The Dead-End of Lesser Evilism

written by Thomas Harrison | May 27, 2010

The November election poses a dilemma for leftists. Both major parties embrace the agenda of corporate America. Neither challenges the assumptions of American empire, and politics as usual will be followed by a Washington regime that will be at best agnostic toward the needs of progressive social movements if not hostile to it. Against this, Ralph Nader is again launching a crusade against both parties. But the Republican administration of George Bush is seen by many as a seismic step to the right, leading even such an inveterate radical critic as Noam Chomsky to declare his support for the Democratic candidate. Three editors of New Politics *— Stephen Shalom, Thomas Harrison, and Michael Hirsch — offer three perspectives on the difficult choices faced by the left. Readers are invited to respond.*

AS THIS IS BEING WRITTEN, in the spring of 2004, John Kerry's advisers, according to the *New York Times*, are "struggling to find a focus," a "defining theme" for his campaign; meanwhile they are "being regularly outmaneuvered by the White House." At first glance, this might seem surprising. The Bush team is managing to run rings around the Democrats precisely at the moment when the President has never been more vulnerable, with the Clarke revelations and the continuing investigations of the 9/11 commission, U.S. atrocities in Falluja, mounting American casualties, exposés of torture used on Iraqi prisoners, and a badly floundering "transition" in Baghdad. Public opinion is sickened by the stories and pictures of vicious sadism and bizarre sexual humiliation at Abu Ghraib prison, increasingly uncertain about the occupation of Iraq and repelled by the lengthening tissue of lies produced by what is undoubtedly the most cynical and mendacious administration in U.S. history.

Polls show Bush's popularity is falling, but not by very much. The President's approval rating might well decline a good deal more if his opponent could really exploit the public's doubts about Iraq and offer a way out. That option is not available to Kerry, and not because he's "unfocussed" or inept, though he seems to be a bit of both. By the time this issue of *New Politics* is published, his handlers will probably have found their "defining theme," but it is unlikely to be Iraq and will probably not be anything very many Americans care much about — apart from, simply, Bush removal, and it remains to be seen whether that will be enough to propel an otherwise relatively issue-free campaign to victory in November.

On Iraq, as on many other critical matters, the gap between Kerry and Bush is so narrow that light could not penetrate it. As everyone knows, Kerry voted in favor of the Iraq invasion, and it's important to remember that at the time the administration's strategy was "shock and awe"; in other words, he was prepared to endorse a massively destructive assault on Iraq, far worse than what actually transpired before Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard collapsed. Since then, Kerry has had his criticisms, but he firmly supports the U.S. occupation of Iraq. For a while he was able to differentiate himself from the White House by calling for a greater United Nations role, but it didn't

take long for even Bush to recognize the cosmetic value of bringing in the international organization: nothing like a coat of multilateral makeup to soften the brute visage of U.S. imperial domination.

Bush Lite

ON MARCH 15, 2004, *The Nation* editorialized: "Ralph Nader got a lot of things right" when he appeared on "Meet the Press" to say that the election of 2000 had been stolen, called Bush a "giant corporation in the White House masquerading as a human being" and called for the impeachment of the President over his lies about Iraq. "But," the editors continue, "he got the important thing wrong when he announced he would run for President." Meaning, apparently, it's great to speak the truth as long as you don't run for president, as long as you don't use the highly visible platform that a presidential campaign affords to broadcast these truths and use them to educate public opinion. It must be extremely embarrassing for *The Nation* and other liberal Kerry supporters that their candidate is *incapable* of speaking those truths — not because he's a shameless liar like Bush and his gang, but simply because he is as much a part of the Establishment as they.

Kerry can be expected to take a few rhetorical swipes at the corporations and the rich, but this is just for the benefit of the riffraff; he and his wife are two of the fattest of fat cats, his campaign depends on the largesse of corporations and wealthy individuals and he has a long record in the Senate of servicing some of Massachusetts' most powerful businesses. But there's no reason to put it in terms of venality; Kerry is no cynical lackey. He *believes* in the fundamental rightness and necessity of corporate power and a government whose first priority is to serve corporate interests. Equality, an end to poverty, a decent standard of living and economic security for all — these are utterly utopian, and the only possible answer to the malcontents and political innocents who dream of a different, a better world is Margaret Thatcher's famous taunt: "There Is No Alternative."

On some level he knows, of course, that Election 2000 was stolen by the Republicans; he might, therefore, even allow himself to consider that smirking, strutting, dimwitted baboon in the White House to be the usurper that he is. But just as Gore and Clinton acted like "statesmen" and counseled quiescence four years ago, Kerry will never publicly question this creature's legitimacy. Nor will he countenance talk of impeaching this proven liar, whose crimes — deceiving Congress and the public in order to win support for a bloody war and occupation that might otherwise have been prevented — surely outweigh lying under oath about a blowjob. No, Kerry's first loyalty is to the system; its stability matters far more to him than mere partisan advantage.

