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The Leadership Crisis of the U.S. Ruling Class

Ron Tabor

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Among the things the contemporary political scene in the United States reveals is that the country's ruling class is suffering from an acute crisis of leadership. I am not speaking here in terms of the effectiveness of the nation's political leaders in addressing the interests of the country as a whole, however one may conceive them. I am referring to the fact that the nation's current political elite is not even adequately dealing with the narrowly-conceived interests of the ruling class itself. In other words, the people now running the country are a bunch of schlemiels, who are making a real hash of things, even from the ruling class's selfish point of view.

The question is not one merely of the Bush administration, its incompetence, venality and other distasteful traits. It is one that involves virtually the entire current political leadership, Republicans and Democrats alike, of the ruling class itself. The existence of such a class (or, as some people prefer, elite) is veiled by the country's relatively open political system—the fact that many people vote, that running for political office is at least theoretically open to all citizens of voting age, that many

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who do not belong to that class do run for office, that membership in the class is somewhat fluid, etc. But it does exist. Although it is hard to demarcate precisely, despite the efforts of Marxists, and others, such as sociologist C. Wright Mills, to do so, I believe there is a social stratum that because of its wealth and its access to power—either directly, in the holding of office, or indirectly, through its wealth, economic, political and social connections and influence—exerts effective control, most of the time, over the economic and political decisions of the country. (The caveat—“most of the time”—is what the rest of this article is about.) I do not wish to debate here the issue of whether there is such a class in the United States. But its existence is, as will be clear, an underlying assumption of this article.

The leadership crisis of the ruling class is clearest in terms of foreign policy, and here, most obviously, in Iraq. Leaving aside the questions of whether the Bush administration lied about Saddam Hussein's involvement with Al Qaeda and his possession of “weapons of mass destruction,” whether it doctored evidence to make its case, and the other collateral issues of the war, the administration's Iraq policy was and is a disaster. Handicapped by their own ignorance, arrogance and ideological blinders, Bush and his cronies assumed that the Iraqi people would welcome the United States as a liberator, and that with Saddam Hussein out of the way, the building of an American-style bourgeois democracy would be easy. Accordingly, they gave no thought to the post-invasion situation and had no plans to cope with anything, let alone the concrete conditions that developed in that country. The political scene in Iraq is now a mess; there is no sign that it will improve and no strategy that could conceivably be effective. (The idea that a newly constructed Iraqi army and police force, rife with the same tensions currently dividing the country as a whole, can defeat the insurrection and pacify Iraq when the US armed forces, the best in the world, have failed to do so is absurd.)

It is now clear that the US invasion of Iraq was a colossal mistake (leaving aside questions of justice and morality). The United States cannot feasibly get out of Iraq without having the situation there degenerate into a total disaster—a bloody holocaust, the probable direct intervention of neighboring states, such as Iran and Syria, and the possible dismemberment of the country. And given the unrest elsewhere in the Middle East—Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Egypt—there is a real danger that the situation in Iraq may lead to an explosion that engulfs the entire region. Given the importance of the area, including its role as a source of oil and its geo-strategic location, the dangers to the global interests of US imperialism are immense. I doubt this is what the Bush administration and the other supporters of the invasion in the ruling class had in mind.

(It's not as if the ruling class had no other imperialist options in Iraq. Anybody remember Muammar el-Qaddafi, the past and present president/strongman of Libya, a former sponsor of "terrorism," foe of human rights and democracy, the overall "bad boy" of the 1990s? He's still around, and as far as I know, Libya is still no Western-style democracy with an "open" political system and economy. He hasn't changed much, but he's not in the forefront in the media, and whatever else he's doing, he's no longer deemed a "terrorist threat." This transformation was not achieved through an invasion. A diplomatic policy—a combination of rewards and threats (carrots and sticks)—brought about the desired result. Such a policy was possible in Iraq—indeed, it was being applied—and it might have succeeded if there had been more time and patience, and finesse.)

