

The Democrats' deconstruction: a post-election report from Kentucky

Naomi Sheehan Groce
8 November 2004

Naomi Sheehan Groce is a reader of the World Socialist Web Site who lives in Kentucky. She submitted the following commentary for the WSWS as a contribution to discussion of the meaning of the 2004 elections.

Following the street address to the Democratic Party's office in Lexington, Kentucky, last year led to a basement, an unlocked door, and an abandoned, unheated room. Speculation was rampant among the various campaigns that John Kerry, rather than having large state organizations had instead single operatives undermining the local campaigns of each of his Democratic challengers. In-fighting and suspicions ran high, but under the radar of the mainstream media, from which most party-loyal voters received their political instructions.

After a failed gubernatorial bid in the fall of 2003, establishment-bred Democrat Ben Chandler—state attorney general under former Governor Paul Patton—announced his run for Ernie Fletcher's vacant House seat against the Bush-backed Republican state senator, Alice Forgy Kerr. Forgy Kerr ran an ad-heavy campaign on religious biases and fears, and her posturing about "family values," attempting to equate in voters' minds Patton's well-publicized marital infidelity with Chandler, roiled many activists into the now familiar lesser-evil task of drumming up support for her rival, despite the widely acknowledged fact that Chandler's platform was not an adequate alternative to the neo-conservative agenda. In a special election on February 17, Chandler won the seat as congressional representative for Kentucky's large central 6th District.

Among the more laissez-faire conservative Democrats—the self-styled "moderates"—there has been anxiety over the so-called progressive elements in the state taking over the Democratic Party. According to an anonymous Lexington organizer, on May 18, the late and largely symbolic Democratic primary, Ben Chandler himself sent a message to state party organizers urging them to be on guard against liberals who might attempt to take hold of the reins and transform the months ahead into an issue-charged election season.

Most of the bureaucratic leadership from the state level down had, in the lead-up to the primary, been pressing for a unanimous "unity" vote for John Kerry, despite a large and committed Howard Dean faction as well as the ongoing campaign of Dennis Kucinich based on the rationale of influencing the DNC platform with his flawed UN-in, US-out withdrawal plan for Iraq.

During the summer, "liberal" Democrats withdrew from discussing the pro-war, pro-corporate agenda, and crept into the netherworld of their sacrificial Anyone-But-Bush vigils. Many progressives circulated New Age mystical self-help material on relaxation techniques, the power of channeling, group meditation as a means of propagating global change, and other escapist diversions intended to nurture the protest-starved, inactive activists in the political interim.

Whatever platitudes of truth that could have been winnowed from their pseudo-philosophical and oddly partisan ramblings in "group-think" were twisted into an elitist, "naturalist" nihilism, full of disdain and blame for

those US troops liberals perceived to have voluntarily enlisted under a Republican administration, full of hatred for women they perceived to recklessly bear children into circumstances where they could not be well cared for, and full of intolerance for the growing Hispanic population in Kentucky they perceived as responsible for the job shortage because they worked for less than the legal citizen's minimum wage of just over \$5.00 an hour.

Disappointed and enraged by the predictable last-place finish, the Kucinich campaign's state coordinator predicted that 2005 would likely see the rumored draft—2003 bills S. 89 and H.R. 163—that both Bush and Kerry would enact, but shamelessly proposed one "upshot": The strained environment and natural resources of Kentucky would be less burdened by ignorant, wasteful, militarized young men sent away to Iraq—"[M]y thinking is, the more we have over there, the better chances of survival we have."—In an appalling post-primary update, she stated, "I respect the next person as much as they respect the environment. If they have no respect for the environment, I'd rather they were shot down. If they do respect the environment, then I have all the love in the world for them." Not surprisingly, John Kerry's stellar Sierra Club endorsement was touted as all the rationale that ought to be required by Democrats to cast their ballots for him, while the single-digit percentages received in the primary by liberal candidates such as Kucinich, Dean, and Al Sharpton were referenced as evidence that voters simply did not support platforms calling for more drastic social reforms or a military pullback.

This reactionary behavior is, quite simply, a means of "closing ranks." Talk of third parties or even ending the war was met with animosity. Those unwilling to voice support of the Kerry-Edwards ticket were accused variously of subversion, misogyny—destroying a woman's right to choose via allowing Bush another four years in which to nominate Supreme Court justices—racism, environmental antipathy, and destructive ignorance—i.e., stubborn adherence to principles. The breakdown of the politically correct liberal open-mindedness into frenzied intolerance of criticism and the taboo of peace was dramatic and instantaneous.

November 2 brought exalted reports of a record turnout at the polls, almost 1.8 million Kentuckians. Even so, the state's registered voter population is nearly 2.7 million, and the eligible adult population is approximately 3 million. Clearly, more than a million citizens were disenfranchised not merely by the Republican Party as Democrats would have everyone believe, but by the entire uninspiring spread of candidates and the very structure of the election process itself, particularly its coincidence with a workday as inflexible as any other.

November 2 also brought, for the most part, crushing defeats for Democrats in the state. Yet, on November 3, as insiders were brusquely attending to the business of face-work, future elections and evermore consummate party unity, the liberal and moderate Democrats were explosive with anger at the party's losses. They were furious at one another and at the public at large. Poverty-stricken fundamentalists who had voted Republican were blamed for the failings of the weak and

insubstantial Democrat platform. Third parties were blamed for constantly stoking the widely-shared antiwar sentiment, to which the Democrats had failed to cater and, less than that, make a single concession, even stooping to the physical removal of delegates from their convention who dared express such popular opposition.

