

The 2000 election and Bush's attack on democratic rights

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In the weeks since the September 11 terror attacks, the media have devoted their efforts to supporting the Bush administration's war in Afghanistan and its assault on democratic rights, uncritically repeating the government's propaganda and tamely acceding to its clampdown on all independent information.

As in the wars of the 1990s—the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Kosovo—the public is being inundated with reportage that excludes any serious consideration of historical background or political context, without which it is impossible to make an intelligent assessment of current events. The mind-numbing barrage of patriotic images and martial slogans, the demonization of enemies and the reduction of world politics to a struggle between the forces of good (the US) and evil (the latest target of American bombs) is intended to induce a form of historical amnesia, in which the events of today are detached from the chain of development that preceded and produced them.

Such a shallow and demagogic approach is an essential element of propaganda that seeks not to inform or educate, but rather to disorient the masses and stampede them into supporting policies that are aimed against their interests.

As part of this propaganda campaign, a myth of September 11 has been created that is summed up in the phrase “Everything changed.” This is meant to suggest that none of the sweeping changes in American political life that have occurred after that date have any relation to events that preceded it. All of the far-reaching institutional innovations that have expanded the government's police powers and curtailed civil liberties have, supposedly, been carried out in response to the unforeseen and unforeseeable events of September 11. They are to be explained entirely by the exigencies of a “war on two fronts” against global terrorism—a war that was forced on the Bush administration.

No one has sought to demonstrate—least of all the Bush administration—why the hijack-bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon necessitated a war against Afghanistan, or why it dictated major steps toward the establishment of a police state in the US. The “everything changed” mantra is based on a cynical and self-serving lie. In reality, the assault on democratic rights since September 11 is a continuation and acceleration of processes well under way prior to the terror attacks.

One year ago the American ruling elite broke in a fundamental and irrevocable manner with democratic norms and procedures. For the first time in US history, it decided the result of a national election by suppressing votes and overriding the will of the electorate.

The Democratic candidate, Al Gore, won the popular vote nationally by some 600,000 votes, but Election Day ended with neither candidate holding a majority of the electoral votes, and the result in the pivotal state of Florida in dispute. (Under the archaic system established by America's founding fathers, the presidential race is not decided by the popular vote. The president is actually chosen by electors from the various states. The number of a state's electors is equal to the number of its representatives in

the House of Representatives plus two—the number of senators from each state.)

Had the votes in Florida been counted in a fair and impartial manner, Gore would have won that state and its 25 electoral votes, and been declared the next president. That, however, is not what happened. Instead, the votes of thousands of Floridians were suppressed and, by means of fraud and conspiracy, the Republican candidate, George W. Bush, was installed in the White House.

Future generations will look back on the election of 2000 as the definitive point at which the American ruling class embarked on the road to dictatorship. All of the authoritarian impulses that have assumed such ominous and concrete forms since September 11 were already revealed in the methods employed by the Bush campaign and the Republican Party to effect an electoral coup d'état.

Nine days before the US Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, stopped the counting of disputed votes in the pivotal state of Florida, thereby handing the election to Bush, the chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, David North, summed up the basic issues in the election crisis in a report to a public meeting in Sydney, Australia. [Lessons from history: the 2000 elections and the new “irrepressible conflict”] North said:

“What the decision of this court will reveal is how far the American ruling class is prepared to go in breaking with traditional bourgeois-democratic and constitutional norms. Is it prepared to sanction ballot fraud and the suppression of votes and install in the White House a candidate who has attained that office through blatantly illegal and anti-democratic methods?”

On December 12, 2000 the US Supreme Court did precisely that. Five right-wing Republican justices, unelected and unanswerable to the American people, handed down a decision reeking with contempt for democratic rights and devoid of any legal or constitutional scruples. This was a court whose majority had employed the mantras of “states' rights” and “judicial restraint” to curtail the power of the federal government to enforce laws protecting the rights of workers and minorities. But when the issue was posed: what considerations would guide the resolution of the contested election in Florida—the need to determine the will of the electorate, or the desire of the most right-wing sections of the ruling elite to install its man in the White House—the Supreme Court inserted itself into the internal affairs of Florida and took the extraordinary action of overriding the state's highest court.