The US invasion of Afghanistan is in similar, if not as obvious, trouble. Osama Bin Laden has not been found, the Taliban has not been defeated, opium production has not been stamped out, and the country has certainly not been united under an effective democratic government. Quite the contrary, the Taliban and its allies in the guerrilla struggle against predominantly US forces are winning, the US-backed government rules over only

a small and diminishing part of the country, and the opium crops are bigger than ever.

Viewed more broadly, US foreign policy has had other serious setbacks. US allies in Europe and elsewhere have been alienated, hindering the US ruling class's ability to mobilize political and material resources behind its goals and to portray its imperialist policies as humanitarian interventions. The political trend in Latin America has been moving against the United States, with leftwing populist governments being elected across the continent. And the prestige of the United States is in decline throughout the world. Increasingly, US global activities, corporate and governmental, are recognized as the imperialism they really are.

Domestic policy is also in a shambles. None of the crucial issues facing the country has been effectively dealt with and most haven't been addressed at all. Bush's pet project for education, the so called No Child Left Behind Act, has arguably (as I do argue elsewhere in this issue) made a bad situation worse, and most of the other dire problems—an economy that is weaker than it looks, the looming threat of insolvency in Social Security, a dysfunctional medical care system, a crumbling infrastructure, environmental destruction, including the United States' (very large) contribution to global warming—are not being seriously discussed. The exception, the question of illegal immigration, is being addressed, but I doubt the plan currently being discussed in Congress will solve the problem.

It's easy (and to many liberals, convenient) to think that this crisis of leadership is merely or primarily the result of an extraordinarily inept and venal Republican administration. But the Democratic opposition, now so bravely flexing its muscle, shares much of the blame. Where was the militant opposition to the invasion of Iraq before it occurred, when it was most needed? Why did the Democrats wait until after public opinion had very obviously turned against the war before doing any-thing more than carping about Bush's

China pursues its dramatic modernization. This entails risks, perhaps dire ones, for all of us, both in the US and internationally. But if one can get past the shock and terror of what this means, there is a certain perverse pleasure to be gained by watching political events unfold. The people running the country really are a passel of clods and I, for one, am enjoying watching them make fools of themselves.

handling of events there? Where are the detailed proposals to deal the situation there, and with the other problems facing the country? Even former New York governor Mario Cuomo has chided the leading con-tenders for next year's Democratic presidential nomination for playing it safe, that is, not raising serious solutions to serious problems. It is quite apparent that these people do not lead; they follow. The chief reason they failed to oppose the invasion of Iraq, aside from the not irrelevant one that they supported (and still support) its imperialist aims, is cowardice and a gross misreading of the mentality of the electorate. The Democrats have long been labeled as being "weak on national security issues." So, fearful of providing evidence for the charge, wary of what seemed to be conservative ascendancy among the voters, and stupidly believing that the invasion might actually achieve its goals, they scurried for political cover, precisely when real leadership—staunch opposition to the proposed invasion—might have made a difference. Those who expect much from the Democrats, either now or in the future, are in for serious disappointments.

What accounts for the current crisis? While the Bush administration seems particularly incompetent and the current crop of Democratic leaders appears especially cowardly, part of the cause is the result of the fact that the power of US imperialism has noticeably ebbed. This decline has been gradual, and in some ways obscured by the collapse of the former Soviet Bloc. But it is palpable, and politically astute sectors of the ruling class are aware of it. This is why previous administrations usually worked carefully to mobilize significant international support for their imperialist ventures before they undertook them. But Bush, Cheney and their advisors believed (and perhaps still believe) that this apparent recession of US power was an illusion, the result of a lack of will. All that was needed, they figured, was for the US to aggressively and self-confidently ex-

ert its authority and everything would be put right. It seems they were wrong.

