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United States

# Elections and Regime Crisis

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### **WILL THE DEMOCRATS "regain control of Congress"? Will Joseph Lieberman change parties? Will Hillary Clinton be the Democratic frontrunner for 2008? How much does any of this matter?**

The November election will highlight, as usual, two sets of questions - the sound-and-fury ones that generate most of the campaign rhetoric and media speculation; and the crucial issues that will be generally be ignored, except for the one that simply can't be skipped over: the war and American defeat in Iraq. Meanwhile, the new Middle East war - Israel's assault on Lebanon - has proven what the Democrats are: as rabid a war party, as cynical and careless (especially with other nations' lives) as anything the Republicans have to offer.

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mission\\_accomplished2.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mission_accomplished2.jpg)]

#### **Iraq war: 'bleeding the Bush regime to death'**

The superficial mudslinging debates will feature such topics as whether the Democrats are "soft on terror" or the Republicans "incompetent" in failing to find bin Laden or letting North Korea go nuclear; which is the party of "irresponsible spending" on social programs or tax cuts; who's best at "securing the border;" which politicians promote "traditional values" and who's most corrupt (between which there is, admittedly, a strong positive correlation), and various other rubbish.

The issues to be debated poorly-or-not-at-all involve the explosive health care crisis, the immediate prospect of a catastrophic wider war with Iran; the hemorrhaging of decent-paying jobs in the U.S. economy; catastrophic climate change, which proceeds apace as our rulers wage endless war for the oil-fuelled empire; electoral rigging and the stripping away of voting rights; the step-by-step replacement of democratic rights by presidentialist decree with the assent of Congress and the courts - in short, most of the questions that shape real people's lives.

There's no doubt that mainstream national politics in America is polarized, bitterly divided and incredibly vicious. At the same time, it's almost devoid of substance, except for a few issues like preserving the badly shredded fabric of abortion rights, where the Democrats remain under pressure from the women's movement. Underlying the general triviality of the official debate is a dual reality: the collapse of public confidence in the Bush regime, accompanied by the extreme decay of the Democratic Party as a meaningful opposition party, i.e. a force that can seriously confront the political drive toward the far right (to the degree it even wants to do so).

Some historical perspective: The last time a Republican presidency was so discredited by a failed war, revelations of criminal conspiracy and global economic uncertainty was the crisis of the Richard Nixon regime in 1973-4 at the height of the Watergate scandal. The difference between then and now lies above all in the relative strength of social movements - antiwar, civil rights and above all labor - in that period, compared to the present level of struggle, above all the incipient collapse of the U.S. labor movement after three decades of a corporate and government offensive against working class people in America. (The latter experience is summarized in Steve Early's essay in this issue on the past quarter-century of strike activity.)

The Democrats retain an enormous electoral apparatus, but their social base is highly segmented. Organized labor, such as it is, remains predominantly in the Democratic fold although this support is somewhat eroded; African-American voters are overwhelmingly Democratic, which is why rightwing voter fraud and intimidation is directed principally against them; Republican inroads into the Latino vote are likely to be blunted by the sheer viciousness of the right wing's anti-immigrant crusade. But much of the Democrats' base is now in the white suburban "socially liberal, fiscally conservative" sector, whose loyalties are fickle and diluted.

Before 1968, to be sure, the Democrats' hegemony in Congress still rested on the most rotten of foundations, the racist Dixiecrat South. By the time of Nixon's fall, however, that segment was moving into the Republican column where it has now become firmly planted. Despite this, Nixon's failures in war, domestic crimes and the onset of economic crisis appeared to be propelling the Democratic Party to the stature of a hegemonic national party - an opportunity that came in with the 1974 midterm election and quickly passed after 1976 with the debacles of the Jimmy Carter administration. Above all, as a loyal party of American capitalism, the Democrats fully participated in the restructuring that attacked the working class and set in motion the destruction of the movement that was the party's main base.