The Florida Supreme Court had overruled the attempt of the state's Republican administration, headed by Governor Jeb Bush, to certify George W. Bush, the governor's brother, as the winner of the presidential race on the basis of a margin of a few hundred votes. Republican election officials had secured Bush's margin by blocking or disregarding hand counts of thousands of ballots that had not registered a presidential preference in the machine tabulations. (Such hand counts are stipulated in the law of Florida and most other states as the means for resolving

contested elections.) The Florida high court demanded that the uncounted ballots be counted.

In taking this action, the Florida justices invoked the basic democratic principles of popular sovereignty and the right to vote. They asserted, “The right of suffrage is the pre-eminent right contained in the [Florida] Declaration of Rights, for without this basic freedom all others would be diminished.”

Antonin Scalia, the ideological spokesman for the extreme right-wing faction on the US Supreme Court, excoriated the Florida court for raising these democratic principles. On the basis of a reactionary interpretation of the US Constitution, one that flies in the face of constitutional jurisprudence since the Civil War, he declared that American citizens had no constitutional right to vote for the president of the United States. This explicit repudiation of the right to vote became the anchor for the December 12 decision that installed George W. Bush in the White House by discarding the votes of thousands of Floridians.

The following day, Democratic candidate Al Gore delivered a craven concession speech, equating the court’s attack on the right to vote with “the rule of law” and calling on all Americans to rally behind the “president-elect.”

Two months later, in a report to an international school in Sydney, WWSW editorial board member Barry Grey drew the following balance sheet on the 2000 election: [“The world historical implications of the political crisis in the United States”]

“The 2000 election in the United States is a historical watershed. It marks an irrevocable break with the forms and traditions of American democracy.... Notwithstanding the attempts of the media and the political establishment—liberal no less than conservative—to pass over the events of November and December 2000 and ‘move on,’ as though nothing of great significance had occurred, America has been changed in a fundamental way, and nothing will ever be the same in the United States, or, for that matter, the world.”

Grey went on to say: “The United States has not been transformed into a dictatorship. But its ruling elite has embarked on a course that must lead either to authoritarian rule of a fascist type, or social revolution.”

The 2000 election crisis brought to a head a bitter conflict over policy and strategy that had been raging within the US ruling elite for the previous decade. A substantial section of the corporate and political establishment never accepted the legitimacy of the Clinton-Gore administration. Despite Clinton’s efforts to conciliate the Republican right and adapt to its social agenda, powerful forces within financial and corporate circles saw his administration as a retreat from the aggressive anti-labor and pro-business policies of Reagan and the elder George Bush. They bitterly resented Clinton’s token gestures toward social reform.

The agenda of this faction of the ruling class is now being revealed in the unfettered militarism of the Bush administration and its frontal assault on democratic rights. In essence it consists in the removal of all restrictions—legal, political and moral—on the accumulation of private wealth and the amassing of profit.

These forces sought to remove Clinton from office, backing the series of scandals and provocations that culminated in the impeachment and Senate trial of the Democratic president. The methods they employed—conspiracy, provocation, character assassination—already signaled a break with bourgeois legality and traditional democratic norms.

Such “dirty tricks” were the *modus operandi* of fascistic tendencies that had gained dominant influence over the Republican Party. What was once the staid party of corporate conservatism, with a popular base in rural and small-town America, had come under the political wing of the Christian right, the gun lobby, anti-abortion zealots and militia elements.

In the 1994 elections the Republican right, led by Georgia Republican Newt Gingrich, gained control of both houses of Congress. Gingrich and company sought to impose their reactionary social program by shutting

down the federal government at the end of 1995 and the beginning of 1996. Clinton was able to capitalize on the resulting popular anger and win reelection in 1996.

This experience convinced influential sections of the ruling elite that they could not overcome popular opposition to their policies by traditional parliamentary and democratic means. They set out to oust a twice-elected president by means of a quasi-legal coup. The network of Christian fundamentalist groups, right-wing talk show hosts, Republican lawyers and judges and their allies in the highest echelons of the mass media mobilized behind the Republican Congress and Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr to humiliate Clinton, destabilize his government and ultimately bring it down. Such were the origins of the Paula Jones sexual harassment suit and the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

The Republican right moved with reckless defiance of popular sentiment, which was overwhelmingly opposed to the attempt to leverage a sex scandal into the removal of an elected president. The 1998 congressional election was a political debacle for the Republicans, whose majority in the House of Representatives was slashed. Gingrich himself was forced to step down as Speaker of the House and quickly resigned his seat, but the popular verdict on impeachment reflected in the election only reinforced the conviction of the right wing that it had to employ extra-parliamentary and pseudo-legal means to achieve its ends. The Republicans proceeded with their coup attempt, and the following month the House, in a strictly partisan vote, impeached Clinton—the first-ever impeachment of an elected president.