In an "Open Letter to Ralph Nader" (Feb. 16, 2004), *The Nation* rashly predicted: "The odds of this becoming a race between Bush and Bush Lite are almost nil." Famous last words. Whether one calls him Bush Lite or a "kinder and gentler Bush," that is exactly what Kerry has turned out to be. And he more closely resembles the real thing with each passing day.

A Poverty of Expectations

THE PROBLEM IS FAR GREATER than Bush and his coterie. Progressives need a strategy for fighting and defeating not just Bush, but the policies he stands for: imperialism and war, greed run amuck, uncontrolled corporate pillage, a new garrison state at home, and neoliberalism abroad. It makes no sense to support a milder version of the same thing. Even in the limited areas where Democrats differ significantly from Republicans, they tend to cave in over and over again; it never works the other way around. So the political center, and therefore the whole political spectrum, moves steadily right — and this will continue at a faster or slower rate as long as no principled, radical alternative to the Democrats emerges to their left.

In the absence of a serious progressive third party, there is no countervailing pull on this center. In

the current electoral campaign the left is so desperately committed to “Anyone But Bush” that it has virtually no programmatic expectations. Apart from a few wistful platitudes in the liberal magazines, nothing is asked of Kerry, except that he win, please, and very little is expected of him if he does. No liberal in his right mind thinks that a Kerry presidency would reduce the military budget, advocate universal health care, put pressure on Israel to withdraw from the Occupied Territories, cut back the country’s overseas empire of troops and bases, or pull U.S. forces out of Iraq any time soon.

Most liberals, if they are honest, are quite frank about all this. No, they do not expect any reforms from Kerry, any new initiatives to address the problems of empire, militarism, poverty and joblessness, starved social programs, millions without medical insurance, and so on. All they want, all they expect, is that Kerry will “hold the line” (on existing rights such as abortion, and social entitlement programs), and that he will “keep things from getting worse.” That’s their Maximum Program.

But trying to stand pat will only ensure that things will get worse. The idea that a sort of stalemate, a holding operation, can be achieved, is the worst kind of illusion. Under Clinton, as under Bush, dismantling the welfare state, deregulation, the erosion of civil liberties and abortion rights, widening of the income gap, the growth of unaccountable corporate power, increasing military interventions and arrogant superpower triumphalism proceeded apace. This drift will continue under Kerry, if only at a somewhat slower speed.

We need to change direction. But as long as the creation of an independent progressive party is postponed, rightward drift cannot be halted, much less reversed. The general political climate will become more and more congenial to the most extreme varieties of reaction and even neofascism, and therefore more and more dangerous. This is true *whether or not Kerry is elected*.

Graveyard of the Left

JOHN KERRY IS VERY MUCH in the New Democratic mold, with a few liberal touches added on because of his Massachusetts provenance. While far from the worst, he is nonetheless a fair specimen of the degeneration of the Democratic Party.

Much nonsense is written about the Democratic Party’s “progressive soul,” but the truth is that the Democrats have always been, in Kevin Phillips’ words, “the world’s second most enthusiastic capitalist party.” The only reason they have been somewhat less openly enthusiastic about this commitment than the Republicans is that since the era of Franklin Roosevelt the Democratic Party has relied on a mass constituency of capitalism’s chief victims: workers, the poor and racial minorities. The need to appease them has molded the party into a vehicle that attracts a fair number of politicians who have some qualms about the system — although most of these doubters learn quickly that too many qualms can make it difficult to raise campaign money or ingratiate themselves to party leaders and powerful committee chairmen.

Democrats have long specialized in co-opting and taming potentially radical social movements, and thus preventing a left opposition from developing. This is not a plot; it just comes naturally to liberals who are committed Democrats. But the conservatism of the Clinton years weakened the party’s ability to perform this function. Nader’s popularity in 2000, which was not at all adequately reflected in his vote, revealed the Democrat’s vulnerability on their left. The Kucinich and Dean campaigns were a response to this perceived weakness. A genuine liberal populist[1] (as well as a slightly wacky New Ager), Dennis Kucinich told the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*: “The Democratic Party created third parties by running in the middle. What I’m trying to do is go back to the big tent so that everyone who felt alienated could come back through my candidacy.” Third parties must be prevented. And Howard Dean, whose liberal credentials are questionable at best, nonetheless

succeeded, by attacking Bush's Iraq policies and calling on the Democrats to stop acting like Republicans, in drawing masses of young antiwar activists into the Democratic fold — thus preparing them to take the next compromising step of falling behind the pro-war, pro- occupation Kerry campaign once the Dean bubble had burst.

The main reason why Kucinich did so badly in the primaries, and the reason that Dean collapsed so quickly and utterly, is that the fear of Bush drove primary voters to avoid or drop and candidate that seemed "unelectable." This year the politicians, fundraisers and corporate big shots who control the Democratic Party did not really have any use for a liberal pied piper to lead the disgruntled millions back into their "big tent." Even a John Kerry will do.

