

Al Gore and the politics of oligarchy

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Al Gore's announcement that he will not seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 says a great deal about the state of the American political system and the Democratic Party.

The former vice president and nominal head of the Democrats, who captured the votes of 50 million Americans and won the popular vote in the 2000 presidential race, chose a December 15 interview on the CBS program "60 Minutes" as the venue for publicizing his decision. That Gore, by far the best known of all likely Democratic presidential aspirants, should remove himself from contention at this early stage shows the degree to which the political system is controlled by an elite of media and political decision-makers, who are themselves answerable to the American financial oligarchy.

For several months Gore had been aggressively preparing the way for a rematch with George W. Bush, making speeches on foreign and domestic policy, appearing on television interview programs, and conducting a national book tour with his wife. According to opinion polls, he was, by a wide margin, the first choice of Democratic voters to challenge Bush in 2004.

But the critical constituency for a viable presidential run was to be found not in voting precincts, but rather in corporate boardrooms, network office suites and the top echelons of the Democratic Party apparatus. Among the few hundred individuals who really "count" in shaping American electoral politics, Gore was decidedly out of favor.

Their verdict was reflected in sluggish fundraising and what Gore associates called the "skeptical media coverage" of his book tour. The blow to Gore's presidential aspirations was softened, according to press reports, by the former vice president's new-found wealth, gained in part from a vice chairmanship at a West Coast investment firm.

In explaining his decision, Gore has offered only one political motivation—but it is a highly significant one. Referring obliquely to the 36-day battle over the Florida vote and the Supreme Court ruling that ultimately handed the presidency to his Republican opponent, Gore told his "60 Minutes" interviewer, "I think a campaign that would be a rematch between myself and President Bush would inevitably involve a focus on the past that would, in some measure, distract from the focus on the future that I think all campaigns have to be about."

In other words, a second Gore-Bush contest would inevitably raise the overtly anti-democratic manner in which the 2000 election crisis was resolved, and bring into question the legitimacy of the Bush administration. In his desire to avoid such issues, Gore reflects a preoccupation of the entire ruling elite and both political parties.

The argument that a discussion of Bush's installation through the suppression of votes would be a diversion from the political issues facing the American people today is pure sophistry. It is not a new argument. Gore and the entire political and media establishment have been saying as much since Gore delivered his cringing concession speech after the US Supreme Court shut down the Florida recount in December of 2000.

At the time, it provided an unambiguous demonstration of the inability and unwillingness of any section of the political establishment to defend the most basic of all democratic rights in America—the right to vote. Two years later, the political significance of the hijacked election has become abundantly clear. The anti-democratic underpinnings of a government placed in power by means of fraud and judicial fiat have found their expression in the most sweeping attack on constitutional safeguards and democratic procedures in US history.

Gore himself, in a well-publicized speech in San Francisco last September, denounced "the administration's attack on fundamental constitutional rights." Gore declared three months ago, "The idea that an American citizen can be imprisoned without recourse to judicial process or remedies, and that this can be done on the say-so of the president or those acting in his name, is beyond the pale."

Not so far beyond the pale, apparently, as to impel Gore to oppose Bush in 2004 and seek to unseat a government whose policies flow, as they must, from the unconstitutional and anti-democratic character of its origins.

What accounts for this pervasive fear in high places of revisiting the 2000 election—a concern that flatly belies the universal claim of Bush's popularity and political invulnerability? The media reacted to Gore's announcement with an audible sigh of relief. The *New York Times* was gushing in its praise, hailing Gore's announcement as an act of immense courage. It focused its editorial of December 17 on the supposed wisdom and selflessness of Gore's resolve to avoid raising the contested election.

The *Times* wrote: "Mr. Gore topped Mr. Bush by more than 500,000 popular votes but lost the electoral tally 271 to 267 in a tooth-and-claw fight that ended in the Supreme Court." Gore "will always get credit," the newspaper continued, for "refusing to put his ambition ahead of the country's security, when the nation was in an uproar afterward."

