

Bush's political honeymoon: why the Democrats are rallying behind an illegitimate government

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Two months after the Supreme Court stepped in to halt the counting of votes and Democratic candidate Al Gore conceded the presidency to George W. Bush, official Washington is moving towards a coalition government in all but name, with the Democrats playing the role of junior partners. The most bitterly contested election in more than a century has been followed by the Democrats' acceptance, without protest, of an illegitimate government and its program of social and political reaction.

On a daily basis, Democratic congressmen and senators troop through the doors of the White House to fawn over the Republican president whom at least some Democratic leaders were denouncing only a few weeks ago. Bush was invited to address the closed-door caucuses of House and Senate Democrats—a gesture that congressional Republicans never made to Clinton—and he received a friendly reception.

Democratic Party spokesmen have generally welcomed the Bush administration's initiatives on federal funding for social services provided by religious groups, on privatization of public education, in the guise of "reform," and on national missile defense. Democratic Senator Zell Miller of Georgia agreed to co-sponsor the Bush tax cut plan, whose benefits go mainly to the wealthy, and many congressional Democrats have joined in the feeding frenzy on Capitol Hill, as corporate lobbyists seek to add provisions to reward their particular industries.

Even those Democratic Party loyalists who proclaimed the greatest hostility to Bush during the election campaign have sought a rapprochement with the new administration. Most of the Congressional Black Caucus accepted a Bush invitation to meet with him in the White House, an office that he only occupies thanks to the widespread disenfranchisement of black voters in Florida.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney praised Bush's second choice for secretary of labor, Elaine Chao, who was nominated after the withdrawal of right-wing ideologue Linda Chavez. At a press conference last week, Sweeney pledged to work with the new administration and specifically praised Bush's proposal for "faith-based" social service programs.

The Ashcroft vote

Despite the 50-50 split in the Senate, and a narrow five-vote majority for the Republicans in the House of Representatives, Congress had approved every one of Bush's cabinet nominees within three weeks of inauguration, most of them by unanimous votes. Only one Bush cabinet nominee, Attorney General John Ashcroft, faced any substantial Democratic Party opposition.

Some Democratic spokesmen claimed that the 58-42 confirmation vote on the former senator, a longtime activist of the Christian right, was a "warning shot across the bow," since 41 votes would be enough to sustain a filibuster against an Ashcroft-style nominee to the US Supreme Court.

It is more likely that the 42 votes against Ashcroft will prove to be the high water mark of Democratic Party resistance to the policies of the Bush

White House. Republican Senator Orrin Hatch sneered that the 42 votes meant nothing since the Democrats did not, despite threats from Senator Edward Kennedy, actually venture a filibuster.

Democratic Senate Minority Leader Thomas Daschle of South Dakota opposed any delaying action and publicly assured the White House that there would be an up or down vote on every cabinet nomination, as quickly as possible. Among the eight Democrats who voted for the ultra-right attorney general designate were Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and two prominent Southern Democrats, John Breaux of Louisiana and Zell Miller of Georgia, who are expected to play a leading role in working out agreements between the congressional Democrats and the White House.

In the course of the debate on Ashcroft, Senate Republicans denounced any opposition to the nomination in strident terms. Hatch blamed "the extreme left" for raising questions about Ashcroft's opposition to school desegregation, abortion rights, and equal treatment of gays and lesbians.

Daschle's press spokeswoman, Ranit Schmelzer, minimized the significance of the conflict, saying, "The tough questions that were asked were necessary. We certainly don't intend for this to have any long-lasting effect and are looking forward to working closely with the Republicans and President Bush."

A few words from Galbraith

Highly significant is the silence in the Democratic Party on ongoing press studies of Florida presidential election ballots, which show that Gore would have won the state by a margin of some 30,000 to 50,000 if the votes of all those who went to the polls last November 7 had been counted.

