

Observations on the opening of the 110th US Congress

Barry Grey in Washington DC
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In the citadel of privilege and power that is Washington, DC, the transfer of congressional control from the Republicans to the Democrats, notwithstanding the gaudy ceremonies and talk of “historic moments,” changes nothing essential.

This particular turnover, even by the political standards of the American two-party system, will alter less than many previous transfers of power.

In some ways, the core reality of American political life was evoked in a description of last Thursday’s swearing-in rites for the new Senate by journalist Geoff Elliott, writing in the January 5 edition of the *Australian*,

“At 11:45 am, Vice-President Dick Cheney’s motorcade sweeps up Constitutional Avenue in Washington, DC from the White House to Capitol Hill. Cheney’s armoured limousine is preceded by an escort of police motorbikes with sidecars and is nestled among black sports utility vehicles in which men in black menacingly poke their semi-automatic weapons out the windows. Cheney is heading to the Senate to preside over his ceremonial role in the chamber as president. At midday he is to start swearing in the new Democrat-controlled Senate.”

The Capitol complex itself is ringed by police-military checkpoints, and police dressed in various uniforms, some wielding large automatic weapons, are everywhere. The domed structure is surrounded by what appear to be fortified barriers, on the other side of which one can see large cranes and tracts of dug-up earth. One can only imagine what type of fortifications are being built there.

It is not exactly Baghdad’s Green Zone, but it is a far cry from a symbol of democracy and open government.

The physical barriers enhance the impression that in and around the Capitol an insulated fraternity of politicians, reporters, lobbyists and a small army of their retainers operates at an immense distance from the broad mass of the people.

Within the well-guarded environs of the Capitol, the new speaker of the house, Democrat Nancy Pelosi, declared at a Thursday morning meeting with the Congressional Black Caucus that the Democratic 110th Congress would provide a new direction “for all the people, not just the privileged few.” Pelosi was, as always, impeccably attired in a designer suit set off by a pearl necklace.

In 2005, she was ranked ninth among members of the House of Representatives in net worth. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, she and her husband together were worth more than \$14 million.

Representative Rahm Emanuel of Illinois, the chairman of the Democratic Caucus, echoed Pelosi’s populist-sounding words, declaring, “The agenda we have is about restoring economic security to a very vulnerable middle class.”

Representative Bobby Rush, the Chicago Democrat and former Black Panther, accompanied his vote for Pelosi as House speaker with a biblical analogy: “Just as the biblical Esther was called to save the nation, I cast my vote for another woman called for such times as these.”

The professed concern for the “little guy” and pledges to end corrupt relations with corporate lobbyists did not prevent the newly ascendant Democrats from partying into the night with lobbyists, union bureaucrats and other denizens of the Washington establishment.

Emanuel threw what the *New York Times* described as a “huge reception at Johnny’s Half Shell across the street from the Capitol.” That, however, was small potatoes compared to Pelosi’s \$1,000-a-plate fundraiser Thursday evening at the National Building Museum.

The invitees, according to a report in the *Washington Post*, “had waited a long time for this night to party, nibble on goat cheese ravioli with pumpkin and truffle, wipe their lips with paper napkins embossed in gold with ‘Speaker Pelosi January 4, 2007,’ listen to former

members of the Grateful Dead sing ‘Truckin,’ and Tony Bennett sing ‘I Left My Heart in San Francisco.’”

The *Post* continued, “A long column of leaders and organizers from several labor unions walked from nearby headquarters. ‘We’re celebrating a change in this country,’ said Larry Cohen, president of the Communications Workers of America, adding that Americans want a ‘commitment to economic justice’ and are ‘fed up with their voices not being heard.’

“But how do those ideals jibe with a fancy affair too pricey for most working families?

“‘I think it’s a good question, actually,’ Cohen said.”

Democratic politicians went more or less directly from voting on the floor of the House Thursday to ban the most egregious forms of bribe-taking, such as meals, gifts and rides on corporate jets, to rub shoulders with corporate lobbyists at the Pelosi bash and scores of smaller affairs around the capital. *USA Today* commented, “Rick Carter, a lobbyist for PG&E Corp., a California-based energy company, was navigating a three-page list of receptions. ‘It’s time to set agendas and strategies and see what we can get accomplished,’ he said.”

The *New York Times* noted, “The House rules leave what lobbyists say are ample loopholes for those seeking to buy access to lawmakers, mainly through campaign fund-raising . . . the lobbyists can still raise money for lawmakers’ campaigns and also join lawmakers at fundraising events or on overnight trips paid for with those campaign funds.”

The newspaper cited Lawrence W. Noble, a “Washington lawyer specializing in political rules,” who said, “We still have a system of private financing of campaigns.”

On Friday, day two of the House Democrats’ “100 Hours” legislative agenda, Pelosi pushed through two measures—the first serving essentially as window dressing for the second. All of the Democrats and 48 Republicans voted to reign in so-called “earmarks”—special provisions favoring particular interests, usually corporate, that are traditionally inserted anonymously by individual congressmen into legislative measures.

This was proclaimed a dramatic step in controlling “pork-barrel” spending as part of the Democrats’ commitment to fiscal austerity. More significant was the measure to restore “pay-as-you-go” budget rules, prohibiting the House from passing any new entitlement programs or tax cuts without offsetting them with spending cuts or tax increases elsewhere in the budget.

“We’re going to put our fiscal house in order,” declared

Representative Emanuel.

Among other things, this means that even the very modest social measures included in the “100 Hours” agenda will have to be scaled back. House Democratic aides have already let it be known that the promise to cut interest rates on student loans in half will have to be phased in over five years instead of being implemented immediately.

More fundamentally, it means that the Democrats have no intention of seriously addressing the critical social concerns of the broad mass of working people—health care, housing, education, job security, wages, pollution.

It could not be otherwise, since the Democrats have ruled out a cut-off of funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which are costing billions of dollars every week, and have signaled their intention to leave in place the massive tax cuts for the wealthy enacted by the Bush administration. The war in Iraq—the issue that dominated the November elections and remains uppermost in the minds of the American people—was entirely omitted from the Democrats’ opening legislative salvo.

Likewise the police-state measures enacted since 9/11, such as the Patriot Act, the Military Tribunals Act and the array of illegal government spying programs.

The dominant factions within the Democratic Party are, in fact, committed to continuing the reactionary measures and policies enacted under the Republican Congress that are most dear to the corporate establishment, especially the tax cuts and regulatory “reforms” that have facilitated the ongoing concentration of wealth at the very top of American society.



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