Political miscalculations are more serious for imperialist nations whose power is ebbing than they might otherwise be. When a country is economically, politically and militarily strong, especially compared to its nearest rivals, it can survive its mistakes. The war in Vietnam was a real blunder, both in itself and in its effects on the country. But the United States was strong enough to recover and to maintain its global hegemony (although the war did cause long-term damage), and the ruling class was able to reassert its control over the domestic political and cultural scene. But over the years since then, US power has receded still further, and as a result, it has become much more vulnerable to errors in political judgment.

Likewise, the impact of some of a nation's longstanding cultural traits grows as the country is weakened. The people of the United States have long been characterized by an incredible ignorance of the rest of the world; most Americans speak no languages other than English, cannot identify other countries on maps, and know little or nothing about these nation's histories and cultures (indeed, most Americans are woefully ignorant of US history). This is accompanied by a tremendous amount of arrogance, usually portraying itself as patriotism: the belief that the United States and everything about it is the best in the world. Much of the political elite and the ruling class more broadly is comparably benighted. But most administrations prior to our current one had the sense to surround themselves with, and to listen to, people with some expertise on the issues. But the bravado of Bush and company knows no extremes. And this, combined with the country's weakness, has helped pave the way to disaster.

In addition to these factors, I think there is something new at work. This is that the current administration, much of the Republican party and considerable sectors of the population as a whole have become prisoners of an extremely narrow ideolog-

people, the disruption of families, etc., would be a tremendous embarrassment to the country internationally, given its claims to be the global champion of human rights. Unfortunately for the ruling class (and those of us who support legalizing undocumented workers and opening the border), the conservative rank and file of the Republican Party and a substantial chunk of the electorate as a whole has been so aroused by the issue that it's not clear if a substantial solution to the problem, from the ruling class's point of view, is politically feasible. Among other things, the current political situation, and the crisis of political leadership we have been discussing, should call into question the accuracy of notions that the state is merely a passive instrument or tool of the ruling class as a whole, in the sense that the class comes to political agreement and arrives at decisions independently of, and prior to, the political process, simply utilizing the state to implement them. To be sure, the ruling class does have its own social institutions, political and economic organizations, and publications that exist independently of the government through which it or sections of it can meet and discuss the issues it faces. But to a great degree, the ruling class is politically organized by, through and around the state. And, given the fact that it is made up of different sectors with divergent interests and motivated by varying political attitudes, and given the precise nature of the political system that has evolved over the decades, this involves considerable risks to itself. Even when it is united, the ruling class might find itself incapable of convincing a majority of the electorate to support the policies it prefers. But when it is not in agreement, it might find the state to be, in a sense, hijacked by a political faction that represents a relatively small minority of the class.

The United States' crisis of leadership is not likely to go away any time soon, if only because at least one of its fundamental causes, the decline in US imperial power, will continue, particularly as Europe emerges as a more unified power bloc and

Security never left the ground, and why the administration's steps to increase domestic "security" at the expense of civil liberties have met with so much opposition from the courts, Congress, and the media.

Unfortunately for the ruling class as a whole (and the rest of us), the nature of our political system means that they (and we) have little power to stop Bush and his fellow oafs before they can do more damage. They could impeach him, but they need true malfeasance, not merely errors or differences of opinion, to do so. The Democrats have been looking for a viable issue, but they have not found one that is likely to stick. The ruling class, or some sections of it, could also arrange to have Bush assassinated, but that involves even greater dangers than allowing Bush to remain in office for the rest of his term, leaving aside the not insignificant issue that if Bush were bumped off, Cheney—as bad or worse, and as many think, the real eminence grise behind Bush—would take over. So they'd have to get rid of both Bush and Cheney; it starts to get pretty complicated.) So, the best option for the ruling class is to try to contain the damage the administration does, while doing what they can to ensure that a more astute person wins in 2008. But here, too, they are hemmed in by the nature of the political system, particularly by the fact that both the Democratic and Republican parties are dominated internally by rank and filers who are more radical, in their respective directions, than the electorate as a whole and most of the ruling class itself.