By performing this role, Democrats, including liberal Democrats, now and in the past, have helped make the United States the most politically monolithic, conservative and crudely pro-capitalist of all the world's industrial democracies. Nowhere are the putative virtues of the "free enterprise" system less questioned and radical change more feared even by those who would benefit most from it. This society is a medium in which rightwing extremism can flourish — and succeed — as nowhere else, mainly because it encounters almost no resistance. The Democrats either half agree with the right or else capitulate on the convenient assumption that it is too popular to resist. The natural constituents of a fighting left are muted and hobbled by their thralldom to the Democrats, or else driven into apathy and abstention from politics. The ultimate irony, then, is that the Democrats' most important accomplishment is to make America safe for the Republicans and the right.

There was a time when the Democrats' efforts to shore up the system in times of crisis, as in the 1930s and 1960s, produced significant benefits for working people, African Americans and others. Tenuous but real relationships were forged with the labor and civil rights movements — again, relationships meant to "manage" these movements and keep them from challenging the system from the outside — that brought genuine progress through state intervention. This progress, however, was far less than might have been achieved had the Democrats not succeeded in thwarting, say, a labor or social-democratic party. Instead of miserably inadequate Social Security checks, retired Americans might be receiving decent government pensions. We might long have had universal health insurance and free higher education like Canada and Western Europe. In any case, the sort of "fighting liberalism" that could be found (along with rabid Southern racism) within the Democratic Party in its heroic periods, if one can call them that, is pretty much extinct. As is well known, few Democrats would accept the liberal label today — maybe a couple of dozen in Congress — and the vast majority dread it like poison.

New Democrats like Kerry may be more liberal on cultural and social issues (tolerance for racial and sexual minorities, respect for women's rights) than their predecessors, but they are qualitatively worse on corporate regulation, jobs, health care, welfare and a host of other matters that deeply affect our lives. They agree with Republicans that large-scale social programs are futile and that global hegemony for the U.S. military and U.S. corporations is essential. At their best they've been the Republicans' timid accomplices. And it's important to realize that they are *accomplices*, not just cowards who fold under the slightest pressure. The New Democrats, as well as quite a few self-styled liberal Democrats, bear co-responsibility for regressive taxation, war, attacks on civil liberties, and a host of other retrograde developments. But most of the New Democrats are worse than accomplices; they are perpetrators.

Yet *this* Democratic Party can still manage to co-opt labor, environmentalists, feminists, blacks and Hispanics. It can count on their automatic loyalty without offering anything substantial in return, apart from a half-hearted commitment to protect abortion rights, offer civil unions (but not marriage rights) to same-sex couples, possibly protect Social Security from being privatized, at least for a few more years, and some other things — all of which fall miles short of what is really needed to, for

example, secure women's control of their bodies, extend equal rights to gays and lesbians and ensure a decent life for the elderly.

Eight Wasted Years

WHEN THE REPUBLICANS are in power, they're so hideous that it's easy to forget how conservative the Democrats have become. But we should remember the atrocious record of the Clinton administration, and recall that, unlike Howard Dean, Kerry has never attempted to distance himself from that record (which would, in any case, require the repudiation of most of his Senate votes).

As soon as Clinton took office in 1993 he proclaimed deficit reduction, rather than job creation, to be his number one priority, and his administration adhered to austerity policies from then on. The Clinton years saw the lowest level of government spending since Eisenhower, even after a budget surplus appeared in 1998.

The administration's biggest initiatives were on behalf of American business abroad: NAFTA and the "normalization" of trade relations with China. Wall Street never knew better times, of course. But the record-breaking economic boom of the Clinton years had almost no effect on workers, who by the end of the 1990s were still earning less, adjusted for inflation, than they did 25 years earlier. Even before Clinton entered the White House, the United States had some of the worst levels of inequality in the industrialized world, but by the time he left, the income gap had reached truly staggering proportions: In 1990, according to *Business Week,* CEOs at large companies made 85 times the pay of the average factory worker; in 1998 they made 419 times as much. If that average worker's pay had grown at the same rate as the CEO's, he would have been earning $138,350 in 1998. Perhaps the rich would have gotten even richer under a Republican administration, but it's hard to imagine how.

On the environment, differences between Democrats and Republicans are clear. In the first place, unlike most Republicans, Democrats at least acknowledge the reality of such threats as global warming. Yet Clinton did nothing to obtain Senate ratification of the Kyoto Agreement after he signed it. He did not repudiate deals that allowed mining oil drilling, and the logging of old growth forests on federal land. A recent investigative piece in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine shows just how ineffective the Clintonites' "environmentalism" was. The article means to expose the Bush administration's surreptitious dismantling of existing regulations on toxic emissions, but it notes, as background, the efforts of the Clinton EPA to bring industry and environmentalists together and to make the regulations "more palatable" to business; in the end, Democratic officials were shocked to realize that business simply did not want to be regulated at all. Across the board, the policy of the Clinton administration was not strict enforcement of regulations, but "voluntary compliance" and "partnership" with business. So, yes, the Republicans were and are far worse, but the question is: Can a business-friendly Democratic stewardship prevent, or better, reverse, the degradation of our environment?

