The 2004 Elections and the Collapse of the Left

written by Thomas Harrison | March 31, 2010

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, "The Second Coming"

SELDOM, IF EVER, SURELY, have the results of a presidential election brought such a sense of despair to so many people. Progressives, in particular, are riddled with anxieties and self-doubt, uncertain of their most cherished beliefs and wondering if there is any hope for this country. The talk of emigrating to Canada seems to have died down, but a great many now feel like strangers among their fellow citizens. Meanwhile, the right claims, falsely, a landslide in favor of their "values," while Democratic Party politicians seem all too ready to agree and are falling over themselves to make the appropriate concessions.

There is certainly ample reason for dread. No one can deny that with the reelection of George Bush, the United States has taken another giant leap to the right. This is not merely a result of the obvious — the victory of a viciously reactionary Republican administration, perhaps the most cynical, dishonest, and ideologically fanatical in our history, plus the tightening of the Republicans' stranglehold on Congress. The triumph of conservatism is also a consequence of the collapse of the left in the face of the Republican threat. It's bad enough that Bush won; what makes it far worse is that he won without ever being challenged by Kerry on a range of vital issues, but especially on the brutal occupation of Iraq — and that the left, in turn, did not challenge Kerry.

In the 2004 election, the big winner was the politics of imperialism and war, of gargantuan military spending and starved and declining social services — and it was a bipartisan victory. In its crudest, most naked form, this is what Bush stands for, of course; but in a less ugly-sounding, but also less realistic,[1] form, so did Kerry. And because the vast bulk of the left self-destructively sold its birthright to the Kerry campaign, it could not intervene in this non-debate. The silence, therefore, was deafening. There were important differences between Bush and Kerry, but not over the burning question of whether the United States will continue to play the role of a hyperreactionary, arrogant and ignorant superpower, bullying the world, policing a horrendous global status quo that condemns billions to misery and early death, and inciting violent hatred as a result. This was simply not on the agenda. And because it wasn't, masses of Americans, instead of being confronted with progressive ideas, were simply further confirmed in some of their worst prejudices — prejudices it will now be much harder for the left to shake.

What a waste. All those liberals and radicals, including tens of thousands of young people, people who had marched in antiwar demonstrations, flocking to the swing states to leaflet, ring doorbells, sit at phone- banks, and register voters, all on behalf of a candidate who was promising them at least four more years in Iraq! The great outpouring to elect Kerry amounted to a veritable mass movement; though profoundly misguided, it exhibited enormous energy and idealism.

It would bode well if there were now at least some awareness on the left that working for Kerry was a fool's errand, and that the impact on progressive politics has been calamitous. But so far the signs are not good. MoveOn has informed the members of its vast network that "We are truly

stronger than ever." In a mind-boggling display of denial, Robert Borosage and Katrina Vanden Heuvel, wrote in *The Nation* that progressives "drove the debate" during the election and "drive the [Democratic] party now" ("Progressives: Get Ready to Fight," Nov. 29, 2004). "Even in the ashes of this defeat," they declare, "progressives can take pride in the remarkable role we played, both in arousing opposition to Bush and in building the independent progressive machinery necessary to communicate, educate, register, and get out the vote." Pride in working their hearts out for a candidate who had nothing but contempt for progressives' demands and wanted only to render them invisible and unheard until the campaign was over? Embarrassment would be a more appropriate response. As for the "independent progressive machinery," the trouble is that when it is placed at the service of the Democrats, it ceases to be independent. If only it were used to organize a new political party that is *controlled* by progressives and serves *their* interests.

Instead, *The Nation* and others insist on more of the same. If the history of the past century is not enough to prove that the Democratic Party is unreformable, that it can never be transformed into a people's party, then surely the Kerry campaign, which confirmed that the slick corporate politics and macho militarism of the "New Democrats" have become the party's very essence, should put these dangerous illusions to rest forever. On this score, however, the absurd bravado of liberals like Borosage and Vanden Heuvel provides little reason for optimism.

A Failure of Nerve

BEHIND THIS BRITTLE FA□ADE, the reality is that demoralization has descended on the left like a toxic cloud. Among its poisonous effects is a tendency to blame the supposed stupidity and atavism of the mass of Americans, to observe bitterly that benighted voters "got what they deserve."