E.J. Dionne, Jr., the liberal Democratic columnist for the *Washington Post*, in one breath noted the widely and deeply felt anger over the theft of the 2000 election, and in the next praised Gore for ignoring such democratic sentiments. Declaring in a December 17 op-ed piece that he was one "of millions of

Americans” who believed a plurality of Florida voters went to the polls to vote for Gore, and the Supreme Court “had no business shutting down Florida’s efforts to recount ballots,” he went on to praise Gore’s decision not to run as a laudable demonstration of “clarity, self-knowledge and a sense of responsibility.”

Gore himself suggested that the 2000 election is anything but a closed book for broad sections of the population, noting at a December 16 press conference that in the course of his book tour across the country, the issue that most concerned the people he met was the anti-democratic manner in which Bush was installed in office. It was precisely because the issue remained so topical that he decided not to run against Bush in 2004.

All of this testifies to an acute sense that any reminder of the 2000 election crisis could have the most explosive political and social consequences. For all the talk of American ascendancy abroad and political consensus at home, the first major event of the 2004 election campaign has already indicated that the ruling elite feels its position to be far from secure. Gore’s departure is but one expression of a system that has reached such a point of crisis that it cannot tolerate any venting of the social and political issues that concern the broad masses of the population.

The deep-going impact of the stolen election was not the only factor underlying the hostile reaction within the media and political establishment to Gore’s preparations for a new presidential run. From his speeches and policy statements, it was clear that Gore had calculated he could exploit widespread popular discontent over Bush’s militaristic foreign policy, his administration’s socially regressive economic policy, and its sweeping assault on democratic rights. In his September 23 speech in San Francisco, Gore attacked Bush’s headlong rush toward unilateral war against Iraq as reckless and politically inexpedient, and denounced the Bush doctrine of preemptive war. In subsequent statements he called for a government-run system of universal health insurance.

The reaction of the media and political establishment to these political initiatives was overwhelmingly hostile. For the most part Gore’s criticisms of the Bush administration were either ignored or ridiculed.

The congressional Democratic leadership and Democratic National Committee greeted his interventions with a stony silence. The last thing they wanted was an open attack on the Bush administration or any appeal to the economic and social concerns of working people, especially under conditions of an impending war for which there is little popular support. The Democratic leadership proceeded to repudiate Gore’s political intervention in practice, voting to give Bush authorization to wage war on Iraq.

The message was clear, and Gore’s announcement on December 15 was an acknowledgment that it had been received. It has since been widely reported that a substantial majority of Democratic National Committee delegates were opposed to a Gore bid for the party’s nomination. In the end Gore decided as he did because he is beholden to the same social forces as those who worked to thwart him.

Two basic conclusions can be drawn from these developments. The first is that the Democratic Party is constitutionally incapable of opposing the profoundly reactionary policies of the Republican

right. Its own trajectory is ever further to the right, as it seeks to adapt itself to the consensus within the corporate elite for imperialist war, the elimination of all restraints on the private accumulation of wealth, and the imposition of authoritarian forms of rule.

The political collapse of the Democratic Party is itself a manifestation of a second, more basic phenomenon—the complete subordination of political life to the demands and needs of the American financial oligarchy. So polarized is the United States between the broad mass of working people and the narrow layer that monopolizes the social wealth that the political superstructure cannot tolerate any genuine expression of the problems and concerns of the population at large. Traditional democratic forms, including the functioning of the two bourgeois parties, are progressively emptied of any democratic content. Within the ruling elite, there is less and less support for maintaining the old forms—elections, constitutional procedures, etc.

In a country as vast and complex as America, with a huge working class and a heterogeneous mixture of peoples and cultures from around the world, the reality depicted by the media and the political establishment is one of general contentment and conformity. No facet of social life that threatens to expose this utterly banal and false presentation can be allowed into the political arena. No serious differences can be publicly raised.

The enormous chasm between this political façade and the underlying reality of social divisions and class tensions must inevitably give rise, sooner rather than later, to immense political upheavals. These will take place under conditions in which the longstanding and politically stultifying myth of the Democratic Party as a party “of the people” will have been widely discredited. Ever broader masses of workers and youth will look for a political alternative in the struggle to defend their social conditions and democratic rights.



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