On abortion rights, Clinton promised a "Freedom of Choice Act" when he ran in 1992, then dropped the subject as soon as he was elected. He did veto Congress's ban on late term abortions, but not restrictions on abortions for federal employees, District of Columbia residents and Medicaid recipients. In fact it was not at the federal level at all, but in the states that the real threat to abortion rights started gathering momentum in the 1990s, and it can be argued that this was facilitated by the demobilization of the women's movement on the assumption that *Roe v. Wade* was safe under a Democratic administration.

Democrats are obviously friendlier to gays and lesbians than Republicans are. But remember how Clinton bowed to the military with his "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The result: a 70 percent increase

in discharges of military personnel on account of their sexual orientation. In 1996 he signed the odious Defense of Marriage Act, supported by an overwhelming majority of Democrats, including the late liberal paragon Paul Wellstone, which exclusively defined marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman; it was designed to help states refuse to recognize same-sex marriages contracted in Hawaii. Now, once again, political homophobia is on the rise, aroused by court decisions and mass civil disobedience on behalf of same-sex marriage. Isn't it likely that the climate would be a lot less favorable to the right had the Clinton administration mounted a militant attack on homophobia and a defense of gay rights during its eight years in office? Instead, its policies were marked only by timid, hesitant, even shame-faced sympathy.

Toni Morrison may consider Clinton the "first black president," but he was no friend of African Americans. The Democratic Leadership Council, which he helped found, was created in the first place to combat the influence of Jesse Jackson. Clinton's welfare reform, the first repeal of a major New Deal entitlement in 60 years, disproportionately hurt blacks. And the scandalous response — or rather, non-response — of Clinton and Gore to the massive disfranchisement of black Florida voters in the 2000 election should not be forgotten. Here, as so often, the "lesser evil" — Gore and Clinton's Department of Justice — simply allowed the "greater evil" — Jeb Bush, the Republicans on the Supreme Court, and a horde of Republican rioters in Dade County — to get away with it. By relying on the lesser evil you end up with . . . the greater evil. Black civil rights need to be defended with the power of the state. The problems of joblessness, poverty and wretched schools, from which blacks suffer far more than any other group in our society, need political solutions. Are we condemned forever to vote for a party that has basically given up even the pretense of addressing these social ills, simply because it is less vicious than the other party and accompanies its delinquency with unctuous platitudes like, "I feel your pain"?

The issue of court appointments is one of the strongest arguments for sticking with the Democrats. Like his father before him, and like Ronald Reagan, Bush tends to select not moderate Republicans but the most fanatical, authoritarian, bigoted rightwing extremists for the federal bench. These judges are extremely dangerous, of that there can be no doubt. What can we do about it? Elect Democrats? But when the Democrats controlled the Senate Judiciary Committee they waved through an Antonin Scalia (much to the surprise of this latter-day Torquemada, by the way) and would have done the same with just as much dispatch for Clarence Thomas had Anita Hill not stepped forward. During the first two years of the current administration they had enough members in the Senate to filibuster every one of Bush's outrageous appointments — and not just judicial appointments; John Ashcroft's draconian fundamentalism was a matter of public record. And it matters that while Clinton was in office he never appointed the equivalent of Thurgood Marshall or William O. Douglas, but rather Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer, bland moderates who support the death penalty. One reason the judiciary is so important is that it can use the Bill of Rights to defend civil liberties, including striking down repressive laws. But Kerry, along with a majority of Democrats, voted for the extremely repressive Patriot Act. Is this the man we should trust to put civil libertarian judges in office?

Neo-Cons and New Democrats

AS MUCH AS THE Kerry team would like to hide from it, foreign policy — and especially Iraq — will be a major factor in this election. It is a sad irony that so many people will be voting for Kerry chiefly because the current administration, with its recklessness, arrogance and brutality, has vastly destabilized the globe and rendered the United States a pariah nation — ironic because it is on foreign policy that the differences between Bush and Kerry are most minute. A mainstream Democrat like Kerry might eschew the strident rhetoric of the Bush Doctrine, but he would never renounce the "rights" it proclaims for U.S. power — to maintain global predominance at all costs and to intervene unilaterally whenever it deems it to be in its "vital interest," including the initiation of

preemptive wars.