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/clinton\\_Lieberman.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/clinton_Lieberman.jpg)]

### **Hillary Clinton with Joseph Lieberman (far right)**

The Democratic Party establishment today is fractured over the Iraq war - with John Kerry ("I opposed the war before I voted for it, before I voted against it") having finally gotten around to opposing it, after a fashion, while Senators Hillary Clinton and Joseph Lieberman continue to be so committed to this failed imperial venture that they are being challenged from the party's base, which hates the war, and in Lieberman's case actually dumped by Democratic primary voters. In any case, unlike their voters, the Democrats do not want to stop the Iraq war - cynically, they want the Bush administration to absorb the blame for "bungling" it and for the ongoing carnage; and the congressional Democrats' foaming-at-the-mouth performance during the destruction of Lebanon shows they hope to share the "credit" for lining up support for war with Syria and Iran.

If the Democrats aren't opposing the war, what then are they arguing about? An important New York Times article by Robin Toner gives some of the answers ("Optimistic, Democrats Debate the Party's Vision. Seeking Big Goals and a Clear Alternative to Conservatism," May 9, 2006: A1, A18). The party's "analysts, both liberals and moderates, are convinced that the Democrats face a moment of historic opportunity...But some of these analysts argue that the party needs something more than a pastiche of policy proposals. It needs a broader vision, a narrative, they say, to return to power and govern effectively - what some describe as an unapologetic appeal to the "common good," to big goals like expanding affordable health coverage and to occasional sacrifice for the sake of the nation as a whole."

A variety of ideas are out there. Thomas Friedman, the Times' designated apostle of globalization, proposes financing economic renovation and reviving national purpose by taxing gasoline up to \$4 a gallon. Others suggest a return to muscular Cold War liberalism, represented by The New Republic, where Democrats would promote tough foreign and military (but multilateralist) policies while reviving social programs at home. On the right, The Third Way and its ideological cousin the Democratic Leadership Council promote a centrist "middle class" perspective in place of fighting for "special interests" like labor and people of color. On the liberal wing of the spectrum stands Michael Tomasky of [The American Prospect](#), whose views are summarized by Robin Toner:

Mr. Tomasky argues that the Democratic Party needs to stand for more than diversity and rights; it needs to return to its New Deal, New Frontier and Great Society roots and run as the party of the common good - the philosophy, he says, that brought the nation Social Security, the Marshall Plan, the Peace Corps and civil rights legislation. After years of what he calls "rapacious social Darwinism" under Mr. Bush, Mr. Tomasky argues that the country is ready for the idea that "we're all in this together - postindustrial America, the globalized world and especially the post-9/11 world in which free peoples have to unite to fight new threats - together."

Tomasky's liberal enthusiasm evades at least two fundamental questions. First: What is meant by the "new threats" that "free peoples" have to fight "together"? Is it the "threat" of Iran? Of immigrants? Something else from outside? Or is the main threat from inside: the assault on democracy, civil liberties and workers' rights mounted by the Bush regime, the right wing and corporate America, the USA PATRIOT Act and domestic spying, to say nothing of Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and secret renditions, on which most Democrats have nothing to say?

Second: What about the war? Just because it may conveniently bleed the Bush administration to death doesn't mean the question will go away for the Democrats. It's not just that American voters will want to know, not only in 2006 but also 2008, what the Democrats actually think about these issues. The fact that the Democratic Party will not demand ending the war means that any promises it makes to fix a broken society are lies, which cannot be kept. A party that doesn't oppose the current war, and the next one, has no claim to represent the antiwar movement - or to lead the country. The fact that the Democrats intend to inherit power as the Bush regime falls apart from its own imperial arrogance and incompetence doesn't mean they can or will clean up the mess it leaves behind.

Our purpose here, in any case, is not to advise or salvage a pseudo-opposition party that has essentially given up on reform, ceded the ideological initiative to the Republican right wing, and pretty much allowed the Bush gang to get away with anything. For our part, we're looking for an escape from the quicksand of a rotten two-party system. At a time when organized labor is at its weakest since the 1920s, we look to the promise represented by the explosive new immigrant workers' rights movement. The magnificent self-organization of this past spring's immigrant rights mobilizations shows that the situation is rather precarious for both parties.

First and foremost, it's social movements like this that represent a hopeful future - and second, initiatives that can give them an organized political expression. That's the potential represented by Green party campaigns, some of which we cover in this issue, in states like California, Wisconsin and elsewhere. We need the kind of party these campaigns point toward - a party that will be genuinely independent of corporate power, with no commitment to America-as-world-ruler, loyal to the real needs of real people instead of the elites and the military machine.

It's no longer about a lesser evil. It's about the politics we need for human survival.