

# Deepening social crisis underlies Republican loss of US Senate

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The transfer of control of the Senate from the Republicans to the Democrats, abruptly ending the across-the-board domination of the US government by the Republican right wing, is a significant shift in American politics.

With Bush's inauguration on January 20, the Republican Party controlled the White House, the Senate, the House of Representatives and the Supreme Court for the first time in nearly 50 years. Only four months later, this seeming political hegemony has been shattered by the action of a single US Senator, James Jeffords of Vermont, who quit the Republican Party, tipping control of the 50-50 Senate to the Democrats.

This political overturn is not a response, in a direct sense, to any broad movement against the right-wing policies of the Bush White House. Such a movement has yet to develop, in large measure because the Democratic Party, the trade unions and civil rights groups have served to diffuse rather than mobilize popular opposition.

The political shift in control of the Senate must rather be understood as a new stage in the raging conflict within the American ruling class, which erupted in the Clinton impeachment and then the Florida election crisis. It is an attempt to impose a course correction on the new administration amid mounting indications that American capitalism is sliding into a profound social, economic and political crisis.

As one of the more perceptive observers of Washington affairs, columnist David Ignatius of the *Washington Post*, noted on May 27: "Jeffords's defection turned the United States momentarily into a parliamentary democracy. It was the equivalent of a vote of no confidence, and it shattered the conservative 'mandate' that the Republicans had imagined for themselves—oblivious to the fact that their candidate had actually lost the popular vote in last November's elections."

Jeffords' decision signals the growing disquiet within ruling circles over the performance of the Bush administration in its first four months in office. From the standpoint of the more farsighted representatives of American capitalism, there is ample reason for concern. In both foreign and domestic policy the Bush administration has proceeded with a combination of recklessness and blindness.

Internationally, the Bush administration in its first hundred days has managed the feat of simultaneously antagonizing Russia, China, Japan, Europe and the Arab world. It signaled its intention to unilaterally repudiate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia, while provoking a confrontation with China over US spy flights in the South China Sea and abruptly reversing the Clinton policy of rapprochement with North Korea, a slap in the face to both Japan and South Korea.

In the Middle East, Bush tacitly encouraged a belligerent Israeli posture towards the Palestinian resistance that has raised tensions in the region to the level of 1967 or 1973, with open talk of war in many Arab capitals.

The Bush administration sparked widespread anger in Europe with its unilateral repudiation of the Kyoto protocol on global warming, its refusal to allow US military and intelligence personnel to be subject to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, and suggestions that US

troops will be withdrawn from Bosnia, Kosovo and other peacekeeping operations.

The rapid deterioration in the US international position was expressed in the May 3 vote to deny the United States a seat on the UN Human Rights Commission. Nominal US allies France, Sweden and Austria all refused to abandon their own candidacies and each won more votes than the American nominee. Meanwhile trade conflicts are multiplying between the US and Europe, the US and Japan, and the US and the bulk of third world countries.

In domestic policy the Bush administration has proceeded with similar obtuseness, apparently oblivious to broad-based opposition to initiatives such as the lifting of restrictions on arsenic levels in drinking water, the banning of discussion of abortion in family planning services overseas, and the ending of American Bar Association review of judicial nominations in favor of vetting by the far-right Federalist Society.

Bush maintained a public silence over last month's riot in Cincinnati, the end product of a long history of police violence and racism. Even more striking is the administration's attitude to the energy crisis in California, a deliberate display of indifference to a state which is home to 15 percent of the American people, as well as key industries such as computers, aerospace, agriculture and entertainment.

The most important development in the four months since Bush took office is the liquidation of paper values on the NASDAQ stock market. The trillions wiped out in the collapse of the high-tech stock bubble and the looming prospect of a major recession have shaken the bourgeoisie. The shock waves of the financial debacle are beginning to be felt, as corporate giants outside the high-tech sector announce major layoffs and cuts in spending on new investment. Despite an unprecedented four rate cuts by the Federal Reserve in five months, the economic slowdown continues.

Bush's tax cut bill, while representing a financial bonanza for the entire ruling elite, is viewed as an economic adventure or worse by those sections of the bourgeoisie that are capable of taking a longer view. It is widely understood, both on Wall Street and in Washington, that the huge projected federal surpluses cited to justify the tax cut will evaporate rapidly in any downturn.

*BusinessWeek* recently ran a cover story on the financial flimflammy of the dot-coms, which has been exposed in the NASDAQ collapse. The tax cut finally passed by Congress May 26 represents the translation into public policy of similarly disreputable bookkeeping. The legislation was modified on the eve of passage to move forward the effective date for the tax breaks given to the rich. To offset the impact of this change and keep the entire bill within the \$1.35 trillion ceiling set in the congressional budget resolution, the Republican leadership added the bizarre assumption that the entire tax cut would be rescinded in 2010—essentially borrowing tax cuts from 2010 to be enjoyed immediately.