It is often said that had Gore won the presidency in 2000 there would have been no invasion of Iraq. This is a dubious claim, based on criticisms Gore made of the war when he was no longer in a position of political responsibility. After all, his running mate was Joseph Lieberman, a fervent and unrepentant backer of Bush's war, much worse even than Kerry. In the aftermath of 9/11 it seems very likely that Gore would have launched an attack on Al Qaeda's Taliban patrons. Having done that, he would have been under enormous pressure to occupy Afghanistan and install a puppet regime there, as Bush did. And while his advisers would probably not have been plotting to topple Saddam Hussein even before 9/11, one can imagine Gore — urged on by Lieberman and others — taking advantage of the post-9/11 mood in this country to remove a regime that had long been a thorn in Washington's side. On the other hand, maybe not. We'll never know. But what *is* known is that Kerry, Clinton and all but a handful of Democrats supported the Iraq operation. Some, like Kerry, had misgivings soon after it was underway, but nearly all agree that the United States must now "stay the course."

As is well known, the Bush administration has faithfully carried out the program, proclaimed in the early 1990s, of the neoconservative Project for the New American Century: "maintaining global U.S. preeminence, precluding the rise of a great power rival, and shaping the international security order in line with American principles and interests." Less well known is the fact that Kerry and other New Democrats also believe in the aggressive use of American power — what the Progressive Policy Institute, an arm of the Clintonite Democratic Leadership Council, calls "muscular internationalism."

As James Traub observed in the *New York Times* ("The Things They Carry," 1/4/04), "at least when they're not preaching to the Iowan choir, Democrats generally use hardheaded looking-out-for- No.-1 language that [Condoleezza] Rice herself would have trouble taking exception to. They foreswear 'mushy multilateralism,' in John Kerry's phrase, for what Senator Joe Lieberman calls 'muscular multilateralism' — multilateralism not as source of legitimacy but as an instrument to advance our interests." Traub celebrates the Democrats' substantial success in shedding their image as a peace party, one of the chief indications of which is that "defense spending, once the great threshold issue separating hawks and doves, has been laid to rest."

This point is worth pausing over. The official military budget is now more than $400 billion a year. And when you include supplemental appropriations for Iraq and Afghanistan, it is probably $650-750 billion. Kerry is *not* calling for cutting back on this colossal and dangerous waste of the nation's wealth, and neither did *any* of the other Democratic candidates except Kucinich — and that includes Dean, the "antiwar" candidate. Under a Kerry presidency, the United States would continue to be armed to the teeth, its social programs starved nearly to death, with no real money for education, health, transportation, welfare, refinancing Social Security, rebuilding the cities, etc., etc.

The New Democrats object to Bush not because he's an imperialist, but because he's an extraordinarily amateurish and unsubtle imperialist. Their main criticism of the White House team is that it has alienated U.S. allies with its go it alone strategy. For both New Democrats and neo-conservatives, the goal is the same: maintaining global U.S. hegemony. Democrats lament the fact that Bush squandered opportunities to organize multilateral cover for the Iraq operation and to relieve the United States of part of the financial and personnel burden of the occupation.

Kerry supports the brutal occupation of Afghanistan, and is as hostile to the Palestinian cause as Bush. And now that the Iraq occupation faces growing resistance and the censure of world opinion, as the U.S. occupiers resort to ever more vicious methods to maintain their control, Kerry stands squarely with the president. Writing in the *Washington Post*, he declared: "While we may have differed on how we went to war, Americans of all political persuasions are united in our

determination to succeed." On Iraq, multilateralism and other foreign policy issues, the differences between New Democrats and neoconservatives merely parallel those between the Republican Department of State and the Department of Defense; to see John Kerry as the bearer of a different foreign policy is as pathetically naïve as considering Colin Powell a man of peace.

Bush has achieved major gains for the American empire, removing an unmanageable dictator, extending U.S. power into Iraq, with its massive oil reserves, and Central Asia with its abundant natural gas, expanding the global network of military bases (now 750 located in 132 countries), and significantly lessening U.S. dependence on the troublesome, and possibly doomed, Saudi royal family. Kerry would not dare to renounce these gains even if he wanted to — and there's no sign that he wants to. The empire is, and since World War II has always been, a touchstone of bipartisanship. No Democratic leader would consider dismantling it.

And now, no Democratic leader supports withdrawing from Iraq — even though every day that the occupation continues, democratic forces get weaker and both Islamic theocrats and neo-Baathist elements grow stronger. Washington's goal is to make Iraq into a stable client state, ideally with some democratic trappings for the sake of image. The problem, though, is: how can the administration allow even a semblance of majority rule if the majority of Iraqis want a complete restoration of national independence, including no American bases? The Bush people have dug themselves into a very deep hole, but they have been assisted by Democratic spadework.

A Third Party Constituency

THE ARGUMENT IS OFTEN made that while the building of a progressive third party is a necessary long-term goal, this is not the moment to do it: Everything must be subordinated to beating Bush. Now in the first place, this argument is made by liberal magazines, pundits and politicians at every election, not just in 2004. And in the second place, it discounts the significant potential for a third party that already exists.

