

The Ugly Truth of the 1994 US Elections

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By now the horrible truth of the 1994 US elections is old news. The Republican Party, increasingly under the leadership of the Christian Right, has won control of both houses of Congress and is aggressively pursuing its agenda. The Republicans have won control of many governorships and state legislatures as well. A 1984ish anti-immigrant ballot initiative won overwhelming approval in California.

There have been a number of attempts to interpret these results in ways that simply hide from the truth. The election results were not the result of some sort of mysterious anti-incumbency “mood” among the electorate. Not one major race saw the defeat of a Republican incumbent. Reading liberal commentaries on the elections is not unlike listening to the incoherent rationalizations of an alcoholic. Yes, only a fraction of eligible voters voted (but in California, where a controversial ballot initiative resulted in a high voter turnout, the results were the same). And yes, many races were won with small margins of victory (but many were not). The liberals are quick to point out the ways that the legislative process will dull some of the sharpness of the Right’s agenda, and that the courts will strike down the more excessive measures (as appears likely in the case of California’s Proposition 187).

These sort of high-school civics lessons are being employed to avoid the truth. The cold truth is that the elections were a colossal political victory for the Right and its ugly agenda. The liberals are clinging to the notion that there is some sort of permanent center in US politics and that “excesses” like the 1994 election will correct themselves through the natural functioning of the system: right-wing elected officials will drift to the center, anti-incumbency will replace Republicans with Democrats next time, and so on. But that is not how the system actually works.

How American “Democracy” Works

The main purpose of elections in the US is to obtain some sort of popular consent for the rule of an economic-political-bureaucratic elite. It is common for radicals to say that the choices offered by the two major parties in the elections are not “real” choices. This is true in the sense that we are not given choices that involve a radical break with the existing capitalist system. But it is not true in the sense that there is no real difference between the political agendas of the different politicians and their parties. The elections give us a choice between different strategies for maintaining the existing order and for responding to challenges to that order. In the simplest terms, the choices we are offered are between different measures of carrot and stick—or, more accurately, between different measures of food stamps and police batons. The two parties, and the factions within the parties, represent different sections of the ruling elite, and different views of what is in the best interests of the elite as a whole. The strength of each faction depends on the resources at its disposal and its ability to mobilize popular support for its agenda—particularly at the polls.

When the system is running relatively smoothly, and is able to channel most discontent into legal and non-disruptive forms, the differences between different politicians and their parties are often superficial. But when the system is undergoing dramatic upheavals, the differences between different sections of the elite become more substantive.

Strategies for Social Control

That is what is happening now. Capitalism, both in the US and around the world, is undergoing massive restructuring. This restructuring is resulting in dramatic upheavals in people's lives. The Los Angeles rebellion and the Zapatista uprising are only the most apparent indications of the socially explosive potential of these changes. The failure (and potential further failure) of the system to channel discontent into acceptable forms is forcing the ruling elite to consider new strategies for social control. Beginning in the 1930s with the New Deal, and continuing through the 1960s with the Great Society programs, a central feature of social control in the US has been a variety of social welfare programs that have given the poor a sense of investment in the system, and that have fostered a mentality of dependency that has tended to weaken the appeal of more radical politics.

In the late '60s this strategy for social control began to break down, and proved unable to effectively contain mass challenges to the system. The system was forced to concede to certain economic and political demands coming from the Black community, to end conscription, and to withdraw from Viet Nam. This failure led to the development of a new and more repressive strategy for social control. The elements of this strategy are now familiar features of life in the US: a decline in real wages and the exclusion of unions from new industries, cuts in education and social services to the poor and other policies that would tend to break the fighting spirit demonstrated by the urban rebellions of the '60s, massive prison construction, and a "war on drugs" to fill the prisons with potentially rebellious youth of color. In short, a war on the poor. At the same time there was a need to mobilize popular support for these policies, to break the white middle class and white workers away from their traditional support for liberal social programs. Restructuring was undermining the economic position of these relatively privileged whites as well—the trick was to convince them that these changes were the result of excessive government spending on the poor and a sort of moral rot, represented by permissive attitudes on sex and drugs, that demanded a "get tough" attitude.

The 1970s saw the consolidation of a mass base of support for this new strategy, which led to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. The 1980s can be seen as a period in which the forces that supported the new strategy of social control pushed back the supporters of the old liberal strategy. By the beginning of the 1990s, old-style liberalism had been effectively defeated, even within the Democratic Party. Bill Clinton's ascendancy represented that defeat. Despite what Rush Limbaugh says, Bill Clinton is no liberal. Clinton has accepted the basic features of the new world order: free trade, lower wages, more prisons, more cops, more executions. Two things distinguished Bill Clinton from George Bush: opposition to certain elements of the social agenda of the Christian Right (on abortion, gay rights, etc.), and his commitment to a higher level of government support for key US industries in a more competitive international market, or what has been called an "industrial policy." These sorts of differences were not going to break the alliance of forces that had been served so well by 12 years of Republican presidential rule. What broke that alliance (temporarily) was probably the Los Angeles rebellion. The Los Angeles rebellion was the largest urban uprising in US history, and it served notice that millions of people were no longer willing to quietly accept the disintegration of their communities under a reign of police terror. It was in this context that Bill Clinton, by virtue of not being George Bush, could become the representative of a kinder, gentler new world order that might be able to pacify the unruly "rainbow coalition" that burnt down Los Angeles.