The nature of the problem is suggested by what is happening in the debate over illegal immigration. There is little doubt that the overwhelming majority of the ruling class elite is not in favor of expelling all the undocumented workers from the US. Economically, it would be a total disaster (even now, whole sectors of the economy—agriculture and home construction, for two—are dependent on immigrant labor), while the social consequences of the attempt to do so, including a massive escalation of raids, the jailing and deportation of millions of

ical outlook, a particular variant of conservatism. This standpoint is the not-fully-integrated melding of a variety of currents: the traditional conservatism of Russell Kirk and William Buckley's *National Review*, the "neo-conservatism" of the former Communists, socialists and liberals once around *Commentary* magazine, the conservative (once liberal) economic theorists such as Milton Friedman and the so-called "University of Chicago school" of economists, as well as the socially conservative trends represented by preachers such as Jerry Falwell (fortunately, now deceased), Pat Robertson and their offspring. Most of these streams developed over the past five decades, largely in response to the New Deal liberalism that seemed so hegemonic after World War II. Partly because of the strength of that hegemony, the evolving conservative movement over the years became increasingly strident. Central to this growing militancy was the fact that the movement fed powerfully on those layers of the population that felt mistreated or ignored by liberal policies, and terrified by the political, social and cultural changes the country (including the decline in its power) was undergoing. These layers now dominate the rank and file of the Republican Party.

Ironically, the militancy of the conservative movement was intensified by the political victories of some of its champions among the politicians. By and large, when these figures were elected to office, they did not systematically promote conservative policies. From the point of view of the conservative purists and the rank and file, they "sold out." This was perhaps clearest in the case of Richard Nixon, who ran as a conservative but governed as a moderate, and in some areas as a downright liberal. For example, in an attempt to deal with the "stagflation" (the rare combination of slow economic growth and inflation) that plagued the early 1970s, Nixon instituted wage-price controls and declared, "We are all Keynesians now," a reference to the liberal economic theories of John Maynard Keynes, who proposed government intervention in the econ-

omy as a corrective to the malfunctioning of the market. In foreign affairs, he opened the doors to a rapprochement with Communist China, then the bugbear of the political right wing. Ronald Reagan, too, ran as a conservative but in many respects governed as a centrist, running up huge government deficits and engaging in a “realist” foreign policy. (Remember the Iran-Contra scandal—secretly selling arms to the revolutionary regime in Iran to fund a right-wing guerrilla war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua?) Reagan was and still is held in high esteem by many conservatives, (among other things, he is falsely believed to have single-handedly brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union). But the “Reagan revolution” was perceived to have been aborted, by, among other things, the policies of George H.W. Bush, another figure who ran as a conservative but pursued centrist policies; and then, much more so, obviously, by the two Clinton administrations (who, despite his liberal rhetoric, also governed as a centrist). Given the growing power of the right wing in the Republican party, sooner or later, it seemed inevitable that a president would be elected who really believed the conservative rhetoric and would actually seek to implement a right-wing program: that president is George W. Bush.

Aside from the factors just discussed, the election of Bush in 2000 (and his reelection in 2004) reveals some noteworthy characteristics of the political system in the United States. I am not here talking about the questionable nature of Bush’s victory, the role of the electoral college, the court decisions, etc., that gave him the presidency. I am referring to the very nature of bourgeois democracy. Such a system offers many advantages to the ruling class. Probably most important, by allowing participation—from voting to running for office—by broad sectors of the population, it gives the illusion that the country is run in a truly democratic fashion, either that the people actually govern, or at least that they can make their opinions known and have their needs met through the political system.