The past ten years or so have witnessed a vast disaffection from the two-party system and a receptiveness on the part of millions of voters to the idea of a third party. There is, right now, a mass base, as yet unorganized, for progressive independent political action. Polls show that on such issues as universal health insurance, increasing taxes on upper incomes, war and foreign policy and other matters millions of Americans, not just a radical fringe, are to the left of John Kerry. Huge numbers of people are disgusted with corporate crime, the control of politics by money, the celebration of greed and excess — all of which have been glaring features of both parties' administrations over the past decade. They sense that something is terribly wrong, terribly unjust and dishonest about the system itself. In this restive climate, the message of the Greens, or some other radical, independent party, can have significant mass appeal.

So far, despite mass disaffection with the two-party system, only a fairly small number of progressive voters have taken the step of breaking from the Democrats. There are many reasons for this, but one decisive factor is surely the absence of bold, clear leadership. In recent years, the New Party and the Labor Party expressed the impulse toward political independence within the labor movement and among community activists, but neither was willing to incur the wrath of the bureaucracy of the labor movement and the big liberal organizations by actually running candidates in elections (the New Party only endorsed Democrats, some of whom were also members of the New Party). The Green Party, on the other hand, did this from the beginning, and in some parts of the country it has made remarkable strides.

The 2000 Nader campaign, when we look behind its very modest vote, indicated more clearly than ever before that there is an organizable constituency out there. Anyone who was active in that

campaign, who attended the “Super-Rallies,” such as the one in New York City’s Madison Square Garden, will not forget the huge, enthusiastic crowds, the enthusiasm and the youth of most participants. Nader himself drastically restricted his appeal by refusing to broaden his focus from a narrow populist concentration on anticorporate themes. While properly central to a third party message, these needed to be supplemented by aggressive campaigning against racism, sexism and homophobia, issues with which Nader was, and is, visibly uncomfortable. Even so, however, his candidacy resonated widely. We will never know how many Americans actually *agreed* with Nader and would have *preferred* to vote for him, had they not been afraid of electing Bush, but it was almost certainly many times the number of votes he actually received. And even that number would have been much greater if he had succeeded in getting on the televised debates.

So Nader’s showing in 2000, far from proving the futility of third party politics, proves the opposite. It is often argued that the U.S. electoral system, with its ancient two-party system and its one-round winner-take-all voting, makes third party politics impossible. But Britain, Canada and Mexico all have a similar system, and none of them have proportional representation or second-round runoff voting; yet all have had successful third parties. Proportional representation and instant runoff voting (IRV) are vital democratic reforms in their own right, because they would permit a much wider spectrum of political opinions to be represented in government, and because they would immensely increase the odds in favor of third parties. But their absence is no reason to postpone the effort to create an independent party now and no reason to believe it cannot be done. In fact, the pressure of a militant and effective third party, able to mount protests and exercise political clout, is probably the only thing that can force the two-party duopoly to loosen its grip on the U.S. electoral system.

Already, in certain localities the Greens have shown what can be done by a radical third party even under the extremely adverse conditions of our electoral system. Their most striking successes have been in California. By astute campaigning, by working with liberal Democrats without sacrificing their own independence, by demonstrating consistency and principle, by tapping into voters’ real concerns, and by sheer persistence, the Greens have become the second party in the inner Bay Area — San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley — as the near-win of San Francisco mayoral candidate Matt Gonzales indicates. Two-time gubernatorial candidate Peter Camejo has a strongly positive statewide reputation. At the time of the recall election in 2003, polls taken after televised debates among the candidates gave Camejo the *highest* rating of all. When the voting took place, Camejo’s total, under three percent, was disappointing, again because of the spoiler factor — fear of electing Arnold Schwarzenegger was rampant. But an examination of how those votes broke down shows potential for the future. Nine percent of 18-29 year olds voted Green, six percent of blacks and five percent of Latinos (Camejo is of Venezuelan origin, but the Democratic candidate, Cruz Bustamante, was also Hispanic, and Mexican American to boot). Nine percent of the poorest voters opted for Camejo. And this was, in a way, the hard core, those who resisted the enormous pressure to vote against their principles for fear of “spoiling” the election in favor of Schwarzenegger.

At the moment, it is easy to forget all this. “Anyone But Bush” panic has set in, and unfortunately much nascent third party sentiment will be channeled back toward the Democrats in 2004. In a sense this is an aberration, caused by the intense fear and revulsion aroused by the Bush administration, but if it is allowed to go unchallenged those who have been questioning their old lesser evil voting habits may simply decide that there really can never be an alternative to the Democrats. It seems inevitable that this election will prove to be a huge setback for the cause of independent politics.

The Nader Campaign

ALL WE CAN DO at this unpropitious moment is refuse to fall back into the corrupting and self-

defeating patterns of lesser evil politics, and to continue advocating and arguing for independence from the Democrats. For those on the left who refuse to vote for Kerry, the likely choice is Ralph Nader. It is a choice about which many of us have very mixed feelings.