The prostration of the Democrats is in sharp contrast with what could be done, even within the traditional framework of "checks and balances" and legislative disposition of proposals from the executive branch. Consider, by way of counterexample, a commentary by liberal economist and author James K. Galbraith, author of *Created Unequal: The Crisis of American Pay*, in a column written for the bi-monthly *Texas Observer*. Galbraith makes a number of apt observations about the historical significance of the 2000 presidential election. He writes:

"With the events of late in the year 2000, the United States left behind constitutional republicanism, and turned to a different form of government.... This is corporate democracy. It is a system whereby a Board of Directors-read Supreme Court-selects the Chief Executive Officer. The CEO in turn appoints new members of the Board. The shareholders, owners in title only, are invited to cast their votes in periodic referenda. But their franchise is only symbolic, for management holds a majority of the proxies. On no important issue do the CEO and the Board ever permit themselves to lose."

Galbraith criticizes the claim that it is necessary to put the Florida

election behind and "move on." While conceding that Bush is president and that he will remain in office for four years, he declares, referring to the Republican administration: "I will not reconcile myself to them. They lost the election. Then they arranged to obstruct the count of the vote. They don't deserve to be there, and that changes everything ... the illegitimacy of this administration must not be allowed to fade from view."

He advocates a policy of what he calls "civic disrespect," which essentially amounts to blocking any policy of the Bush administration that would have consequences after the four years of Bush's term in office. He calls on the 50 Senate Democrats to reject all right-wing judicial nominees, leaving vacancies on the Supreme Court for years if necessary, and urges them to block a partial privatization of Social Security or Medicare, abolition of the estate tax, or the development of a national missile defense system. Galbraith points out that Bush not only won the presidency through the suppression of votes, but lost the popular vote by a substantial margin and therefore can claim no mandate for his policies. He concludes with the ominous suggestion that Americans will in the future elect a more progressive government, "if we get another chance."

Son of John Kenneth Galbraith, the famed liberal economist and adviser to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Galbraith is neither a revolutionary nor an avowed socialist. The methods of political resistance he advocates are those that a serious parliamentary opposition would employ in any bourgeois-democratic country. Yet in the current political climate in official Washington, his comments are looked upon as something akin to a summons to insurrection. They demonstrate how far to the right the Democratic Party has moved over the past three decades.

O'Neill and inequality

The prostration of the Democratic Party has encouraged the Bush administration to accelerate its attacks on working people. A mood of intransigent and impatient reaction prevails in Washington—the right wing wants it all, and they want it now.

A government that came to power through the methods employed by the Republicans in Florida is not likely to have many scruples about violating democratic rights once in office. That is the implication of an extraordinary interview given by Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill to the *Washington Post*, in which he denounced any criticism of the anti-egalitarian character of Bush's \$1.6 trillion tax cut plan.

O'Neill did not dispute the premise of the criticism—that the tax cut plan will provide hundreds of billions for the top one percent of wealthy families, and little or nothing for those in the bottom half of the income bracket. Instead, he suggested that to point out such economic disparities was socially divisive and politically illegitimate.

"I don't believe this society should still be operating with a robber-baron premise as the basis for how we discuss public policy," O'Neill said. "I think it is really corrosive to have this argument about the rich and the poor. It's not worthy of where we are in our development as a country."

Democratic Party attacks on the tax cut plan were appeals to populism and economic envy, he said. They sent an improper message to the public that "we're going to get those rich, dirty SOBs, and the way we're going to do it is to tax them."

O'Neill declared that he opposed those who believed the tax cut should be used to "level the field and say that everyone should have the same amount of income." He continued: "I think we've demonstrated as a people that we don't think some form of socialism is the way to run a society."

America is a society in which unceasing ideological warfare has been conducted against Marxism and every form of progressive ideology, where socialism and even liberalism have been transformed into epithets. Nonetheless, a top spokesman for the new administration seems convinced that the levelers are at the gates of Washington.

O'Neill acknowledged that the growing gap between rich and poor was a problem, but in his interview with the *Post* he twice refused to suggest any government policy to deal with it. To the contrary, he said that after the passage of Bush's tax cut plan he would begin a campaign for abolition of the corporate income tax.

The Treasury secretary not only expressed the desire to ban any public discussion of social inequality, he voiced impatience with the lengthy process of obtaining legislative approval for the Bush tax cut. "It's just annoying to me that people have all these damned excuses," he said, adding that in corporate America such a policy change would be carried out in a matter of weeks, not months.

O'Neill is not just any high government official. Until taking office he had served as chairman and CEO of Alcoa, the world's biggest aluminum maker, for the past dozen years. Last year he collected \$59 million in salary, bonuses and stock options from Alcoa. His views reflect the reactionary and increasingly anti-democratic outlook that prevails in corporate America.

Why the Democrats are prostrate

There is a profound social logic behind the rapprochement between the Bush administration and the congressional Democrats. Bush makes an appeal to the Democratic Party, not merely out of crude political calculation, but because the social base of his own government is extremely narrow. It is impossible to impose drastic changes in social policy in the United States by relying exclusively on the support of multimillionaires, Christian fundamentalists and other right-wing fanatics.

The Democratic Party is making its peace with Bush because, like the Republicans, it is a party that defends the interests of the wealthy elite which dominates American society both economically and politically. There is no serious support within this ruling elite for either social reform or the defense of democratic rights.

The Democratic Party, like the Republicans, rests on an ever more narrow social base. The more it has moved to the right, adapting itself to the reactionary consensus within the financial and corporate elite, the more it has alienated the working class and middle-class layers that once formed its mass base of support. The AFL-CIO trade unions, which remain one of the Democratic Party's main props, have themselves undergone a dramatic decay, declining sharply in both membership, as a percentage of the workforce, and in influence over the working class. Today the Democrats rest largely on sections of finance capital and more privileged layers of the middle class, including the civil rights establishment and those sections of the minority population that have risen economically on the basis of government set-asides and subsidies.

It is significant that in the debate which has broken out within the Democratic Party on the causes of Gore's defeat, the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council, which Clinton, Gore and Lieberman all support, has declared that Gore lost the election because he went too far to the left in his populist attacks on Bush's tax cut plan.

This argument ignores the actual course of events—Gore's turn to populism produced an upsurge of support, until he largely abandoned it during the debates. It also ignores the fact that Gore did not really lose the election, winning the popular vote by 600,000 and losing Florida and the presidency only because of the anti-democratic intervention by the Supreme Court.

More fundamentally, as in all such disputes in official political circles, the 50 percent of the population who did not vote are left out of the equation. These were disproportionately drawn from the poor and working class. (By one revealing study, of those who voted last November 7, some 70 percent owned shares of stock, compared to 50 percent of the population as a whole.)

The Democratic Party refuses to challenge the legitimacy of the Bush administration, above all, because to do so could open the door for a much more radical political development in the United States.

American politics sits on a social power keg. The working people, who constitute the vast majority of the population, are excluded from any political influence. The gulf between the two officially sanctioned political parties and the working class has been growing steadily for decades, fueled by the staggering rise in the level of social inequality, which has reached levels unprecedented since the days of the nineteenth century robber barons.

In a society in which one percent of the population owns nearly half the national wealth, the two big business parties necessarily confine themselves to a struggle over who can best represent and defend the interests of the uppermost layers, while making purely demagogic appeals to win the votes of the masses.

In the 2000 election, particularly in Florida, the political implications of the growth of social contradictions have starkly emerged. It is impossible to maintain capitalist democracy under conditions of such acute polarization between rich and poor. The ruling class must move against the democratic rights of the masses. Inevitably, the working people must take up a political struggle against the economic elite.

In recent weeks there have been muted expressions of concern in the bourgeois media about the danger of a major political shift in the United States. The *New York Times*, in a review of the crisis in the Democratic Party published February 4, voiced the fear that “if activists become discouraged by Democrats in Washington, finding them too accommodating to Mr. Bush, they could become alienated from traditional party politics.... As both Democrats and Republicans cast themselves as centrists, the emergence of these activists could create new problems for the Democrats by yanking the party to the left.”

While the *Times* voices the fear that the Democratic Party itself may be pushed to the left, the time is long past when this thoroughly conservative bourgeois party could effectively posture as a representative of working people. There will indeed be a mass opposition to the extreme-right policies of the Bush administration. But this must take the form of an independent political movement of working people, outside the Democratic and Republican parties, and directed against the profit system.



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