It would be spiteful and wrong to say that it was the Anyone But Bush left that got what it deserved — no decent person deserves Bush. But by lining up behind Kerry, by lowering its voice and largely withdrawing from the public spotlight in order not to "embarrass" the ticket, by excusing Kerry's conservatism and flag-waving in the interest of removing Bush, and by joining — and indeed leading — a venomous attack on the only effort to mount a serious national challenge to the reactionary bipartisan consensus — Ralph Nader's deeply flawed, yet infinitely preferable independent campaign — the left only succeeded in making itself more invisible and ineffective than usual.

In its desperate quest to elect Kerry, the left allowed almost every progressive goal to be ignored — the need to slash military spending and launch a genuinely democratic foreign policy, to respond effectively to global warming, to restore and defend civil liberties, to combat poverty, to launch public works to create jobs, to make the tax structure progressive, to implement prolabor legislation that actually helps workers unionize, to reform the country's cruel immigration policy, reverse the decay of urban schools, and a host of other crucial matters. For the better part of a year, the Kerry and Bush camps focused on the question of who would be a stronger and more decisive Commander-in-Chief, while most of the left obsessed about polls and worried about Kerry's personality.

The left put no pressure whatsoever on Kerry: its support was unconditional and, mostly, uncritical. Rep. Barney Frank boasted that "Kerry has less of a problem on the left than any candidate in my memory. . . . The proof is that I am less busy this presidential campaign than other ones. I'm not being sent out to calm down the left."[2] Had Kerry won, he would have taken office with no mandate for change and with no political debts to pay to the progressives who worked so hard to elect him.

The Anyone But Bush hysteria represented a colossal failure of nerve on the part of the broad left. Without any doubt, we are in deep trouble. The power of the right constitutes a moral and

political crisis of alarming proportions, but just as in any emergency, there are sensible ways to respond, and ways that simply heighten the danger. For the left to sacrifice its principles on the altar of Kerry's alleged "electability," for it to stand silently by while the Democrats allow the savagery of the U.S. occupation and the torture scandal in Iraq, as well as the grim erosion of civil liberties at home, to be excised from the nation's consciousness, was the worst possible way to combat the dangers of Bushism.

As usual, those who had opted for the lesser evil strained mightily to find reasons for thinking that their candidate was "not so bad." In truth Kerry was worse on most counts, and closer to his Republican opponent, than any Democratic presidential candidate since the 1920s. This is not to deny that Kerry *was*, despite his conservatism and hawkishness, undeniably the lesser evil. A Kerry presidency would probably prevent, or at least postpone, the privatization of Social Security. Abortion rights would certainly be more secure with a Democrat in the White House than with a Republican. Kerry would doubtless feel obliged to continue the occupation of Iraq, if only out of fear of Republican charges that the Democrats "lost" it, but would be less likely, perhaps, than Bush to launch new military interventions.

Had Kerry won, we might not be witnessing such a frenzied and unseemly scramble to the right on the part of most Democratic politicians. Nevertheless, most Democrats have an extremely superficial commitment to progressive principles, one that is shaky in the best of times; now that these principles appear to be electoral handicaps they are ready to discard them like so much used Kleenex. The fact that in defeat so many Democrats are capable of compromising on so many things, including, it seems, even Social Security, shows the futility — or more pointedly, the *extreme danger* — of relying on them even to hold the line. Even for those who have abandoned all hope of radical reform, whose only political goal is to maintain some shred of humane social policy in the increasingly Darwinian world of American capitalism, to preserve at least a few of the gains of the New Deal, the labor, civil rights, and women's movements, it should be obvious by now that depending on the Democrats to defend these things and stand up to the right is madness. To do so is *maximally* unsafe.