Nader's decision to run as an independent rather than a Green is understandable. The Green Party is divided on the very issue of mounting an unambiguously independent presidential campaign this year, and it may end up endorsing David Cobb, who advocates a "safe states" strategy: this would mean that the Green presidential candidate would only appear on the ballots of those states deemed "safe" for Kerry. Nader rightly dismisses this strategy as a capitulation to lesser evilism that contradicts the whole point of independent political action. Not unrelated is the problem that the party will not take any position on the elections until its convention in June, which is far too late to begin a serious campaign. On the other hand, had Nader actually *joined* the Green Party when he became its candidate back in 2000, and had he participated in its deliberations since then, things might be different. In any case, Nader always functions as a "star" who is averse to being democratically accountable to an organization.

Nor does Nader seem to have learned much in four years. While his formal positions on gay rights and same-sex marriage are miles ahead of Kerry's, his reluctance to talk about these issues recalls his contemptuous dismissal of "gonadal politics" four years ago. And he is still barely able to pronounce the word "abortion." Nader's willingness to associate with the unscrupulous cult run by Lenora Fulani and Fred Newman — even if he considers them merely useful in gaining ballot access in the states where they control the Reform Party line — can only damage his credibility.

With all his faults, however, Nader represents the only alternative — that is, unless the Greens end up nominating a candidate like Peter Camejo who believes in challenging the Democrats across the board and at every level. The issues on which he is outspoken and eloquent — corporate power, workers' rights, wealth and poverty, globalization, the environment, electoral reform, and many others — are central and all-important. His fame, his unimpeachable honesty and integrity, are enormous assets.

Nader is, of course, hated and feared by Democratic leaders, who patronizingly congratulate him for all the good work he did *before* he flipped out, went on an ego trip and organized an electoral challenge to them.[2] Nader himself often sows confusion by claiming that much of his electoral appeal will be to conservatives and libertarians rather than liberals, and that he may actually help Kerry get elected by taking votes away from Bush. But the Democrats certainly know that he is a threat to their base, even if, as is likely, he wins even fewer votes in this election than he did four years ago. That is why they will do anything to keep him out of the presidential debates, as they did in 2000. If Nader is allowed on TV to confront Bush and Kerry, his arguments — impeach Bush, withdraw from Iraq, repeal the Patriot Act, make deep cuts in military spending, double the minimum wage, etc. — will appeal mainly to Democratic voters. In the present climate, Nader is unlikely to win over a massive number of voters as a result, but he might succeed in convincing enough people to vote for him to cost Kerry the election.

And this raises an interesting problem. Are Kerry's liberal supporters in favor of barring Nader from the debates? If they believe their apocalyptic warnings, if, as they say, so much is at stake in defeating Bush, how can they take the chance that Nader will hurt their candidate? Robert Kuttner (*Boston Globe*, May 5, 2004) has openly warned that Nader could "siphon off" votes if Kerry does not "distance himself" from the war and occupation in Iraq. Logically, then, Nader's voice should be silenced. Kerry's liberal supporters, if they are serious about doing whatever it takes to defeat Bush, must accept the necessity of a two-way debate — that is, a debate in which none of the positions previously mentioned are articulated — because they certainly won't be by Kerry. While millions sit in front of their TV screens, it would be inadvisable to suggest that Bush is guilty of crimes, and not

just mistakes, to stand up for civil liberties, to denounce this disastrous war. Better viewers should be subjected to the usual diet of lies, meaningless sound bites and bland political pablum. This is the dangerous logic of "Anyone But Bush."

Hearts and Minds

ELECTIONS ARE NOT ONLY about winning office, but also about getting people to think, raising consciousness and changing public opinion. Indeed, while radicals are still in a small minority it is the educational value of electoral action that counts most. In our relatively apathetic and apolitical society, election season is a time when interest in politics is suddenly heightened. For the left it should be considered a critical time for political education. Raising consciousness, obviously, is the only way the left will ever build a mass opposition that can take power. Moreover, unlike the right, the left needs to foster among its supporters a sophisticated critical understanding of history, social problems and structures of power. It cannot, like the right, simply declare its loyalty to existing conventions and traditions or appeal to prejudice and religious dogma; it must, to a great extent, swim against the stream, push against the enormous weight of deference to authority, passivity and fatalism with which we are indoctrinated from birth.

The Kerry campaign has a deadening effect on popular consciousness. What does it mean when on "Meet the Press" Kerry backs off from earlier charges of atrocities in Vietnam and then allows the egregious Tim Russert to get away with the lie that such charges have been "discredited"? The effect is to reinforce the mindless patriotic myth that America can do no wrong, a myth that only benefits the right. In fact, whatever historical credit Kerry deserves for his role in the antiwar movement, his current position on Vietnam is appalling. In his campaign book, *A Call to Service*, he writes: "I say to both conservative and liberal misinterpretations of that war that it's time to get over it and recognize it as an exception, not as a ruling example of the U.S. military engagements of the twentieth century."