As economic columnist Paul Krugman observed acidly in a commentary in the *New York Times* web edition, the tax bill involved "financial fakery

that, if practiced by the executives of any publicly traded company would have landed them in jail.... This is white-collar crime, pure and simple. We should call in the Securities and Exchange Commission, and send the whole crew—Democrats like Senator John Breaux and Senator Max Baucus as well as their Republican partners in crime—to a minimum-security installation somewhere unpleasant.”

The purpose of the political maneuvering in Washington is not the removal of the Bush administration, but the establishment of a virtual coalition with the Democrats which will, in the parlance of the official media, compel Bush to govern “from the center” rather than “from the right.” Much of the commentary after the Jeffords defection criticized Bush for relying for support and advice solely on a narrow faction of right-wing religious fundamentalists and anti-tax zealots.

The Democratic Party leadership itself seeks a partnership with the White House, rather than confrontation. There has been no hint of radicalism or even liberalism in the pronouncements of the soon-to-be Senate majority leader, Tom Daschle, who will replace Republican Trent Lott on June 5. A former Air Force intelligence officer and lifelong Washington insider—congressional aide, congressman and senator—Daschle immediately pledged cooperation with the Bush administration.

Even on the issue of judicial appointments, where there have been the most predictions of a likely clash with the Bush White House, Daschle was conciliatory. “While we expect the president to appoint or to nominate conservative judges,” he said in an interview on CNN, “I think that there is a mainstream component here that we will come to expect.”

In other words, another Antonin Scalia or Robert Bork might encounter opposition, but judges of the stripe of Anthony Kennedy and Sandra Day O'Connor, who provided the key swing votes in the 5-4 decision to install Bush in the White House, would likely sail through a Democratic-controlled Senate.

Less than a day after Jeffords's bombshell, Daschle and other top Senate Democrats decided to allow the nomination of Theodore Olson as solicitor general to go to a floor vote. Olson is one of the most odious figures in Washington, at the heart of the right-wing campaign that engineered the Clinton impeachment, and the chief legal representative of the Bush campaign in the theft of the 2000 elections. He was narrowly confirmed by a margin of 51-47.

This action demonstrates that there will be no principled opposition to Bush from the Democrats. Daschle could easily have blocked the nomination as the first demonstration of Democratic control of the Senate. Instead he allowed this political gangster to assume the post of chief lawyer for the US government.

Daschle then struck a posture of implacable opposition to another Bush initiative, declaring Senate Democrats “will never allow” oil drilling in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge. This is an instructive example of the Bush initiatives the Democrats will choose to fight, and those to which they will accede.

There is no commitment to the defense of democratic rights. The Democratic-controlled Senate will not conduct an investigation into the Florida vote, let alone the ties between Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and extreme-right elements in the Republican Party. The Democrats will oppose the White House only on issues of special concern to a privileged layer of the middle class—the environment, abortion rights, perhaps curbing the abuses of HMOs.

As the acceptance of the Olson nomination demonstrates, it is not the strength of the Bush administration that engenders Democratic acquiescence, but its fragility. Once the defeat of Olson became possible, even likely, the Democratic leadership decided it was no longer desirable.

The Bush administration is a weak regime. An illegitimate president, chosen by the Supreme Court in a 5-4 ruling which overrode the popular vote, would be an easy target should the Democrats decide to mount a

serious opposition. There is a dramatic contrast between the Democrats' timidity today and Republican ferocity in similar circumstances.

When Clinton took office as a minority president in 1993—although unlike Bush he received more votes than any of his rivals—the Republicans mounted a relentless campaign of obstruction. Not one Republican voted for Clinton's first budget; his health-care plan was torpedoed; and once the Republicans gained control of Congress in 1994, they launched investigation after investigation of alleged administration improprieties, culminating in the Lewinsky sex scandal and impeachment.

The conventional wisdom in liberal Democratic Party circles was voiced by the *New York Times* May 27. The newspaper published a column by former Clinton campaign aides James Carville and Paul Begala, urging an aggressive campaign of political opposition to the entire Bush agenda, challenging the legitimacy of the Bush presidency. The *Times* editorial explicitly rejected such an approach and called on the Democratic Party to use its new power “judiciously” and reject “payback politics.”

Behind such caution is the fear that unleashing popular hostility to the right-wing policies of Bush and the Republicans could open the door to a political movement that would go well beyond the tepid measures advocated by the liberals.

Most comments from congressional Democrats have been notably restrained and cooperative, while the most scathing criticism of Bush & Co. has come from within the Republican Party. Jeffords himself, in his May 24 speech, made a stronger indictment of the right-wing extremism of the administration than any Democrat.

Arizona Senator John McCain denounced the rigidity of the Republican congressional leadership. “Tolerance of dissent is the hallmark of a mature party,” he said, “and it is well past time for the Republican Party to grow up.” Nebraska Senator Chuck Hagel said, “There is an arrogance here that cost the Democrats control in 1994.... I would hope the president would make this an indicator that he factors into his governance.”