The Rise of the Christian Right

The history of the Christian Right has been told better elsewhere than is possible here. What makes this election particularly frightening to so many people is the prominence of the Christian Right among the victors. The Christian Right was deliberately built up from practically nothing by the right-wing of capital as a mass counterweight to the people's movements of the late '60s and early '70s. Its social agenda was used as a battering ram against the widespread popular support that existed for those movements. But as the Christian Right has grown, it has become increasingly self-directed, and has begun to spawn what can only be regarded as a theocratic fascist movement. It is a monster that can act independently of its creator. An example of this was the 1992 Republican National Convention, where the hatefulness of the Christian Right was on display to the whole country, no doubt much to the distress of the section of the corporate elite that was backing Bush. Another example of where the Christian Right has shown its capacity for independent action has been Operation Rescue and similar groups, which have openly embraced illegality and an open contempt for the norms of capitalist "democracy." Already there is overlap between sections of the Christian Right and the racist right of the Klan, nazis, and Christian Identity. Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, which is focused on winning local electoral contests, is in effect building a party within the Republican Party that can force the adoption of its agenda simply by flexing its muscle.

It would be a mistake to think that the Christian Right are simply pawns of the corporate elite. Similarly, it is a mistake to think that the only form that fascism can take in the US is that of open white supremacy. The maintenance of white supremacy is a crucial part of the appeal of fascism, but it is not its only appeal. It is not possible to anticipate all the variations on the fascist theme that are possible. The masses of white middle and working class people who must be the base of any fascist movement are subject to many anxieties that can be played on, as has been demonstrated by the various anti-queer ballot initiatives in various states.

Disaffection on the Left and Right

Bill Clinton's campaign was also aided by the recession that we have since been told is over. This recession was really only the latest episode in the ongoing situation-tragedy of global capitalist restructuring that has been running since the early '70s. This recession threw hundreds of thousands of people out of work. (Those no longer looking for work or who have accepted lower-paying or part-time work are no longer counted as unemployed—hence "the recovery.") Particularly hard-hit by the recession, in addition to communities of color, were the children of the white "middle class" working in the new service and information industries. After 12 years of Republican promises that welfare cuts and family values would deliver a better life, the recession split the white suburban vote enough for Clinton to win.

The 1992 and 1994 elections were each an expression, in different ways, of a deep disaffection from the existing order. In 1992 that disaffection found two outlets—Bill Clinton and Ross Perot. Bill Clinton won the election with a combination of white suburban voters who wanted to throw Bush out but were not ready to cast their lot in with Texas's answer to Napoleon, and the traditional urban Democratic base. In 1994 the traditional urban Democratic base sat out the election and the white suburbanites united behind the demagoguery of Newt Gingrich and Pete Wilson.

A look at the breakdown of the 1994 vote is instructive. Almost without exception, the Democrats won majorities among the low- and middle-income voters, among non-white voters, among urbanites, among youth, among women, and among gays, lesbians and bisexuals—groups that, taken together, constitute an overwhelming majority of the potential voting populace. But because these groups are less likely to vote, the average voter was a straight, white, upper-middle class suburban male—and he voted accordingly.

The Wrong Lessons

Looking at these figures, many radical activists are likely to think that they point in an obvious direction. Our responsibility, they will argue (as they have in the past), is to register and mobilize this potential majority of voters to defeat the Republicans. Or, if they are more radical, they will argue that since the Democrats are obviously not interested in representing the interests of these various groups, we need to build a third party that will mobilize them and give them leverage in the electoral process. These solutions will not work because they don't address the larger social processes that have brought us to where we are.

Get Out the Vote?

The 1994 elections were the first time in a decade that Jesse Jackson has not waged a large-scale voter registration and mobilization drive. In a great many races, a higher turn-out among Black voters would have given the Democratic candidate a victory. Quite conceivably, the Democrats could have retained control of the House of Representatives, if not the Senate. But what would have been the results for the Black community? Would GATT go down to defeat? Would the cops stop terrorizing the Black community? Would we have won guaranteed health care? Would the courts stop packing the prisons with young, Black bodies? From the point of view of much of the Black community, the difference between the Democrats and the Republicans is a matter of the speed at which the situation will go from bad to worse. There is no dignity in knocking on doors and urging people to vote for being shoved into a meat grinder at a slower speed. After 10 years, Jesse Jackson has exhausted much of his insurgent credibility on such efforts, and wisely chose not to squander what remains. It is the responsibility of political activists to propose a plan of action that stops the meat grinder.