One 6th District organizer, venting his frustration and dejection upon Young Democrats, stated, “We really are in a sad, sad shape. In fact we are barely even a party, it’s so bad. The organization is not even in existence, the energy is bleak, and it doesn’t seem as if anyone cares.” This sentiment is systemic, and the proposed elixir is more of the same counter-intuitive poison Democrats have been abusing these last decades. “First off,” he contended, “we have to realize, all of us, every single one of us, that we cannot win with liberal candidates, there is no way! Plain and simple. Many people bucked that idea this year, well it’s been proven true yet again. We must have only moderate and conservative candidates to win, plain and simple. Madison County, Kentucky, and the US, is now officially a conservative to moderate country. We won’t be back to the liberal days and we have to realize that, especially on social issues.”

Meanwhile, the typically feverish response among popularly referenced liberal web sites and web logs follows the same lines of blame all the way up to the titular head and recommends solidifying the core through bloodletting: “We need a new director of the Democratic Party. [DNC Chair Terry] McAuliffe has been a miserable failure over the last three election cycles and needs to go. Let’s start the so-called ‘bloodbath in the Democratic party’ today. Tell your officials you demand that, too.” This reaction comes as little surprise since many liberals pledged to help elect Kerry and then “hold his feet to the fire” on keeping campaign promises, betraying not just a dislike of moderates, but a well-earned distrust.

Among Internet chatters, the separation between these moderate and liberal factions has even been administratively enforced on sites such as the popular Democratic Underground. Moderates and liberals may not directly lay blame on one another or they will be banned. No arguing over the issues and, in particular, the question of responsibility for electoral failure between them is permitted. This is both the essence and imminent downfall of their hallucinatory unity. For Democrats to define their allegiance to the party in terms of aims rather than names would prompt a true bloodletting—a mass exodus of the working poor from the party ranks.

John Kerry, in a November 3 condolence letter to his followers, described his concession call to Bush in an effort to quell discord: “We had a good conversation, and we talked about the danger of division in our country and the need, the desperate need, for unity for finding the common ground, coming together. Today, I hope that we can begin the healing.” He also emphasized that Republicans had won fairly despite widespread reports of voting machine “malfunctions” and fraud. Democrats were supposed to be angry over the “cheating” of Republicans—a convenient scapegoat—but not angry enough to question Kerry’s facilitative role, namely his complacent surrender before hundreds of thousands of ballots had been counted.

Dennis Kucinich, in a tactical statement eerily similar to those of other, more openly conservative Democrats, reiterated the call for solidarity, disregarding the seemingly irreconcilable divides: “Those commitments [to the Democratic ‘ideals’] remain. They help to empower us daily. So, let’s grieve over the loss of this election, but let’s come together and realize that it’s the unity that we have expressed over these last few years which gives us real power to bring forth creative change.”

Unity within party lines would place the blame safely outside its bounds. For moderates, this is the old, familiar persecution of Ralph Nader supporters, socialists, Libertarians, and other groups they perceive to be posing as an alternative and thus a threat to a Democratic win at the polls. For liberal Democrats in Kentucky—where appeals to Bible Belt fundamentalism saturate every cranny of local and state politics—the moral contradiction entails lashing out at the religiously conservative masses

beyond their own party’s ranks.

Of Bush’s 60 percent sweep in the state, a liberal on a popular progressive Kentucky message board wrote, “I heard America say that women have no right to their own bodies. They have no right to determine how many children they will have and how close together they will have them. A woman’s most private decisions are now determined by a segment of society suffering from religious fanaticism.” To discard the potential of enlightening that segment of society is to discard enlightenment itself in favor of the cynicism that is all too chic in educated circles. “While our fellow Americans sink into the darkness one more time, I take my stand for all that is good and noble in our country’s origins,” she vowed.

However, rather than decisively moving the Democratic Party away from the neo-conservative, corporatist point of view, the Democrats have decided to begin their personality makeovers early in an effort to gain the anti-abortion, anti-gay vote in 2006.

That this type of logical trap is so pervasive is an indicator that the Democratic Party is on the verge of collapse under its own weight. They do not seem to recognize the Reaganite victim-blaming in their arguments against the religious poor, nor do they propose constructive efforts for outreach in the form of education or public works programs. Rather, the strategy seems to be a magnification of the Republicans’ suppression of the increasingly polarized working class. “We can make changes. We can elect Democratic Secretaries of State in states that elect them, pressure them in states that don’t,” a moderate statement circulating locally suggested. “We can demand vote accountability and investigations.”

The Democratic Party cannot expand legitimately because it answers to a higher capitalist calling than the needs of the citizenry. It can only, like the Republican Party it enables, repress, disenfranchise, intimidate, and vilify other groups to reinforce the status quo. The Bible Belt is an ideal region for a workers movement to develop, not only because of its poverty, its misuse by Republicans, and its dismissal by Democrats, but also because of its history in labor struggles with regard to mining and the lingering mistrust of “suits”—professional politicians and the burgeoning police-state segregating them from the under-represented and toiling society underneath. The workers of Kentucky have a sense of deep and growing social unrest, and, as of November 2004, the Democratic Party is not immune.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact