The Democratic Party and the Future of American Politics

written by David Friedman | January 21, 2010

1. Fiddling While Rome Burns

After six years of the Bush administration, euphoria over the election is understandable. The Democratic victory has been rightly interpreted as a referendum on Iraq as well as a reaction to Republican scandals and mismanagement of the economy. However, the winning strategy was to run conservative Democrats for many seats, and in the flush of victory, to emphasize collaboration with the Republicans. No doubt this will continue into the 2008 Presidential election. People who hope to transform the Democratic Party into a progressive vehicle should take note that "their" party is in fact moving to the right.

Thoughtful people who see beyond the intellectual blinders of party affiliation are becoming aware that things are going terribly wrong for America and politics-as-usual is not dealing with it. We can see multiple catastrophes on the horizon: larger wars, resource shortages and global warming, a growing national debt and trade deficit, health care and pension systems in crisis and a working class whose very livelihoods are under attack. The two-party system helps rather than hinders wealthy elites and powerful corporations to bloat themselves with riches and plunder the earth.

For most of the liberal and labor left the central idea has been to "take back the Congress" in 2006 and then "take back the Presidency" in 2008. This is based on the belief that the Democratic Party is "our party" — albeit a party that may need some changes. However, the actual record of the Democratic Party is one of *complicity*, not opposition, and if it is changing it is in the wrong direction. People who see only that the Republicans are worse — which is undeniable — overlook the ideological similarities of the two parties and their collaboration on issues of the greatest importance, such as the erosion of democracy from the Patriot Act of 2001 to the Military Commissions Act of 2006.

2. Congress and the Two-Party System

An analysis of American politics should be based on actions and results rather than wishful thinking. We will do a bit of reality testing by reviewing some important decisions passed by overwhelming votes in Congress.

The Imperial Presidency

The central threat to America's constitutional democracy is the ascendancy of the Executive branch with its huge bureaucracy, covert agencies, military power and global operations. Heading this Executive is a President who possesses more power than any emperor in the history of the world. As global affairs come more and more to dominate all other issues, the principle of the Imperial Presidency is gaining support among America's elites. A very readable account of this process is Senator Robert C. Byrd's book, *Losing America,* (2004) — an eloquent statement on the abdication of the Senate and the security-based demagoguery and rush to war in the post-9/11 period.

The Terry Schiavo Bill

In March of 2005, members of Congress met in emergency session to pass a bill backed by the Bush administration which allowed the parents of comatose Terry Schiavo to seek a special federal court review after normal judicial processes had been exhausted. This grotesque attack on the Rule of Law and the Constitutional Separation of Powers cleared the Senate on a voice vote and passed the House by a late-night vote of 203 to 58 — an unprincipled disregard of the Constitution to curry favor with America's religious right.

The Patriot Act — 2001 and 2006

Shortly after 9/11, both houses of Congress passed the original Patriot Act in a near-unanimous vote. This could be attributed to the panicky atmosphere at the time, but no such excuse exists for the 2006 renewal of the Patriot Act, a bipartisan decision taken despite years of abuses by the Bush administration.

On July 14, 2005 the *New York Times* reported that Democratic Senator Feinstein had joined with Republican Senator Specter in sponsoring a bill to make fourteen of sixteen expiring provisions of the Patriot Act permanent. On February 17, 2006 the Associated Press reported a Senate vote of 96 to 3 to extend the expiring provisions of the Patriot Act.

The Military Commissions Act of 2006

This bill, which guts the U.S. constitution and lays the juridical groundwork for an American dictatorship, passed by a vote of 65 to 34 in the Senate, and 253 to 168 in the House. The Military Detention Act is not normal law; in gross disregard of the U.S. Constitution and the norms of civilized society, it wipes out a centuries-long principle of habeus corpus, gives the Executive branch the power to indefinitely detain anyone it determines to have "purposefully and materially" supported anti-U.S. hostilities, allows evidence collected through hearsay and coercion, and immunizes U.S. officials from prosecution for cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of prisoners. See, for example, the September 29, 2006 *Washington Post* article by R. Jeffrey Smith, "Many Rights in U.S. Legal System Absent in New Bill." One wonders why the 34 Senators who voted against this bill did not filibuster. It's hard to imagine a more important issue on which to wage an all-out fight.

Immigration and the Border Fence

The controversy over illegal immigrants has given rise to the most massive working class demonstrations of recent decades, in an atmosphere of anxiety over the disappearance and degradation of jobs. The showboating proposals in Congress only pit one kind of worker against another.

Instead of considering jobs programs and joint economic development projects with Mexico that could alleviate both illegal immigration and the justified concerns of American workers, Congress passed a border security bill that contributes to anti-immigrant xenophobia and exacerbates relations with Mexico.

On September 29, 2006 the Senate voted 80 to 19 to approve 700 miles of border fence which would span only a fraction of the U.S.-Mexico border even if it were actually funded and built. Meanwhile, the President has called for a program to import millions of "guest" workers to satisfy employer desires for cheap labor. Ironically, much of the opposition to this idea comes from conservatives in the Republican Party, while leading Democrats support a guest worker program allegedly sweetened by a lengthy, punitive and unreliable "road to citizenship."

Illegal immigration owes much of its recent impetus to massive loss of jobs in Mexico due to

NAFTA, which was passed with Bill Clinton's support. See Jeff Faux's book, *The Global Class War* (2006) for a highly educational account of how NAFTA was approved.

Authorization and Continued Funding of the Iraq War

On October 11, 2002 Congress authorized President Bush to invade Iraq. The vote was 77 to 23 in the Senate, and 296 to 133 in the House. In both houses, the fatal resolution passed by more than two-thirds, far exceeding the simple majority held by Republicans.

On March 16, 2006 the House voted 348 to 71 for an emergency spending package that included an additional $72 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, bringing the costs of these wars to many hundreds of billions of dollars.

Senate Confirmation Votes

o Condoleezza Rice by 85 to 13

o Alberto Gonzales, the defender of torture, by 60 to 36

o Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Alito with no filibusters

The lackluster opposition to Justice Alito made a farce of earlier claims that Democrats were avoiding small battles in order to fight the big ones. The vaunted struggle over the Supreme Court ended with a whimper. The consequences could prove catastrophic. In addition to the right to abortion, forthcoming issues include the ability of Congress to use its power to regulate interstate commerce for environmental purposes, and the constitutionality of domestic surveillance and oppressive detention without habeus corpus.

Anti-Consumer Legislation

The "Class Action Fairness Act" of 2005 passed the Senate by 72 to 26, and the House by 279 to 149. The "bankruptcy reform bill" of 2005 passed the Senate by 74 to 25, and the House by 302 to 126.

Support of Israel's Attack On Lebanon

On July 20, 2006 the House voted 410 to 8 for a shameful resolution that unconditionally endorsed Israel's ongoing attacks on Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, praised President Bush for "fully supporting Israel," and praised Israel for "minimizing civilian loss." The Senate passed its own supportive resolution by voice vote.

3. A Conceptual Framework

How is all this to be interpreted? Some people try to explain the performance of the Democrats solely as maneuvering and political cowardice, of which there is no lack, but more important is the actual conservatism of the party leadership, functionaries and big money backers. America's political elites share a broad bipartisan consensus on most major issues; by objective standards and compared to any other halfway democratic country, the spectrum of acceptable ideas is extremely narrow.

The bipartisan consensus includes a commitment to "free market" economics, a drive toward

world hegemony, support for a bloated military establishment, and a chauvinistic concept of American exceptionalism. For some deep insights on this subject, see Andrew Bacevich's books, *American Empire* (2002) and *The New American Militarism* (2005), and Chalmers Johnson's *Blowback* (2000) and *The Sorrows of Empire* (2004).

The bipartisan consensus supports the Global War On Terror, a slogan that masks an aggressive foreign policy and may lead to a war with the Islamic world. While alarms ring about North Korean and future Iranian nuclear weapons, there is little talk of nuclear disarmament by our own country and other major powers, or by Israel and the potential tinderboxes of India and Pakistan.

In short, when it comes to basic policy, the two parties seem more like a single bipolar organism. To understand this phenomenon, we have to think beyond the mechanics and machinations of electoral politics. *The essence of a political party is the active, organized expression of a class or sector of society, struggling in a variety of ways for their social, economic and national goals and beliefs.*

In this deeper sense of "party" America is governed by one party with Democratic and Republican wings. The two wings are not "the same" — they have different styles and somewhat different voter bases — but they collaborate in a single system of governance whose primary allegiance is to the country's wealthiest elites and corporations. Because of the differences there are some benefits to a Democratic Party victory, such as occasional raising of the minimum wage, but this doesn't come close to offsetting the continuing loss of good jobs to offshoring, the prospect of importing cheap "guest" labor from Mexico, the disappearance of pensions and affordable health care, tax benefits for millionaires and billionaires, inaction on global warming, and the terrible human and financial costs of war.

The Party of Davos

In *The Global Class War,* Jeff Faux observes that "the politics of the global market reflect a virtual one-party system." Faux coins the phrase "Party of Davos" for the constellation of wealthy elites and powerful economic and political institutions that collectively represent the interests of the global investor class and share in its prosperity. Davos is a resort in the Swiss Alps "where managers and agents of the world's most important enterprises meet annually among themselves and with political leaders to discuss the state of the world. . . ."

The Democratic and Republican parties with their elected and appointed officials, functionaries, patronage machines and intellectual defenders, represent the Party of Davos in American politics and government.

The Cases of Joe Lieberman and Howard Dean

Howard Dean's rapid transformation from an outspoken critic of the Iraq war and leading candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004, to a party figurehead and fundraiser illustrates one form of power wielded by the Party of Davos. In a single barrage of newspaper headlines based solely on the triviality of a "war whoop" at the end of a speech, Dean virtually overnight became "non-presidential and unelectable."