Antiwar Movement Goes AWOL

DURING THE CAMPAIGN, the antiwar movement kept a very low profile, despite the carnage in Iraq and the fact that half the population opposes the war — a much larger percentage, for example, than during the early years of the Vietnam War. Its one major mass mobilization was in New York City on the eve of the Republican National Convention.[3] The antiwar movement's semihibernation was, in a way, bizarre. The leaders of the labor, women's, civil rights, and environmental movements are longtime Democratic Party serfs; their prostration before Kerry was no surprise. Kerry could throw them a few symbolic concessions and get away with leaving it at that. But what could a frankly pro-war candidate concede to the millions who had come out against the imperialist occupation of Iraq? By what twisted logic could Kerry, who repeated over and over again his commitment to "finishing the job" in Iraq, whose minions quashed any hint of a peace plank in the Democratic Party platform, be considered an antiwar candidate? There were no bones for him to throw.

In a hard-hitting column in *The Nation* (Dec. 13, 2004) Naomi Klein described a "new era of supercharged American impunity": the Bush administration commits war crimes in Iraq — dismembering children, blowing up hospitals and mosques, attacking journalists and medical personnel, as it rampages through Falluja and other centers of resistance — with absolute freedom. The American public is cocooned within a media fantasy-world in which only brave American boys (and the occasional girl) die, while the rest of the world watches the scenes of civilian carnage on their televisions every night. As Klein points out, at no time did Kerry call into question the lawless depredations of our government's forces. Never during the campaign did he so much as mention the

torture at Abu Ghraib or the 100,000 Iraqi deaths calculated in *The Lancet*. Far from expressing regret over Iraqi civilian casualties, Kerry didn't even acknowledge them. And thus, Klein says, he offered Bush "the gift of impunity."

That this man was either openly or de facto endorsed by the organized antiwar movement was disgraceful. In fact, as the conservative columnist William Safire delightedly pointed out, on several issues Kerry was actually more militaristic than Bush ("Kerry, Newest Neocon," *The New York Times*, Oct. 4, 2004): calling as early as the spring for an attack on Falluja, making warlike noises about North Korea, and even opining that preemptive war was "a great doctrine throughout the Cold War." The official doctrine of "mutual assured destruction" allegedly precluded preemptive nuclear war, which was openly advocated at the time only by madmen like Edward Teller; imagine the reaction from leftists if Bush had made this comment, the solemn reminders that voting for Kerry was truly a matter of life or death.

But no matter what Kerry said, no matter what position he took, it just didn't seem to make any difference to his progressive supporters. The almost religious fervor, the iron discipline, with which members of the antiwar movement campaigned and voted in their millions for this hawk, whom they knew to be a hawk, and poured scorn on all who demurred, was a deeply depressing spectacle.

MANY RADICALS WHO ARE normally highly critical of the Democrats and friendly to the idea of independent politics argued that it was only because the Bush administration was so uniquely dangerous that "this time" the left had to forego political independence. But the conditions that supposedly mandated a vote for Kerry in 2004 are unlikely to change for the better in the future. Isn't it virtually certain that the Republicans will put up someone as bad as, and probably a good deal worse than, Bush in 2008, in 2012, and so on? In which case, is the left condemned to subordinate itself permanently to an increasingly conservative Democratic Party? If the "strategic" vote for Kerry in 2004 becomes the pattern of the future, if every four years the left declares another "emergency" that requires putting the effort to build a political alternative on hold, an alternative will never get built.

Right now, the few remaining vestiges of "progressivism" in the mainstream of the Democratic Party are rapidly unraveling. In the aftermath of their defeat, party leaders scratch their heads wondering how they can appear more religious and "family-friendly" (code for distancing themselves from gays and feminists). The new minority leader in the Senate, Harry Reid, is a conservative Mormon from Nevada who opposes abortion and is described as "close to Bush." He has praised the "brilliance" of Antonin Scalia as a potential chief justice. California Senator Dianne Feinstein greeted Reid's promotion by saying, "I think it's time to do some reassessment . . . I have noticed in the past that all the gravitas [in the Democratic caucus] has slid to the left." And House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi has announced that she is proposing bipartisan negotiations on Social Security in which "everything would be on the table," including, obviously, privatization.

