors conclude their endorsement of Gore by remarking that “the content of his campaign in these final days demonstrates how much he has grown in the last year.” Why is the *Times* patting the vice president on the back? In recent weeks he has played down his populist rhetoric, reassured big business, continued to distance himself from Clinton, come out strongly for Israel and defended US military intervention in the Balkans. Gore has reiterated that the “era of big government is over” and bragged about his firing of hundreds of thousands of federal employees.

As election day draws closer, Gore moves farther to the right. He has proven himself as far as the *Times* editors are concerned. Gore’s endorsement by this mouthpiece for an important section of the financial and political establishment helps clarify the dishonest and reactionary character of his candidacy and the entire 2000 election campaign.



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