New York Times advises Bush opponents to accept new administration

David Walsh
5 November 2004

Not wasting any time, the editors of the *New York Times* have greeted the narrow electoral victory of George W. Bush with a predictable dose of toadying, wishful thinking and upper-middle-class self-absorption.

In a November 4 editorial, "The Next President Bush," the editors begin by informing the "49 percent of the voting public who wanted a different outcome" that their "first job is to accept the will of the majority."

What is the meaning of this? The critical question is not so much the will of the majority, but the rights of the minority, on which the constitutional framework lays great stress, particularly against the aggressive intrusion of the state. What the *Times* has in mind is not 'accepting the will of the majority,' but political capitulation to the second Bush administration.

This prostration is symptomatic of the present social dynamic in American bourgeois politics. The Republicans are relentless, give no ground, and seize every opportunity, not hesitating to use lies, provocations and similar methods. The Democrats and the "liberal" media are perpetually on the defensive, ready to throw in the towel at the first sign of a conflict, and always careful not to offend.

If Tuesday's election had resulted in a John Kerry victory by 51 percent, one can only imagine the tone the *Times* would have adopted in its first editorial addressed to Democratic voters. The editors would have argued vehemently that such a vote did not represent a repudiation of the war in Iraq and the essential thrust of US foreign policy. They would have taken pains to point out the narrowness of the margin of victory, cautioned against Kerry aggressively pursuing his agenda, warned against alienating the Republicans, etc.

The November 4 editorial drips with dishonesty and insincerity. After noting that Bush's pledge "to reach out to the whole nation" rings hollow in light of the experience of the past four years, the *Times*' editors nonetheless plunge ahead with pious hopes. They write: "But there's a yearning out there, in red states as well as blue, for a government that works better and with less partisanship. ... Mr. Bush can address that national yearning—and leave a magnificent legacy to the country—but such an effort will require bipartisan action."

Bush can leave a "magnificent legacy?" Less than three weeks ago, a *Times* editorial endorsing Kerry argued that the 2004 presidential race was "mainly about Mr. Bush's disastrous tenure." It continued: "Mr. Bush came into office amid popular expectation that he would acknowledge his lack of a mandate by sticking close to the center. Instead, he turned the government over to the radical right."

Once in office, Bush installed "John Ashcroft, a favorite of the far right with a history of insensitivity to civil liberties, as attorney general. He sent the Senate one ideological, activist judicial nominee after another. He moved quickly to implement a far-reaching anti-choice agenda including censorship of government Web sites and a clampdown on embryonic stem cell research."

Despite an economic slump, the *Times* wrote, "the president remained fixated not on generating jobs but rather on fighting the right wing's war against taxing the wealthy." The administration's "domestic antiterror war ... had all the hallmarks of the administration's normal method of doing business: a Nixonian obsession with secrecy, disrespect for civil liberties and inept management."

That, however, was before the election. Now the *Times* would have its readers believe that the character of the second Bush administration remains an open question. Thus they write: "Mr. Bush can either try for four years of the same, or look to his place in history. ... The president could pick a respected jurist of centrist temperament with a genuine belief in judicial restraint [to replace Chief Justice William Rehnquist], or he could pick someone in the ultra-extreme school of Justice Antonin Scalia. ... [A] leader who was prepared to make political sacrifices in order to stake a claim to that middle ground could be laying the foundation for a new national consensus that might finally bring the nation's social wars to an end. Mr. Bush could be that leader. He could be the uniter he promised to be, then failed to become, four years ago."

The newspaper fails to provide a single argument as to why Bush, having won reelection by galvanizing the most right-wing elements in the country and deceiving millions of others, should do any of these sensible, moderate things. Such wishful thinking is a means of calming the editors' own unsettled nerves and, beyond that, lulling to sleep the millions disgusted and outraged by the reelection of Bush.

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Ever since the former Texas governor was installed in office by the US Supreme Court in December 2000, the first concern of the *Times*—while registering "concern" over his administration's more reckless and destabilizing measures—has been to ensure that a movement against Bush's policies never went beyond the channels of the Democratic Party and into the dangerous waters of opposition to the entire political and economic order.