If its reaction to Jeffords is any indication, the Bush administration would collapse in the face of any serious opposition. Press reports suggest that at least one adviser to Vice President Cheney warned in April that Jeffords might defect, but was ignored. Bush's “brain trust”—the same political wizards who assured him on the eve of the election that he would win by a landslide—downplayed the threat from Jeffords and suggested the course of bullying and political snubs that helped provoke his departure from the Republican Party.

As in the case of the China spy plane shoot-down and the UN Human Rights Commission vote, the Bush administration appears to be nonplussed by opposition from any quarter, even from a single senator from a small state.

This is not just a matter of incompetence, but reflects the blinkered outlook of political operatives who rest on an extremely narrow social base, talking only to the right-wing lobbyists, politicians and media pundits who infest official Washington, and believing their own propaganda.

Here Jeffords' remarks on quitting the Republican Party are of some interest. He contrasted the Republican Party of today with the Republican Party of Lincoln. It may be true that the Republican Party had ceased to represent the principles of Lincoln well before the 67-year-old Senator Jeffords was born, but even in the 1960s Republican support was critical to the passage of civil rights legislation. Midwestern Republicans like Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen of Illinois and House Minority Leader Charles Halleck of Indiana backed Lyndon Johnson while every Southern Democrat voted no.

It is a largely undiscussed but enormously important reality of American politics that the Republican Party of today is beholden to fascist elements in the Christian right, the gun lobby, anti-tax outfits and sections of the militia movement. Their spokesmen include some of the most influential Republicans in Congress, including Senator Jesse Helms and

congressmen Bob Barr and Tom Delay, to name a few.

Several media commentators last week noted the recent statements of former Connecticut senator and governor Lowell Weicker, another New England Republican turned independent. Weicker recalled a conversation he had with Barry Goldwater on the Arizona senator's deathbed. The leading representative of Republican conservatism in the 1960s remarked that in the Republican Party of the 1990s he was considered too far to the left.

Underlying the weakness of the Bush administration are shifts in US demographics and social structure generally unfavorable to the Republican right wing, and to the stability of the bourgeois two-party system as a whole. Republican weakness does not mean Democratic strength, but rather the discrediting of the whole political structure in which two big business parties exercise a monopoly over political life.

The Republican Party lost its majority because of the defection of one of the handful of Republican senators from New England, once a major base of the party. This fact underscores the deep regional splits in American politics. In the 22 Southern and Western states carried by Bush (including Alaska), the Senate seats today are split 32-12 in favor of the Republicans, while the House seats are 89-49 Republican. Of the 28 states outside this region—the West Coast (including Hawaii), Midwest and Northeast—Democratic candidate Al Gore carried 21, and the Senate seats split 38-17 for the Democrats, while the House seats divided 152-123 Democratic.

Such regional differences are of great significance in a country as vast and diverse as the United States. The political map reveals, as it were, two different countries. Nor are these two halves equal. The regions dominated by the Democrats are more populous and contain the bulk of American industry, the centers of finance, technology and education, the five largest metropolitan areas.

Even in the Republican-dominated region, the two most populous states, Florida and Texas, reflect the demographic changes that are weakening the right wing. But for rampant violations of democratic rights, Florida would have been lost to the Republicans in 2000. As for Texas, Bush's home state, the *Washington Post* quoted one Republican analyst warning that the trend was unfavorable, given the rapid growth of the Hispanic population. "At some point," he said, "we are going to flip over and become another California," referring to Reagan's home state, which has not voted for a statewide Republican candidate since 1994.

The socioeconomic trends that are undermining the Republican Party have ominous long-term implications for the Democrats as well. America is increasingly divided into two class camps: a wealthy and privileged elite, comprising 5 or 10 percent of the population at most, for whose allegiance the two parties compete, and the bottom 90 percent, whose interests are ignored by both of the big business parties.

The Gore-Lieberman campaign made a pretense of appealing to the social interests of working people, but the effort was wooden, insincere, and ultimately abandoned. According to a recent report in the *Baltimore Sun*, Lieberman is "distancing himself from the Gore battle cry about the little man vs. the wealthy elite." Lieberman told the newspaper, "I've never been one for class warfare. Some of the rhetoric in the campaign—'the people vs. the powerful'—in general terms is not the approach that I'm interested in or that I feel comfortable with."

The pathetic Gore campaign and the Clinton-Gore administration as a whole were the end product of a protracted shift to the right in the Democratic Party, which has tracked the movement of the Republican Party, only one step behind. The Democratic Party now campaigns, not as the party of social justice or economic redistribution, but as the party of fiscal responsibility and austerity, the party that can be trusted by Wall Street.

In the final analysis, neither party represents the interests of working people. An enormous political vacuum exists in America, and it is this

absence of any political representation for the vast majority that lends such an air of unreality to the present political conditions. A genuine opposition to the Bush administration—and his new Democratic partners—must take the form of an independent movement of the working people and the building of a new political party that opposes the financial oligarchy and the economic system that sustains it.



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