

Halfway There: An interpretation of the 2004 election

For a discussion about the election

November 8, 2004

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The main thing I see from the election is reconfirmation of my contention that one of the two major political parties is well along the way towards a fundamental re-visioning and restructuring of the two party system (as happens off and on during American history), while the other party is not.

Republicans have redefined themselves very successfully as theocratic fascists. They are no longer even remotely a conservative party, and they are no longer the party of (neoliberal) Big Business. Many true conservatives and neoliberals who initially supported Bush have deserted the party, or would, but there is no place for them to go, and so they voted out of loyalty, inertia, or the willful suspension of disbelief, but not out of support for Bush's policies.

Democrats need to create a new popular vision that appeals to neoliberals (in economics) and social liberals (in human rights and lifestyle). They might start by learning from what the Republican Party did when it too was in shambles and defeat.

Democrats (and progressives/liberals generally) ruled America from the 1930s until 1980 (Eisenhower and especially Nixon were liberals just like Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Carter). Liberals believed they would rule forever (The Left was afraid they would). But following Reagan's election in 1980, Newt Gingrich began the then seemingly impossible task of creating a new Republican party that was not just a pale imitation of the Democrats. He was entirely successful against all odds because he had a clear and compelling vision, and a brilliant and effective strategy which he patiently implemented.

Old timers will recall my reporting to the Department on a meeting I had had in Washington with Newt Gingrich in June 1981 in which his plans, all of which came true, were about to be revealed to the then newly-elected Republican President, Ronald Reagan. Instead of being an ineffectual imitation of the Democratic Party, he vowed to turn the Republican Party, as he told me, into "The Majority Party for the Rest of My Life." Though Newt himself fell from power in disgrace, and helped re-elect Clinton--who was himself nothing but a pretty Republican clone--the party fully achieved Newt's vision, even though my colleagues here found it totally laughable nonsense at the time, thereby fulfilling Dator's Second Law of the Futures which is that "any useful statement about the futures should appear to be ridiculous" (For the details, see, "Newt's Sweet Dreams," <<http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/dator/governance/Newt.html>>).

In the 1990s, during the height of Clinton's presidency, the people who created Dubya, ruled the last four years, and so brilliantly manufactured the 2004 electoral victory, met as the "Project for a New American Century", developing a vision and strategy for a Republican victory. They signed and announced their vision in 1997. When Bush and

Cheney were declared victors by the Supreme Court in 2000, members of the New American Century project occupied all the important positions of power in Bush's administration, and began implementing their vision from the very beginning, and with fearful gusto after 9/11 (For more information see, "Mortgage Banking for the New American Empire, and other futures," *Foresight*, Vol. 6 No. 1, 2004, pp. 13-18, also < <http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/dator/unions/mortgage.html>>).

Democrats, on the other hand, have not framed an inspiring vision and effective strategy in response to any of this. Instead, they have in essence simply said that they can achieve the Republican's agenda better. This is what Clinton said and did with some success; what the Democrats did in Congress during Bush's first four years with no success, and what Kerry did (and the Democrats did by nominating him) with tragic results.

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Anxiety was growing among the American people well before 9/11. In 1999, following the tremendous and unanticipated success of the "unlikely bedfellows" who joined together to demonstrate so massively and impressively in Seattle against the World Trade Organization, I suggested in lectures here and elsewhere that the two political parties were restructuring. It turned out that I was half right. The Republicans were restructuring, moving even more swiftly down the path Newt laid out for them, but the Democrats have not reorganized or refocused at all.

In Hawaii, Democrats have been utterly reactive as well as. Instead of remaining loyal to the roots of the "Democratic Revolution" of the 1950s by redefining those values and strategies for the present, they have become for the most part mere powerholders and Republican wannabees. That has kept most of them in power, which is all they want, but otherwise ineffective.

For example, Ben Cayetano entered the political spotlight as a kind of outsider, from a marginalized ethnic group, who many of us actively supported because we hoped he would restore the party to its liberal, if more local, roots. So when Cayetano became governor, and was faced with a huge deficit along with a major global economic turndown that threatened Hawaii's dependence on tourism, I urged him to use the opportunity to bring the people of Hawaii together to develop a new vision of its traditional progressive values. Instead, he turned to the business elites who came up with the infamous, but very accurate, "Thumbs Up Hawaii!" PR campaign obsessed with bringing the tourists back and relying on the military, with a tiny fillip of what was called "high tech", and to the exclusion of any other fundamentally different and compelling economic or social options.

If Democrats care about the future of America and its people, and not just about being in political office, then it is time we develop a compelling new vision to counter that of the Republicans. There are more than enough Americans out there waiting for it. Many reluctantly voted for Kerry as "anybody but Bush" while others either did not vote at all or decided ultimately to support the President in hopes his fantasies could come true since the Democrats had no fantasies or facts to share at all.

I do have some ideas of what a positive, popular, and honest Democratic vision might look like, but that will have to wait for another time.