Ultimately, the growing anger in the population at large convinced the ruling elite to back down, and the Senate acquitted Clinton. But this new defeat only fueled the desperation and ruthlessness of the Republican right. Backed by the most powerful sections of the corporate oligarchy, it was determined to gain control of all of the levers of political power by capturing the White House in 2000. It chose as its standard-bearer a political and intellectual cipher with ties to big oil, who had the advantage of name recognition, held generally right-wing views, and could be counted on to carry out the dictates of his sponsors on Wall Street and in US industry.

For the Republicans, the 2000 election was the last best chance to achieve their goals. They saw it as a window of opportunity in a social and political situation that was moving against them. The 1990s had demonstrated that there existed no mass support for their social agenda. As Election Day approached, it was already clear that the stock market boom of the previous two decades, which had played an immense role in building a Republican constituency of nouveau riche layers, was unraveling. The social and political implications of a recession, under conditions of a staggering growth of social inequality and the shredding of the social safety net, were incalculable.

The Republicans saw a country, demographically and socially, that was moving, in objective terms, against them. These forces were determined to use any means to gain the White House and utilize their control of the judiciary and Congress to beat back what they perceived as the growing threat of the masses.

In the course of the five-week struggle over the Florida vote that ended with the intervention of the US Supreme Court, the Republican Party organized a mob attack on election officials in Miami-Dade County that had the intended effect of convincing them to shut down their recount of disputed ballots. It made direct appeals to the US military to oppose the recounts that were requested by the Democrats and sanctioned by the Florida Supreme Court. It sought to whip up a pogromist frenzy within the fascist right, employing the technique of the “big lie” to accuse the Democrats of doing precisely what it was doing—stealing the election.

The Republican administration in Florida intervened repeatedly to disrupt manual recounts in three heavily Democratic southern counties, and the Republican-dominated state legislature, with the encouragement

of Bush campaign officials and Supreme Court Justice Scalia, prepared to select its own pro-Bush slate of presidential electors, in the event that Republican efforts to halt the counting of votes failed and Gore was declared the winner.

Underlying the election crisis and the break with democratic norms was the most salient feature of contemporary American life—a phenomenon that holds such immense and revolutionary significance, it is generally excluded by the powers-that-be from what passes for political discourse. That feature is the staggering growth of social inequality, which has made the US the most socially polarized of all the advanced capitalist countries.

The growth of social inequality over the past 20 years has been accompanied by other far-reaching changes in the social structure of America. These have been fueled, at the most basic level, by the vast transformations in world economy—denoted by the term “globalization”—that are bound up with the revolutionary developments in computer and communications technology in the concluding decades of the twentieth century.

The United States has undergone a process of proletarianization, as large sections of what was traditionally considered the middle class—white-collar employees, professionals, small farmers, shopkeepers—found themselves propelled into the ranks of America’s wage earners. As the numerical strength of the working class has grown, the social weight of the middle class has declined. Objectively speaking, the United States is today, more than at any other time in the postwar period, polarized between the working class and the bourgeoisie, with far less of a middle class to serve as a bastion of parliamentary democracy and political stability.

At the same time, the growing weight of world economy and the world market has fostered the growth of centrifugal tendencies throughout society, including within the ruling class, where the old established “Sixty Families” have been at least partially supplanted by upstart moguls who have grown fabulously rich in an environment of rapid technological change and rampant financial speculation.

These shifts at the base of society have found their reflection in the political superstructure, where political consensus has given way to ferocious warfare within the establishment, and the entire political system has grown increasingly distant and alienated from the popular masses. As the axis of bourgeois politics has lurched to the right, the social base of both parties has shriveled, and the political apparatus has come to resemble an inverted pyramid—corrupt, ossified, and deeply unstable.

As David North put it in his December 3, 2000 lecture in Sydney: “The relationship between political forms and the class structure of society is of a complex, dialectical character. But in the long run, there comes a point at which the social tensions produced by rampant social inequality cannot be contained within traditional democratic forms. American society has reached that point.”