Center, and believing that the conservative upswing was the beginning of a long-term realignment of the US political scene (as Roosevelt’s had been for liberalism), Bush began to implement a radical conservative program. In foreign policy, this included, among other things, the bald and militant assertion of US military power (in Afghanistan and Iraq), the total alignment of the United States behind Israel, a rejection of the European ruling elites’ right to influence or even to criticize US actions, and an antagonistic attitude toward the UN and other international organizations. Domestically, Bush’s program entailed the dismantling of Social Security (when Barry Goldwater raised the idea in the 1964 presidential election, most of the country thought he was a nut), the regimentation of the country’s public school system through the so-called No Child Left Behind Act (which many in the system believe to be designed to prepare the ground for its weakening if not dismantling through the use of vouchers), the drastic increase in the ability of the government to spy on US citizens, the realignment of the Supreme Court through the appointment of conservative justices to replace the liberals who retired, and through that, the rolling back of abortion rights, environmental protections, civil liberties, and the separation of church and state, among other things.

I do not believe these goals were or are supported by the majority of the country’s ruling class. This is certainly the case in foreign policy; even before the invasion of Iraq was launched, elements in the country’s foreign policy establishment spoke out forcibly against it, while today, the disastrous results of Bush’s program are glaringly obvious. (If anything, the Baker Commission, the so-called Iraq Study Group, represented the efforts of the mainstream of the ruling class to try to salvage an operation that had gone so awry. Its tone revealed this: it had the character of parents admonishing wayward offspring for their naughty behavior.) The same is true of domestic policy. This is one of the reasons why Bush’s plan for Social

among other things, that he would be able to get back the gambling casinos Castro had closed down.) Kennedy also contemplated removing Hoover, who had immense power over the political elite itself through his illicit surveillance (photographs, wiretaps and bugs) of their private lives, and who himself was a creature of the Mafia. (For decades he denied the very existence of organized crime, while he met secretly with mob boss Frank Costello, who told him which races to bet on—they were fixed—at the racetrack. The mob, it is alleged, had photographs of Hoover and his long-time lover Clyde Tolson in compromised positions.)

Precisely why Kennedy took all these steps—out of concern for the long-term interests of the ruling class and the system as a whole or merely to increase his own power, or some combination of the two—is not clear. (The entire Kennedy family was long known in the ruling class for its unscrupulousness and total lack of loyalty to anybody or anything but its own interests and power) Whatever the case, in carrying out or attempting to carry out these and similar policies, he antagonized many if not most sectors of the ruling class, making the tactical mistake of going after too many enemies at the same time. He thus set himself up for his assassination in November 1963 (by the Mafia and elements in the CIA, in my opinion, the cover-up being arranged or connived in by all who had dirty laundry to keep out of the public eye), and his replacement by the much more pliable Lyndon Johnson.

The present Bush administration illustrates the same basic dynamic, but this time involving a conservative, rather than a liberal, administration. Bush, you may remember, ran under false pretenses, claiming to be a “compassionate conservative,” (aka a moderate), slipped into office on a questionable vote count, an even more questionable Supreme Court decision, and a still more questionable failure to contest on the part of the Democratic Party. Then, basing himself on the patriotic fervor engendered by the attack on the World Trade

Such a setup, along with the two-party system that has evolved in the US, offers several positive advantages from the point of view of the country’s rulers. First, as suggested above, it hides the very existence of a ruling class—a social layer that does, in fact, run the country. Secondly, it blunts political opposition, tending to move political debate and, even more so, implemented policies, toward the center, while rendering radical alternatives virtually irrelevant. Thirdly, it serves as a kind of feedback mechanism, allowing the elite to gauge public opinion and take steps to mollify it before it gets out of control. Fourth, bourgeois democracy offers the different, and often competing, sectors of the ruling class a way to articulate and fight for their specific interests and come to an agreement about which policies are to be implemented.

But bourgeois democracy does have its drawbacks from the vantage point of the ruling class. Because of its relative openness, the fact that it involves large sectors of the population (roughly 50%), and that it enables different ruling class factions to mobilize popular support for their programs, it raises the possibility that someone may be elected who implements, or tries to implement, policies that are not supported by significant sections of the ruling class or even by a majority of that class, and which, for a variety of reasons, they are not able to block. Several administrations in recent US history reveal this dynamic.