Build an Electoral Alternative

One plan of action that many are likely to propose is to build a third party that will fight for the interests of the oppressed in this society. There are already several efforts underway in this direction. There is the vaguely defined New Party, there are the Greens, who have been waging local electoral efforts with varying degrees of success, there are the Labor Party Advocates, who are fighting for the unions to establish a third party. There are different ideas about how such an effort will lead to real change. Some people believe that such a party might be able to drag the Democrats to the left by denying them the margin of victory. Others believe that it is possible that such a party might capture the majority of Democrats, unite them with the currently disenfranchised, replacing the Democratic Party, and actually winning and becoming the governing

party. Both of these could be called strategies of realignment—by creating a third party we can force the realignment of politics in the US.

The Fire Last Time

The last time this actually happened was 1860, when the Republican Party, with the support of the movement to abolish slavery, rose to power and the country was propelled into civil war. The Republicans were successful because they united the new class of industrial capitalists in the North, the landless poor who wanted to see the West opened up to small farmers instead of slave plantations, and the abolitionists who stood for the radical possibility of a new society.

None of the current proposals for a third party represent anything like such a dynamic alliance. Rather they represent bitter elements in the old and no-longer-new social movement bureaucracies who have been discarded by the Democrats as they have revealed their irrelevance to the politics of the new world order. For a third party to succeed it must have a vision of a new society that it is able to convince people is worth fighting for, and it must represent new forces within society that have been excluded from power and who are determined to reorganize society. That is to say that before there can be such a party there must be a movement. If such a movement exists, it may or may not set out to form a third party. (The creation of the Republican Party can be seen as an effort by Northern capital to prevent the more militant abolitionists from attempting to ignite a slave insurrection.) But to try to build such a party without a movement is like buying a computer with a fancy monitor and printer but no processor, hard drive or RAM. It might look nice, but it won't do shit.

The Los Angeles rebellion suggests that we are not so far off from 1860. There are contradictions in US society that are potentially as explosive as those that set off the Civil War. But if radical activists want to tap those contradictions, we should not squander our paltry resources trying to build a third party when there is no movement.

A Movement of Autonomous Resistance

For all intents and purposes, there is no left in the US. There is a very thin layer of radical activists, the great majority of whom are demoralized often to the point of inactivity, that supports a handful of weak projects and a couple of dozen tiny sects. There is a larger collection of people associated with the various social movements and the struggles of particular communities. Demoralization among this group is also high. If all these people could be energized to do so, they might have some sort of marginal impact on the next set of elections, knocking on doors for liberal Democrats. Our energies are much better spent trying to find ways to ignite and participate in struggles of resistance to the agenda of the ruling elite. There is the potential for such struggles everywhere. Each attack on the poor in the form of cutbacks, layoffs, or police repression needs to be met with defiance.

In Feb., 1960, four Black students went into Woolworth's in Greensboro, N.C., sat down at the counter, and asked to be served. At some point an action will be taken that seems to express particularly clearly not just our contempt for the existing system but the possibility of a better world. We can try to guess in advance what that action will be, but we will know it by how it

captures the imaginations of those who were until that moment hopeless. We must seize on that action, repeat it a thousand times in every community, and elaborate it into a movement.

While we are doing this, while we are waiting for the spark that sets off the explosion, we need to be educating ourselves. We need to be studying what is happening right now in the world we live in, and studying the history of previous struggles. We need to be attempting to identify where we see the weak points in this system. All this so that when the spark comes, we can identify it. We need to be organizing ourselves. We need to be putting in place the structures of communications, of decision-making, and of coordination that will enable us to act decisively when the opportunity arrives.

International Solidarity and the Next Left

When the four students in Greensboro asked for a cup of coffee, they did so less than a year after the collapse of the US-sponsored Batista regime in Cuba, and at a moment when Africa was in the midst of a dramatic process of decolonization. The sit-in movement they sparked developed into a broader movement for Black liberation, and inspired a number of other movements of the 1960s, but it did so in the context of the international struggles—in Algeria, in Viet Nam, in Latin America—of that period. If there is a single feature that defines the new world order, that defines capitalist restructuring, it is that it is a global process. No movement can hope to challenge the new world order if it confines itself within the borders of a single nation-state. Any effective movement must be international in scope. This presents new questions for radical activists that we will have to answer. But the crucial thing is that we must begin the process of building the international movement by laying the foundations of international solidarity today. Every time a strike or a food riot rocks the capital of another country, we need to get into the streets to say we are with those who are defying the new world order everywhere. We need to engage in such actions not only to support movements elsewhere, but to make them examples of what we might do here.

The situation that confronts us is that of building a new radical movement attuned to the new realities, the next left. How we respond to the elections is an indication of whether or not we have the vision to see the possibilities that these new realities create. The elections have plunged many into despair. But they have also pushed many people to the breaking point, to the point where they ask “if not me, who? if not now, when?” We must be ready to seize on the opportunities to transform such individual sparks of resistance into a firestorm that will burn away the rotten structures of the old world and clear the ground for the creation of the new.

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