As horrific and tragic as the events of September 11 were, they were not the cause of the sweeping assault on democratic rights that has since ensued. Indeed, the murky circumstances surrounding the hijack-bombings remain unexplained—how, above all, a group of suspected Arab terrorists could organize and execute such a complex assault on strategic centers of US economic and military power without being detected or blocked by American intelligence agencies.

What is clear, however, is that the Bush administration seized on the events of September 11 to implement repressive measures that had long been centerpieces of the reactionary agenda of the Republican right. The most that can be said is that the atmosphere of anxiety and anger produced by the terror attacks enabled the administration to proceed more swiftly than it could have previously anticipated. But the attack on democratic rights of the past two months was already foreshadowed in the anti-democratic methods by which Bush came to power.

A government that seizes power by means of fraud and usurpation must

rule by the same means. It is, in objective terms, a government of provocation and coercion, with no democratic mandate and no constitutional legitimacy. Lacking a serious base of public support, and facing a deepening economic and social crisis, it was inevitable that the Bush administration would turn to repression and violence to defend itself against the threat of resistance from below.

It is necessary to speak bluntly: the people who are running the US government are the same gangster elements who stole the 2000 election. Why should anyone doubt that given the chance, they would jump at the opportunity to dismantle constitutional safeguards and destroy civil liberties?

A survey of the leading personnel of the Bush administration confirms this assessment. They are a combination of military men and veterans of the Reagan and Bush (the elder) administrations, most of whom became multimillionaires by parlaying their political connections into lucrative posts in industries such as big oil and pharmaceuticals. One prominent figure, Solicitor General Theodore Olson, was intimately involved in the anti-Clinton conspiracies of the 1990s, and another, United Nations Ambassador John Negroponte, worked closely with death squad leaders and military assassins in Central America as US ambassador to Honduras during Washington’s covert wars of the 1980s.

A few days before the Supreme Court intervened to halt the counting of votes in Florida, Al Gore made a nationally televised speech. It was one of the rare occasions when the Democratic candidate directly broached the principled issues of democratic rights at stake in the election crisis. Gore raised the entirely legitimate question: “If we ignore the votes of thousands in Florida in this election, how can you or any American have confidence that your vote will not be ignored in a future election?”

In light of recent events, the question should be rephrased as follows: how can any American be sure that there will *be* a future election? Those who might be inclined to dismiss such a question as far-fetched should recall that only last month the mayor of New York suggested that, in the interests of prosecuting the “war against terrorism,” the city’s municipal election be postponed and he be allowed to remain in office after the expiration of his term. This flagrantly unconstitutional proposal received considerable support from within the financial and political establishment and from sections of the national and local media.

It is necessary to issue a clear warning: the American working class is being stripped of its basic democratic rights. This attack is largely being carried out behind the backs of the American people. Its source is not simply the right-wing cabal that stole the 2000 election and presently controls the reins of government. Rather it is rooted in the contradictions of the capitalist system, a social order that is incapable of addressing the most basic needs of the broad mass of the people. That the attack on democratic rights is an organic outgrowth of the economic system is demonstrated by the refusal of any of the political forces that defend the system—the bourgeois parties, the trade union bureaucracy, the courts, the mass media—to oppose it.

The 2000 election demonstrated that there is no longer any significant constituency within the American corporate and political establishment for the defense of democratic rights. Powerful, and politically dominant, sections of the American ruling elite have broken with democratic procedures. Within the liberal sections of the establishment, which long ago abandoned any commitment to social reform or a lessening of economic inequality, the prevailing attitude is a combination of cowardice and indifference. The Democrats’ half-hearted and conciliatory response to the theft of the election demonstrated conclusively that they fear a movement of the masses far more than they fear the fascistic methods and aims of the Republican right.

The only social force that has a vested interest in upholding democratic rights, and remains genuinely committed to their defense, is the working class. But it can prepare and carry out the necessary struggle only by

freeing itself from the political domination of the parties and representatives of the capitalist ruling elite.

The 2000 election opened up a new chapter in US history, in which the class contradictions that suffuse all aspects of social life, but have been expunged from official politics and debate, are inexorably coming to the fore.

Great social struggles are on the agenda. The most critical question is the assimilation by the most conscious and courageous sections of the workers, students and intellectuals of the political lessons of the strategic experiences of the previous century. Among these is the 2000 election.

The Socialist Equality Party and its political organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*, are committed to providing the historical and political analysis that will enable these layers to draw the appropriate conclusions from generations of struggle for democratic rights and social equality, and build an independent mass party of the working class based on the program of international socialism.



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