As I see it, the administrations of Franklin D. Roosevelt constituted such a scenario. Without going into details, it is worth noting that a much of the US ruling class (and certainly its corporate leaders) opposed Roosevelt’s New Deal policies, particularly its social legislation and the institutionalization of workers’ rights to organize and strike. But given the crisis of the country, Roosevelt’s personal popularity (which he so astutely cultivated through his use of the media, particularly radio), and the militant mobilization of millions of workers and others in strikes, mass organizations and demonstrations,

the capitalist efforts to thwart Roosevelt's policies failed. Roosevelt's programs did not end the Depression of the 1930s (many economists think they made the situation worse); the mobilization involved in World War II did. But socially, Roosevelt's policies were critical in blunting the radical mobilization of the time, institutionalizing it and ultimately destroying it. Thus, Roosevelt very effectively managed a social crisis that was a serious threat to the ruling class, and strengthened and stabilized US capitalism as a whole. But in many senses, he had to do this against the opposition of much, if not most, of the ruling class itself.

The Kennedy years represent a similar phenomenon, but with a different outcome. In 1960, John F. Kennedy ran on a political platform that was virtually indistinguishable from that of Nixon. Aside from rhetoric and packaging, he offered nothing new. If anything, he ran to the right of Nixon on foreign policy, claiming the existence of a so-called "missile gap" (the Russians supposedly had more intercontinental ballistic missiles than the US, a charge later shown to be false), and accusing the Eisenhower administration, in which Nixon was vice-president, of allowing Fidel Castro to come to power in Cuba and doing nothing to overthrow him. (Kennedy knew that the administration had secretly ordered the CIA to prepare an invasion of the island nation and that Nixon, for obvious reasons, could not reveal it.) Kennedy won the election by a handful of votes (with a significant assist, in both the primaries and the general election, by the Mafia), but once in office, he developed a broad popular following, primarily through the manipulation of the media, in a manner similar to that of Roosevelt. (Where Roosevelt pioneered the use of the radio, Kennedy, with his youthful good looks, had TV. He was also the darling of much of the nation's print media and the intellectual class as a whole.)

During his first three years in office, Kennedy mostly pursued a mainstream Cold War-era agenda, in both domestic and

international policy. But some crucial events convinced him to change direction. These included: the catastrophic defeat of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and the failure of the CIA's mob-assisted efforts to kill Castro afterward; the US-Soviet missile crisis in 1962; the CIA-directed assassination of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem and the growth of the civil rights movement, culminating in the huge March on Washington, both in 1963. In foreign policy, Kennedy moved to ease tensions in the Cold War, signing a nuclear test ban treaty with the Russians and removing Titan missiles from Turkey, in exchange for a pledge not to invade Cuba. He expressed unease over the liquidation of Diem and the overall course, and even the viability, of the war in Vietnam. He fired long-term CIA chief Allen Dulles and brought the agency more directly under his control.

Domestically, Kennedy began to move toward allying himself with the civil rights movement and to curb the power of certain sectors of the capitalist class. Among other things, he eliminated the 27 1/2% oil depletion allowance (essentially, a huge tax write-off) enjoyed by the oil companies. He intervened in a national steel strike in 1961, forcing the steel companies, then among the most powerful corporate interests in the country, to rollback their recent price increases and to come to an agreement with the United Steelworkers union. Through his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, he attacked the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the largest labor organization in the country, and its independent (and Mafia-connected) leader, Jimmy Hoffa. He began a ferocious campaign against the Mafia, which at that point dominated whole sectors of the US economy and with which virtually all major political figures, including Kennedy himself (and his father), senator and later vice president Hubert Humphrey, Nixon, FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, vice president Lyndon Johnson, and untold numbers of others, were affiliated. (The Mafia, remember, had helped get Kennedy elected, hoping,