For Senator Lieberman it was the other way around. Democratic voters rejected him as their candidate, but with continued funding, respectability and Republican support, he won reelection as a putative Independent. It is naive to think that the Democratic Party can be taken over or moved to the left solely through its official structures and primaries. The Party of Davos doesn't work that

way.

4. America Needs a Second Party

One of the tenets of the bipartisan consensus is that "class war," including any serious initiatives that threaten corporate profits or prerogatives, must be avoided at all cost. In reality, a one-sided class war is being waged unrelentingly by corporations, governments, international financial institutions, well- funded think tanks and the mass media. The offshoring of jobs, for example, is not due to a natural force; it is a strategy to maximize profitability, drive down wages and working conditions, and undermine trade unions.

America needs fundamental changes that can only be won by mass movements organized for struggle on many fronts including the political — a true second party and not just in the narrow sense of electing people to office. As long as people depend on saviors from above — presidents, senators or benevolent billionaire — they will remain subject to the Party of Davos. Obviously a credible new party cannot be pulled out of the air or just declared by a few good people. It will require support from the rank and file and leaders of substantial liberal and labor groups that are currently committed, albeit grudgingly in many cases, to the Democratic Party. Until a foundation is laid and a critical mass of support achieved, this is a *perspective*, a *strategy* that can give direction to opposition movements and labor militants, and can be the basis for steps in that direction.

The Shape of a New Party

When people hear "new party" they tend to visualize campaigns, candidates, and elected officials. This is like imagining a building without a foundation, a professional athlete without years of training and development. It assumes that political action must resemble the mode of operation of the Democrats and Republicans. On the contrary, a party that is to be an active, organized expression of working people and progressive movements must be based on democratic mass organizations and commitment to developing a new vision and program for society. A new party should grow out of existing struggles in which people educate themselves to understand complex issues and seek common themes that have broad appeal to the larger public. There are no quick fixes: electoral victories might be won along the way, but it will be necessary to pick and choose those battles.

PDA and the Inside/Outside Strategy

Some say that the Democratic Party can be transformed through the power of numbers and victories in the primaries. More likely, this would result in the Joe Lieberman phenomenon on a larger scale. However, a serious effort by rank and file Democrats to transform their party requires most of the same tasks as building a new party and could lay a foundation for the latter. The most promising development along these lines is the Progressive Democrats of America (see their web site at http://pdamerica.org/index.php). PDA is a movement organization carrying out public education and action, not just a cheering section for politicians. They have a membership structure with the capacity for expansion and for building associations with "ally" organizations that are not necessarily in the Democratic Party. There is a great deal of potential here, if PDA can meet the challenge of retaining their independence and energy in the face of Democratic Party pressures and betrayals.

The Green Party

Despite its independence, the Green Party emulates the major parties in ways that are too serious to ignore. Their chief characteristic is a candidate-centered electoralism based on campaign committees and small, transient branches of activists with a one-note strategy of running as many

races as possible.

Internally the Green Party often operates on the basis of a mushy notion of "consensus" that is an invitation to manipulation by leaders and cliques. There is no real membership organization; for the most part, candidates and their entourages, together with small circles of loyalists, speak on behalf of uninvolved Green voters — a familiar pattern in American politics. The Greens could play a more positive role if they adopt a serious approach to organization and seek a fraternal relationship with PDA, instead of viewing them as rivals.

Tikkun/NSP

It is worth taking note of the Tikkun Community and Network of Spiritual Progressives, whose founder and intellectual leader is Rabbi Michael Lerner. An outgrowth of Tikkun Magazine, The Tikkun Community is a voice of progressive Judaism counterposed to the increasingly right wing, Israeli-loyalist positions of many American Jewish leaders. The Network of Spiritual Progressives now plays a similar role as a progressive alternative to the religious right. TC/NSP are developing a vision, values and an intellectually serious analysis of issues, and building membership chapters of people who share those goals. Lerner is one of the few prominent people on the left who has had the nerve and insight to stand up publicly against authoritarians of both the left and the right. TC/NSP is following one of many roads that can converge on an alternative to the Party of Davos.

Organized Labor and the Religious Right

The trade unions depend exclusively on the Democratic Party for their political voice, and pump millions of dollars into that vehicle. Union leaders are not known to the public and mostly confine themselves to issues of immediate concern to the trade unions. There is no network of labor-based newspapers or radio stations, and little ongoing involvement in the affairs of local communities. Most union members do not participate in their locals, with occasional exceptions during contract disputes.

By contrast, the religious right has thousands of congregations that meet regularly, sponsor community activities and have outspoken pastors, publications, a multitude of right wing radio stations, and television personalities with audiences in the millions.

This enables the religious right to exert a strong influence on the political parties.

The labor movement, with its millions of working families, can deliver votes but can't exert much pressure on the Democratic Party because it has no independent ground to stand on. The case for independent political action by labor is that it can draw concessions from the Democrats while building a vehicle for larger struggles.

Conclusion

The central task of a progressive movement is to transform or replace the Democratic Party. In either case, people need to build mass, democratic membership organizations, develop a new politics and fight for it against America's political elites. The alternative is to follow the Party of Davos down a long road into darkness.

Footnotes