Nor does it appear likely that the Democrats in the Senate are going to put up much resistance to Bush's nominations. When the President picked White House counsel Alberto Gonzales to be the next Attorney General, Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy, the ranking minority member of the Judiciary Committee, assured the press that Gonzales would have no trouble winning approval because he was not "a polarizing figure." Evidently the fact that Gonzales authored the notorious 2002 memorandum arguing that the "war on terror" allowed the United States to ignore the Geneva Convention's ban on torturing military prisoners, and thus opened the way to the atrocities at Abu Ghraib, is nothing to get all polarized about.

And then there's Hillary Clinton, the liberals' great white hope apparently, who has spent most of her years in the Senate so far becoming an expert on military affairs, fawning over bombers and missile launchers and winning the respect of Congress's most hawkish Republicans. Sen. Clinton is now helping to "reposition" the party so it can have greater appeal in the "red" states, and thereby preparing her own possible presidential run in 2008 by attacking the Bush administration for being too soft on illegal immigration. She demands more high tech surveillance equipment at the borders and a better tracking system for foreigners who are allowed in. Immigrant bashing, it seems, is something else the left will have to swallow in order to stop the Republicans.

Nipping a Third Party in the Bud

IN THE FIGHT TO TRANSFORM THIS COUNTRY we may not be back to square one, but the prospects of creating an independent progressive party, the *sine qua non* of radical change, have been set back, in all likelihood. What appeared to much of the left as a dire political emergency, requiring at least a temporary united front of all progressive forces, constituted a golden opportunity for the pro-corporate politicians, centrist ideologues and professional operatives who run the Democratic Party — an opportunity to eliminate permanently any possibility that a serious political alternative might emerge to the party's left. This is essential for the Democrats: their electoral fortunes depend on the continuing loyalty of workers and unions, Blacks, Hispanics, feminists, the poor, and progressives in general. Only when the party can feel unconcerned about losing this base is it truly free to appeal to the conservative middle-class "swing voters" whose support is so coveted by the strategists of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC).

Depending on the fear of Bush was not enough. Beginning more than a year before Ralph Nader announced that he would be a candidate in 2004, prominent liberals and radicals called on him not to run. Then when he did declare his candidacy, an unprecedented campaign of vilification was launched, which reached a pitch of intensity on the eve of the election itself. In addition to defaming Nader personally, the Democrats and their allies in the labor movement left no stone unturned in their efforts to keep him off the ballot in every state they could. Their goal was nothing less than total obliteration.

Unfortunately, Nader made it much easier for the enemies of independent political action to discredit him by his confusing statements that he would help Kerry win, by his courting of disgruntled conservatives, and especially by his failure to clearly distinguish himself from the nativist and cult-dominated Reform Party, whose ballot line he used in several states. In their public statements, Nader's running mate, Peter Camejo, and his campaign manager acted as if there was nothing more to the Reform Party than its opposition to the occupation of Iraq and the Patriot Act. And Nader's positions on immigration, while far more tolerant than the Republicans and Democrats, were also far from a recognition of foreigners' basic rights to enter and work in this country. Nonetheless, while all this provided useful ammunition to Kerry's supporters, it is important to realize that they would have been no less relentless in their attempts to demonize Nader and the idea of an independent left electoral campaign in 2004 even if he had been much better.

Four years ago, there was an upsurge of interest in independent politics among rank and file progressives and young voters, largely in response to the conservatism of the Clinton administration. In fact, disgust with the two-party system had been growing for more than a decade, and millions of Americans were receptive to the possibility of a political alternative. By 2000, it looked like this trend might produce a genuine threat to the Democrats. As a result, the big guns of labor, the organized women's, civil rights, environmental and gay rights movements, the liberal journals, and of course, the Democratic Party itself, were deployed in a desperate attempt to scare voters away from the Nader campaign. But Nader's appeal and Gore's limp performance made their job difficult.

At election time, the scare tactics proved successful. Even without the hysterical warnings of NOW, the AFL-CIO, the Sierra Club and other organizations, the old lesser-evil habit probably would have induced most of Nader's potential voters reluctantly to cast their ballots for Gore, but disappointing though the Green vote was, it represented a promising beginning. Nader's personal popularity during the campaign was high, and his attacks on corporate malfeasance and the two-party duopoly resonated far beyond his actual vote total.

It was a great stroke of luck for the Democrats and their loyalists on the left that because of the events in Florida Nader could be perceived as having "spoiled" the election for Gore. In reality, the election was lost for two reasons: First of all, there was Gore's totally uninspiring campaign; it was quite an achievement not to win by a comfortable margin given that he was running on the coattails of a very popular president and, as we know now, that millions of rightwing evangelicals stayed home rather than vote for a candidate they deemed insufficiently reactionary. Second, there was the massive disfranchisement of black voters in Florida and the hijacking of the election by the Supreme Court, to which the Democrats bowed with a cowardice (not to mention a cynical betrayal of their most loyal supporters) that must have few if any precedents in the annals of partisan politics. For the most part, however, all that has been conveniently forgotten, and instead Nader has been made the scapegoat. Of course, for those who have decided that there is no alternative to the horrors of Bushism other than the slightly less horrible Democrats, it is much easier to beat up on Nader than to question the Democrats' commitment to opposing the right.

And now, after four years of Bush, this conviction — that no matter how bad the Democrats have become, they are the only thing standing between us and fascism — has steadily deepened. With Washington ruled by an extraordinarily malevolent gang of thugs and zealots, large parts of the left have simply panicked, effectively abandoning any hope of changing a system that continually spawns these creatures.

Blaming the Victims

WITH THE DWINDLING of hope comes a growing tendency on the left to blame the American people for our current troubles. After the election, *Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt wrote: "Maybe this time the voters chose what they actually wanted: Nationalism, pre-emptive wars, order not justice, ‘safety' through torture, backlash against women and gays, a gulf between haves and have-nots, government largesse for their churches, and a my-way-or-the-highway president. Where, I wonder, does that leave us?" (11/22/04) Where indeed, when the only alternative imaginable, according to Pollitt and other members of the Anyone But Bush brigade, is simply a milder version of the same thing? Except for government aid to the "faith-based community," all the items on Pollitt's list *were* chosen by those who voted for Kerry, whether they realized it or not, because those are the things the Democratic candidate either openly stood for, partially supported or timidly acquiesced in.

Nationalism and preemptive wars? Didn't Pollitt watch the debates or listen to any of Kerry's speeches? Kerry never lost an opportunity to stress his militaristic bona fides and his commitment to maintaining the U.S. empire, including staying in Iraq until the United States won, and he was quite explicit about the option of preemptive war. If Kerry valued justice over order, why didn't he call for the repeal of the Patriot Act? Why, as noted earlier, did he say nothing about the torture at Abu Ghraib, not to mention at Guantanamo and throughout the U.S. gulag? This might have been one of the campaign's major issues — talk about moral values!

Instead, Kerry never brought it up during the debates. What about the backlash against women and gays? To counter the multipronged attack on abortion rights, Kerry courageously announced . . . that he would consider appointing anti-abortion federal judges. His frequently repeated opposition to same-sex marriage merely added legitimacy to popular prejudices on this issue.

As for the widening gulf between rich and poor, Kerry offered nothing, and every serious person knew it. No jobs program (unless one counts his supply-side plan for big tax concessions to companies that refrain from out-sourcing), no diversion of resources from the military to domestic needs, no restoration of welfare guarantees for the most impoverished, and no change in the country's massively regressive tax structure beyond the repeal of Bush's most flagrant cuts for the rich. Kerry's program on taxes would have merely reverted to the pre-Bush status quo; as president, he would have been only too glad to preside over the kind of frenzied, gulf-widening enrichment of the upper class that marked the Clinton years.

KERRY AND THE DEMOCRATS forthrightly endorsed imperialism, militarism, and chauvinism. They made crucial concessions to homophobia. Kerry, like Gore and Lieberman four years ago, furthered the intrusion of religion into politics by constantly trumpeting his faith. Is it any wonder, then, that so many Americans regard these as bedrock political values, from which only fringe elements dissent? And given the increasingly monolithic character of political discourse in this country, why should it be surprising that voters would tend to select the proudest, clearest, most consistent exponents of the dominant values, rather than their more hesitant, shamefaced, or flip-flopping supporters? The Democrats have helped push the United States to the right; and they have thereby fostered a political climate in which it is much harder — perhaps now impossible — for them to win.

We will never know if a fighting liberal, militantly antiwar presidential candidate could have been elected in 2004. Possibly not: popular consciousness is full of contradictions, but conservative ideas are undeniably powerful and widespread, thanks in large part to the decades-long complicity of the Democrats and the capitulation of the broad left, which repeatedly muzzles itself at election time, accommodating the Democrats' move to the right precisely when people are most tuned in to politics. Polls show that large majorities support certain liberal and social-democratic ideas, such as universal, single-payer health insurance. More than half of non-union workers would like to join unions. In June and July 2004, Gallup polls indicated that 54 percent believed the Iraq war was "not worth it," and slightly less than half favored immediate withdrawal.

But such enlightened thinking coexists, often in the same individuals, with retrograde attitudes toward women, gays, minorities, and immigrants, with blind national chauvinism and brutal fantasies of military aggression against perceived "enemies," and so on. Even on these latter issues, however, popular thinking is complex and mutable. Think of fast-changing attitudes toward homosexuals: polling data reveals that a large majority of Americans support civil unions for same-sex couples with the same rights as married couples — whoever even heard of civil unions as little as five years ago? But this did not just happen naturally, or because people watched *Will and Grace*. It is the result of years of activism by the gay rights movement. The problem is that to undermine homophobia and other conservative prejudices there has to be leadership and active campaigning, not timidity and acquiescence.

Disillusioned radicals like Pollitt are simply wrong to write off the American people as permanently reactionary. The 2004 election certainly underlined a deepening and dangerous reactionary trend, but, as is well known, Bush's victory owed a great deal to the mobilization of ultraconservative religious types; it was far from the popular mandate the Republicans now claim. Moreover, voter turnout, at something over 55 percent, was higher than in any election since 1968, but was generally highest in the red states, especially in the Southern Bible belt; the turnout figure also means that almost 45 percent of Americans did not vote, and, as usual, these were overwhelmingly working class and poor. The party of nonvoters is still the largest and still potentially mobilizable by an anti-establishment political force.

Nevertheless, it will take some hard campaigning by an *independent* left even to begin to turn mass consciousness around, and, most important, to inspire millions of Americans with the belief that fundamental change is actually possible. At the same time, it will require a renewal of the elementary democratic understanding among progressives themselves that the people we want to reach, the vast majority, having no fundamental stake in the perpetuation of the existing system, are capable of grasping the reality that they are plundered, exploited, and ideologically manipulated in the interests of a ruthless elite.

Down With the Ship?

MEANWHILE, HOWEVER, ALL BUT a small fraction of the left clings for dear life to the decayed and rapidly sinking ship of the Democratic Party. The "progressive" wing of the party is utterly and permanently marginalized. *The Nation* and other liberal organs still make feeble noises about "transforming" the party, recapturing its lost "soul," and so on, but few really believe this can be done — and they are right. In any case, most of those who got on the Anyone But Bush bandwagon this time did so not because they think the Democrats can ever actually put up someone who is worth voting for on his or her merits; instead, it was all about electability. And the bitter irony in 2004 was that Kerry's alleged electability — essentially, his similarity to Bush — may have been the main thing that cost him the election. As I said earlier, there's no telling if a more liberal candidate would have won, but the Democrats' Republican Lite approach was doomed. And meanwhile, the left, yet again, forfeited an opportunity to begin to transform the political landscape by championing a consistently progressive alternative.

The demise of the Democratic Party will only be hastened if, as looks likely, the crackpot "realists" of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) succeed in pushing the party to cave in even more to the right. In 2004 Kerry refused to endorse the 11 state ballot initiatives to ban same-sex marriage (although he did not openly oppose them either). But it is noteworthy that Clinton advised him to come out in favor of these homophobic measures; this is a sign of things to come. In fact, Democrats, apart from some gay subgroups such as the Stonewall Democrats in Ohio, did not lift a finger to defeat the marriage referenda. In many states, these measures were actually widely supported by Democratic politicians — for example, in Montana, where every Democratic candidate for statewide office did so. Of course, such a strategy makes no sense even in Machiavellian, ends-justifies-the-means terms: endorsing the backlash against gays and lesbians can only strengthen and embolden the far right; consequently, it can only benefit the Republicans.

The logic of Anyone But Bush was essentially nihilistic: eliminating almost everything that might sharply distinguish the Democratic from the Republican candidate. What's left? Abortion rights? If the present trend continues, one can easily imagine a situation four years from now, or even sooner, in which electoral success is deemed to depend on major concessions to antiabortion forces — probably not overturning *Roe v. Wade*, but very likely on late-term abortions, parental consent for minors, and other issues. If the rights of gays can be sacrificed, why not the rights of women? And then, when the Democrats do start to throw reproductive rights overboard, one can easily imagine NOW and other women's organizations, along with the rest of the liberal establishment, arguing that, bad as the Democrats have become, the Republican are still so much worse that the lesser evil choice is, once again, the only possible option. Of course, such concessions will only hasten the day when the far right will indeed succeed in reversing *Roe v. Wade* and banning abortion entirely.

The Real Choice

THERE *WAS* A CHOICE in 2004, and it will continue to be the choice facing the left: death by lesser-evilism or life through independent political action. Nader's muddled, compromised campaign was deeply disappointing, though I think that on balance it was worth supporting. But whether one voted

for Nader or not was of little consequence; the important thing was to declare one's political independence by refusing to be sucked into the deadening nihilism of Anyone But Bush.

With all its weaknesses, the Green Party has kept the flame of independent political action burning, and even shown significant potential for growth. All the more tragic, therefore, that it too lost its nerve and joined the panicky stampede into the Kerry camp. At its national convention the party rejected an endorsement of Nader and instead nominated David Cobb and Pat La Marche, who advocated a "safe states" strategy of running only in the dependably blue states and working for the Democratic ticket everywhere else. Some claim that the party's convention was stacked by Cobb supporters and that most Greens supported Nader. Whatever the case, unless Cobb's opponents regain control of the Greens, 2004 could prove to be the year a promising third party committed political suicide. In nominating Cobb and La Marche, the party denied its very reason for being; no independent party of the left can succeed unless it is willing to compete with Democrats across the board, even if this allows Republicans to win in the short run.

As it turned out, the Cobb campaign was effectively invisible. It won 130,000 votes — as compared to Nader's 550,000, even after he had been kept off the ballots of six out of the ten states where he got his biggest support four years ago (Nader got 3.5 million votes in 2000). The Greens lost ballot lines in more than one-third of the states, including Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Connecticut.

Greens who supported Cobb's safe-states strategy, as well as many other progressives, do acknowledge the need for an independent party of the left — someday. *For now*, they say, the effort to build it must be suspended because the danger of continuing Republican rule is too great. Because the Republican threat will go only grow worse, this threatens to become a formula for the permanent deferral of political independence and, consequently, permanent political enslavement to a rightward-moving Democratic Party.

The third party to which we aspire does not exist, but the forces on which it must rest are very much alive and present. They consist of the millions of Americans who are sick of wars, insecurity, declining wages, worsening schools, racism, and homophobia and long for peace, equality, and social justice. If we are ever to succeed, in organizing these forces behind a new political party, we must begin by modeling the kind of political action — today, not in some ever-receding future — that we recommend for millions of others: opposing the Democrats *now*. In the contest between Bush and Kerry this course seemed perverse, at best, to most progressives, but logic indicates that it is the only way to build for a future of peace and real democracy. By the same token, all the evidence suggests that a very grim future indeed awaits us if the left does not declare its political independence.

Footnotes

1. Kerry's "multilateralism" was a complete fantasy, his promise to persuade France, Germany and other powers to share the burden of occupying Iraqi utterly empty since these nations made it clear that a Kerry presidency would have no effect on their determination to steer clear of Washington's quagmire.

2. What a damning admission for Frank, as well as a damning indictment of the pro-Kerry left. Frank's comment should be treasured for what it reveals about the role of the Democratic Party's "left" wing in containing and neutralizing threats to the system.

3. Even this event, although it could be seen as a pro-Kerry rally, frightened the campaign's

operatives and its liberal apologists. The editors of *The Nation*, worried that any show of militancy in the streets might damage Kerry's chances, initially urged demonstrators not to assemble at all but instead to stand *silently* all over the city holding candles.