What is the effect when Kerry supports the occupation of Iraq at a time when so many are confused about it, fearing a quagmire, suspecting that the United States had no right to go in to begin with, yet feeling "we" have an obligation to somehow "straighten out" the country before leaving? It increases people's disorientation, making those who are uncertain bow to what looks like a consensus or else simply feel isolated and hopeless. It also demoralizes those who have already been in the streets fighting war and corporate power. That's why it's so empty when *The Nation* and other organs of liberal opinion advocate supporting Kerry without illusions and at the same time building independent movements to "keep his feet to the fire." Supporting Kerry undermines our ability to maintain and build movements by sapping the very sources of opposition in this country.

Lesser evil thinking is conservatizing. Fear of the "spoiler" factor means that millions of Americans do not feel free to vote for candidates who stand for what they actually believe in, and end up voting for politicians whom, for the most part, they despise. And then, having made that commitment, they often begin to discover hitherto unsuspected virtues in their chosen candidate. If, as is currently being rumored, Kerry selects John McCain as his running mate, you can be sure that liberal editors will reveal that the Republican senator from Arizona is not so bad after all. Many supporters of Kerry, the lesser evil, have managed to convince themselves, for example, that the mass same-sex marriages in San Francisco, New Paltz and elsewhere were a terrible idea: drawing attention to the issue, they think, will only play into the hands of the Republicans. Gays and lesbians, in other words, should put their rights on hold for the time being. This is just like the argument that was made in 1960 that the civil rights movement should suspend its demonstrations to ensure Kennedy's election.

If Not Now, When?

THE POLITICS OF THE lesser evil is a very tired old story, and it has brought us only worse and worse evils. Historically, it has produced an ever-downward spiral of defeat. Some Kerry supporters on the left will admit that this is true, but insist that 2004 is exceptional. One wonders, though: what do they think might happen four years from now, or eight years, or twelve, that would prevent them from making the same choice? It's mysterious.

The United States is a more conservative country than most, but it is not hopeless and unchangeable. Americans are divided and restive in ways that provide opportunities for radicals. And millions have already been mobilized. There has been, for one thing, a vigorous antiwar movement. The great march in Washington on April 25 heralded the possible revival of a militant women's movement. The movement against corporate-driven globalization is alive and well. The outpouring of same-sex couples to get married this spring was a glorious defiance of homophobia. But there is no political party that can bring these movements together and champion their causes. Kerry has nothing in common with them, even if he is better than Bush.

The Greens are crucial to the early stages of building the base for a progressive third party, but it seems unlikely that they can grow, through small-scale accretion, into the party that we need, one that can really contend for power on a national scale. Still ahead is a major political fight within the labor movement and within the big environmentalist, women's, civil rights and gay rights organizations to liberate them, or large parts of them, from political enslavement to the Democrats.

Many on the left have already decided that radical change is simply not on the agenda, that radical politics are not "real" politics, and that they must make their peace with the two-party system. Those who are not prepared to give up on radical politics, but believe they are not being inconsistent in supporting Kerry this year, need to be persuaded that the logic of choosing the lesser evil, in 2004 and in the future, entails ever-greater compromises and inevitable defeat. The greater evil, the Republican far right, coddled, enabled and even assisted by the Democrats, will only get bolder and more powerful, and will continue dragging the lesser evil along in its wake. To escape this fate, we must build a powerful left opposition in this country, and it must take the form of a political party, not just a collection of separate movements. This is a job that cannot be postponed; the longer we wait, the worse it gets.

Footnotes

1. It is simply amazing that Al Sharpton continues to be classed with Kucinich as a quixotic but principled candidate of the left. The evidence that Sharpton is an unscrupulous demagogue whose only goal is publicity and personal power has been available for years, for anyone who cared to notice it — his endorsement of the rightwing clown Al D'Amato for Senate in 1986, his de facto support of George Pataki against Mario Cuomo in 1994, his cooperation with Michael Bloomberg to defeat Mark Green in 2001. And then there was his long career as an FBI informant, working to entrap black leaders and sports personalities on drug matters. But in this campaign he has been thoroughly exposed. Investigative reporting by Wayne Barrett in the Village Voice ("Sleeping With the GOP," Feb. 2, 2004) revealed that Sharpton's campaign was financed and controlled by Roger Stone, a wealthy and especially sleazy GOP "operative" who began as a protégé of Roy Cohn, was involved in Watergate dirty tricks, and worked on every Republican presidential campaign since 1972.

2. Though Nader is fiercely castigated for costing Gore Florida and therefore the electoral votes he needed to win in 2000, it is arguable that without Nader's candidacy prodding him to make some populist noises Gore's lackluster campaign would have gotten *fewer* votes nationally, perhaps even a minority of the popular vote.