Using similar arguments and language to those it mobilizes now, on December 13, 2000 the *Times* urged the American people to "respect the authority of the [Supreme Court] ruling and the legitimacy of the new presidency."

Oozing hypocrisy, the *Times* cannot articulate, even in a diluted fashion, the feelings of tens of millions of anti-Bush voters. This is nothing new. The *Times* ignored the anti-Iraq war sentiment until it reached mass proportions in January 2003, and then patronizingly claimed that it merely raised "nuanced questions in the name of patriotism about the premises, cost and aftermath of the war the president is contemplating." In fact, the antiwar protests expressed widespread and passionate opposition to the unprovoked US aggression in Iraq and the criminal regime that launched it.

The *Times* cannot begin to convey the anger felt by the more politically aware layers of the population for the deeply reactionary and sinister policies pursued by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Ashcroft and the rest of the cabal in Washington. The newspaper's editors and leading writers essentially covered up for these policies over the course of four years—apologizing, justifying, occasionally criticizing, and often offering friendly advice.

Nor do the editors denounce the means by which Bush regained office. They merely make a bland reference to a "rancorous campaign" whose wounds "will be raw for a long time." As though the 2004 campaign had been a rather unpleasant college debate!

The Republicans could win only by bewildering and terrorizing a substantial section of the population, paralyzing its ability to think, even convincing the most backward layers that opposing Bush in "wartime" was treasonous. They needed to resort to the foulest means—brazen lying, character assassination, dirty tricks, playing on religious fanaticism, scare-mongering. No one should forget this, much less "join hands" with the president, as the *Times* suggests.

How is the conciliatory tone of the *Times* to be explained? In the end, for the newspaper's editors and their wealthy milieu, the extreme right is merely an *inconvenience*. They would prefer a less "irresponsible" regime, one that proceeds along the more familiar paths of post-war American bourgeois politics—global multilateralism, making use of the United Nations, NATO and the traditional alliances; collaboration at home with the trade unions and the black petty-bourgeois leaders, etc. They sense that the provocative methods of the Bush-Cheney crowd carry with them certain risks—above all, the danger of a mass radicalization in the American working population and among the youth.

The *Times* editors speak for a privileged layer, more frightened of this movement from below than anything else. A wide swath of the liberal establishment has enriched itself over the past several decades through the general redistribution of wealth from the working population to those at the top. For these people, defense of the economic status quo is far more pressing than opposition to the predatory policies of the Bush administration. The conflict between the *Times* editorial board and the Bush-Cheney regime, in the final analysis, does not run very deep.

One must remember, after all, that the *Times* editors and their ilk (including Kerry himself) received a consolation prize from the Democrats' defeat: they will get even richer, thanks to the reactionary tax and spending policies of the new administration.

For definite social reasons, the *Times* editors—like the Democratic Party leaders—are hostile to the interests and concerns of broad layers of the working population, including many who misguidedly voted for Bush. They belong to a wealthy, effete, self-satisfied elite that carefully reduces its liberalism to a handful of cultural issues. They support "progressive" causes insofar as they represent no threat to their stock portfolios.

The *Times* editorial writers—again, like the Democrats—cannot establish any serious connection with the great numbers of workers, farmers, small business people who feel increasing desperation in the face of vast changes in the world economy, continual downsizing and wage-cutting, the ruthless pursuit of profits by giant corporations, but do not yet grasp their own social situation. Those millions, feeling the ground slipping beneath their feet, are swayed at this point by appeals to eternal "moral" and "family" values. As its editorial indicates, the *Times* is quite indifferent to the problems of such people.

One of the most significant features of the 2004 election was the incapacity of what remains of liberalism to reach, much less mobilize, wide layers of the oppressed. Political progress in America depends on the emergence of a politically educated, broad-based socialist working class movement that can show a way out of the deepening crisis to these social layers.

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