

How the Democrats assess their election debacle

Barry Grey
11 December 2002

The post-mortems that have emerged from the Democratic camp following its November election debacle underscore the political bankruptcy of the Democratic Party. For all the recriminations about lack of “message” and “vision,” the most striking feature of the various commentaries published in the wake of the election is the absence of any serious analysis. None of the factions—right, center or left—have been able to articulate a coherent “message” or “vision” in opposition to the reactionary program of the Republicans. Nor have they sought to probe, beyond the small change of immediate electoral tactics, the roots of the Democrats’ political collapse.

There is a powerful element of fraud and deceit that permeates the entire discussion, centered on the claim that the Democratic Party is—or was—a party “of the people.” In reality, every great popular movement of social struggle in the US for more than a century has come up against the fact that the Democratic Party is a party of the capitalist ruling class, driving the most principled and determined forces to fight for a break with the Democrats. Indeed, for most of the history of the United States the Democratic Party was openly and directly aligned with the forces of racism and reaction in the South.

The current discussion demonstrates just how threadbare the myth of the Democratic Party as the party of the working man has become. Most of the post-election commentaries argue against any departure from the policy of adapting to the extreme right program of Bush and the Republicans. Zell Miller, the Democratic senator from Georgia, published a column in the November 14 *Wall Street Journal* which made the fantastic claim that the Democrats lost the election because they were too anti-Bush. “Then we saw former President Clinton and Vice-President Gore,” he complained, “flying from state to state, urging the old Democratic base to get out and vote against Mr. Bush...or in the case of Florida, against two Bushes.”

Tom Freedman, a senior adviser to Clinton from 1999 to 2001, co-authored a column in the November 8 *New York Times* entitled “How Republicans Usurped the Center.” Setting out to debunk the “conventional wisdom” that the Democratic Party “has moved too far to the center,” he wrote: “Democrats were too timid in their opposition to the president’s tax cuts and his Iraq policy, the argument goes. The solution, therefore, is to attack President Bush on everything... But if the Democrats adopt this strategy in 2004, the results will be even more disastrous than Tuesday’s.”

Similarly, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich argued in a November 11 piece: “A unified vision composed of actual policies and principles, as opposed to knee-jerk liberal sloganeering, cynical political strategies and anti-Bush whining, is now required.” On the content of this “unified vision” and specifics of the required “actual policies and principles,” Rich was silent.

Even as these commentators railed against the Democratic campaign for its lack of substance—the Democrats have become a party “that stands for nothing and does nothing” (Miller), “[I]t’s the Democrats who were about

nothing” (Rich)—they could muster nothing more than empty phrases when it came to advancing an alternative. Their evasions underscored their own lack of significant policy differences with the Republicans.

The post-mortems from the left wing of the Democratic Party were no more serious or coherent. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, one of the more forthright liberal critics of the Bush administration, expressed the mood of despair that grips what remains of American liberalism in a November 8 piece entitled “Into the Wilderness.” The blame for the election defeat, he argued, rested with Democratic leaders who insisted “that the party must play it safe—don’t criticize the Bush administration too much, don’t propose anything drastic that will offend corporations and the wealthy.”

Instead, he wrote, the party had to be bold and “stand for something.” Democrats had to be “the defenders of ordinary Americans against the power of our burgeoning plutocracy.” Even to speak of a “burgeoning plutocracy” places Krugman on the outer fringe of the Democratic Party. Yet the stark contrast between the evil he denounced and the pathetic measures he proposed had the unintended effect of highlighting the impotence of the political trend he represents.

What did Krugman propose to combat the plutocracy? He counseled Democrats to “hammer” the Republicans for backing off on corporate reform, while defending the environment and “coming out forthrightly” against the Bush tax cuts passed in 2001 (with significant Democratic Party support). He did not mention the growth of unemployment, the crisis in health care, the decay of public education, or the overall decline in working class living standards. He passed over Bush’s warmongering and his assault on democratic rights. He did not suggest that the vast redistribution of wealth from the working population to the rich of the past two decades should be reversed.

Thus the “maximum program” of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party boils down to rescinding a tax cut so regressive that when Bush proposed it during the 2000 presidential election campaign, his Democratic opponent, Al Gore, treated it as one of the more exotic planks of the Republican right.

The *Nation* magazine was even more timid in its assessment of the Democratic collapse. A series of columns in the November 25 issue all exhibited an irrepressible need to bow and scrape before the Republican right. An editorial marveled at how “Bush and his party brilliantly, daringly used what they had to maximum advantage, while the Dems went limp.”

This was attributed to the American electorate, which was supposedly enthralled by Bush’s policies of war and repression. “The war-and-terrorism presidency trumped all,” the *Nation* wrote, “silenced Democrats and pushed aside other matters from serious examination.” There followed a call for “new voices, new thinking” and an injunction to the Democrats to “construct substantive goals... grounded in people’s everyday experiences.” The editorialists made no attempt to define these goals.

A second column spoke of Bush as “a relentless and effective campaigner,” and a third summed up the viewpoint of demoralized liberals by describing Bush as a “quasi-wartime President...whose approval rating is in the mid-60s.”

A common thread that runs through all of these commentaries, echoing the universal appraisal of the media, is the claim that Bush enjoys the overwhelming support of the American people. This unassailable political fact, it is said, was the overriding factor in the Republican triumph.

A particularly crude statement of this thesis appeared in the November 18 issue of the *New Republic*, in an article by John B. Judis entitled “No Fault: Why There’s Nothing the Democrats could have Done.” Judis wrote: “If you look closely at the political context in which these races occurred—in particular, the overwhelming popularity of George W. Bush as a war president and the overriding importance of national security as a campaign issue—it is far from apparent that more strident attacks from the Democrats would have reversed any of the outcomes.”

He concluded: “[T]he Republicans were borne to victory this fall by Bush’s energetic response to Osama bin Laden. And there was probably nothing that the Democrats could have done to stop them.”

This line is at once a gross distortion of reality and a political evasion. Even were it true that Bush enjoyed enormous popularity, and that the overwhelming majority of the American people supported his policies, that would in no way justify the Democratic Party’s prostration before the administration. A political party, if it is serious, exists to advance definite policies, even if at any given time they are not accepted by the majority of the population.

In any event, the claims of Bush’s immense popularity have no credibility. Bush’s popular support is a contradictory and distorted expression of the lack of any significant opposition from within the political establishment.

For decades the two-party system permitted only the most limited expression of the genuine feelings and aspirations of working people. Over the past two decades, however, the decay of American liberalism, the lurch to the right of the Democrats, and the banning of even mildly left views from the media have rendered the political system incapable of giving any expression to the sentiments of the masses.

In a country where the media functions as a propaganda arm of the most right-wing forces within the corporate and political establishment, lying incessantly and working to dupe and disorient the public, where the so-called opposition party refuses to oppose the policies of the Republican right, there is no way the deep-seated opposition of working people to Bush and his policies can find expression in the electoral arena.

Even the opinion polls, with their built-in conservative bias, do not give a picture of a president riding a wave of popular approval. A *Newsweek* poll taken on the eve of the election found that Bush’s approval rating had fallen to 60 percent, its lowest since the September 11 attacks. Numerous polls taken both before and after the election register widespread opposition to Bush administration policies, including his plans for war against Iraq. Only days before the election, some 200,000 people demonstrated in Washington and other cities to denounce the government’s war drive.

A substantial majority of voting age citizens did not go to the polls in the mid-term election, which saw the second lowest turnout (39.3 percent) in US history. This massive abstention, which is now a chronic feature of American political life, is an expression of the profound alienation of broad sections of the population from both parties and the entire political system.

Voter turnout fell sharply among working class and minority voters. This is no mystery, since the Democrats decided not to run in opposition to Bush, and therefore gave their traditional supporters no reason to vote for them. On all of the burning issues of the day—the administration’s war policy, its assault on democratic rights, its policy of tax cuts for the

wealthy—the Democrats adapted themselves to the Republican administration.

There was, however, a significant increase in voter turnout among the narrow social layer of diehard Republican partisans—the Christian Right, anti-abortionists, anti-immigrant forces—who responded with enthusiasm to the government’s warmongering and authoritarianism. In an election where masses of working people abstained, key races were decided at the margins and the upsurge of Republican right voters was sufficient to determine the outcome.

A variation on the theme of Bush’s popularity is the claim made by Democratic Congressman Dick Gephardt, who resigned as House minority leader after his party’s debacle, that 9/11 had tipped the election in Bush’s favor. While there is no doubt that Bush benefited from the public shock, fear and anger that predominated in the immediate aftermath of the hijack-bombings—and exploited the tragedy to carry out a pre-existing policy of militarism and repression that he could not otherwise have attempted to implement—the notion that 9/11 made Bush politically invulnerable is absurd.

Fourteen months separated the election from the events of September 11, 2001, during which time the Democrats had ample opportunity to rally public opposition to the government. The events of that day left the Bush White House in anything but an unassailable position.

Bush’s administration had not only allowed the attack to take place, under his watch US air defense forces had failed even to scramble planes to intercept the hijackers. The Bush clan and its closest political allies had well known business and personal ties to the Bin Laden family. The Bush administration openly opposed any investigation into the terror attacks for months, and then worked to undermine the congressional probe that began almost a year after the event. In the meantime, a series of revelations emerged of advance warnings of an imminent attack and US surveillance of some of the alleged hijackers, all of which had been covered up by the Bush administration. Finally, the government failed to arrest anyone in connection with the anthrax attacks that targeted the Democratic Senate leadership and killed five citizens.

To say that this record left the White House vulnerable to political attack is to grossly understate the case. That the Bush administration survived these events, let alone carried out a successful election campaign, is due to the efforts of the Democratic Party, which worked to suppress all criticism and smother all opposition.

The Clinton years had already marked the political collapse of the Democratic Party, which demonstrated its inability to oppose the Republican right and its disinterest in defending democratic rights.

Even as Clinton attempted to adapt his “New Democratic” administration to the right-wing program of the Republicans, the political warfare within the political establishment reached explosive proportions. The Republican Party, which had become the vehicle for extreme right and fascist forces, waged a form of guerilla warfare against an administration it deemed an obstacle to its policies of social reaction, authoritarianism and imperialist war. The Republicans worked to remove Clinton from office by conspiratorial and anti-democratic means, culminating in the first-ever impeachment of an elected president.

The Democrats refused to expose the far right forces behind the impeachment drive, and the Clinton administration survived the Senate impeachment trial only because of massive popular opposition to the attempted coup. Less than two years later, the Republicans consummated their conspiracy by stealing the 2000 election, with no serious opposition from the Democrats.

The decay of the Democratic Party is one manifestation of a broader phenomenon—the erosion of the popular base of both bourgeois parties. Vast changes in the structure of American society—above all, the enormous growth of social inequality—have narrowed the social base upon which the two-party system rests.

The Democratic Party has largely lost its former base of support within the working population. When Democratic pundits today talk of mobilizing the party's "base," they avoid the critical question: what is the social base of the Democratic Party? In fact, it has been reduced to a section of finance capital that fears the social and political consequences of the Republicans' provocative policies, combined with certain privileged layers of the upper-middle-class, including the trade union bureaucracy, Hollywood liberals and a narrow layer of Blacks and other minorities who have benefited from affirmative action and similar forms of identity politics.

A whole host of changes in the structure of world capitalism have intensified the crisis of American capitalism to the point that there no longer exists any substantial base within the ruling elite for a party of social reform. What appears as prostration is rooted in the fact that the Democratic officialdom knows full well that those to whom it is beholden will not tolerate any departure from policies of unrestrained market capitalism. What formerly was considered the program of the extreme right wing—the elimination of all legal and economic impediments to the accumulation of private wealth and corporate profit—is now the bedrock of bourgeois politics.

Hence the increasingly grotesque contrast between the Democrats' pretensions and the reality of their political role. Had the Democrat Party captured the House of Representatives and retained control of the Senate in last month's elections, the right-wing trajectory of the US government would not have changed in any significant way.

The November elections were a milestone in the breakdown of the bourgeois two-party system and the shattering of popular illusions in the Democratic Party. As the social and political crisis intensifies, bringing broader social layers into struggle, ever wider sections of working people and youth will look for an alternative to both parties of the American financial oligarchy.

On what basis can a party genuinely committed to democratic rights, social justice and an end to militarism be developed? It must start from the recognition that it is impossible to square a program of social progress with the private ownership of the main levers of economic life and the continued domination of a plutocratic elite. Only a party that is openly and frankly opposed to capitalism and turns resolutely to the working class can serve as an instrument of struggle of the broad masses of the population.

It must advance a radical program of social reform and the most far-reaching redistribution of wealth from the ruling elite to the working people. This means mounting a massive assault on entrenched wealth and privilege, including the expropriation of the corporate and financial oligopolies and their conversion into public enterprises, run on the basis of scientific planning and under the democratic control of the working class.

The international policy of this party must be infused with the same democratic and egalitarian impulses. It must completely repudiate the predatory and militaristic foreign policy of American imperialism, and advance a program for the international unity of the working people of all countries.

These are the principles for which the Socialist Equality Party fights. The time has come for American workers to make a conscious and decisive break with the Democratic Party. The essential lesson of the November election is the need to build the Socialist Equality Party as the mass political organization of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact