

## "The 2004 Elections in the United States"

George W. Bush has been reelected President of the United States, and he has increased his margin of support in both houses of the Congress. What happens now - in the United States, in the world? We have to start any analysis with an appraisal of Bush. Bush is by far the most right-wing president the U.S. has had since the Great Depression. And he is the most aggressively reactionary president in the history of the United States. I am using the term "reactionary" in the classic political meaning of the term - someone who wishes to turn the clock back politically.

Bush has already demonstrated in his first term in office that he doesn't intend to be a compromiser or a moderate in the pursuit of his program. Rather, he seeks to use a bulldozer to attain his objectives, riding over opposition forces and even weak members of his own camp. He has already said of his reelection that he has earned political capital and that he intends to spend it.

Within the Republican party, Bush has three different constituencies: the Christian right, big business, and the militarists. Each is feeling its oats right now, and putting pressure on Bush to pursue its interests. Their priorities are however quite different, and none of the three constituencies gives more than nominal support to the concerns of the other two.

The Christian right is basically concerned about issues internal to the U.S. They have concentrated their fire on two current questions: gay marriage and abortion. What they want is to render impossible gay marriage. To do this definitively, they need a constitutional amendment. And they wish to outlaw abortion, which requires that the Supreme Court undo the decision called *Roe v. Wade*. To do this definitively requires new appointments to the Supreme Court such that there can be a 5-4 vote for such a reversal. At the moment, three justices are ready to vote that way, but one of them is about to retire. Bush therefore needs to appoint three justices committed to overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

But this is only the beginning of the Christian right agenda. They wish to undo the entire liberalization of mores that has been one of the marks of the twentieth century, not only in the U.S. but also in Europe and much of the rest of the world. In the United States, were they to get their way on gay marriage and abortion, they would next work on banning contraception, making homosexual sex illegal, limiting or even ending divorce, and for some of them forcing women out of the work force and maybe even the vote. Another part of their agenda is pushing the clock back on racism, and reestablishing the United States as a country socially and politically dominated by White Protestants. They would begin by ending all forms of affirmative action and proceed from there to immigration issues and then perhaps to voting rights. This would undo the entire social evolution of the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century.

This of course expresses the intentions of the most extreme group. But it should be noted that, for the moment, this extreme group controls most of the political structures of the Christian right, and plays a very large role in the Republican party. Their political strategy is to get courts that will allow legislatures to do these things, appointing persons young enough to guarantee an institutionalization of these decisions, and then to elect such legislatures.

Can they do this? The Christian right is certainly in a better position than it has ever been to

get their kinds of judiciary appointed. They might even be able to get a constitutional amendment, although this requires a two-thirds vote of the Senate plus confirmation in three-quarters of the states. It will not be easy, but is by no means impossible, especially if Bush throws his weight behind the effort.

Needless to say, such an effort will be fought politically, and will upset the still important minority of so-called moderate Republicans. Bush will support the Christian right, provided that it doesn't jeopardize what he wants to do on the economic front, which is more important to him personally and of course to his big business constituency. What do economic conservatives want? They also want to push the clock back - on taxation, on environmental regulation, on legal suits against them, on health costs. On taxation, it is simple: they want to shift the taxation burden from the rich to the non-rich. They have been pursuing this objective in many ways: lowering tax rates for the top categories, ending taxes on dividends, and the so-called reforms of social security and medical insurance. The immediate objective is to make permanent the major tax cuts of the first Bush administration, and to permit opting out of the social security program via so-called individual accounts. The latter would remove younger, better-off persons from being contributors to the fund that now serves to pay the retirement accounts. Further down the line might be the elimination altogether of social security (an achievement of the Roosevelt administration in 1935) and beyond that of the income tax (legalized in 1913 by constitutional amendment). Government income could then be assured either by a flat tax or by a national sales tax, both of them highly regressive.

On the front of the environment, most of the Bush agenda will be pursued by executive fiat, although they will still try to get the Alaska pipeline through the legislature. They are counting on the transformed courts not to stop them. The same is true of their efforts to constrain so-called class action suits by which big business is held to account for its misdeeds. Here Bush will try to enact "tort reform," limiting the amounts of financial punishment the courts can impose. And of course Bush is committed to do nothing to constrain the pharmaceutical companies from their indecent level of profits, even as he tries to enact so-called reforms of medicare that would in fact reduce real benefits.

This too will be fought politically. The major constraint on the Bush administration will come less from the Democrats than from the more sophisticated capitalist strata, who are worrying these days about a possible meltdown of the dollar and a monstrous government debt, growing by leaps and bounds, both of which could result in a disaster for the stock market. Some of them are beginning to say that, if these changes are to proceed, the U.S. government must cut its costs. And the only place it could cut a sizeable amount in a short run is in the military budget, which brings us to the third constituency, the militarists (including the neo-cons).

The militarists want to go back to the days, more recent, when the United States was the unquestioned hegemonic power in the world, when it could dictate what should happen everywhere, or almost everywhere. This constituency took top place in the first Bush administration, and the question is whether they can maintain that slot in the second Bush administration. The Iraq war, it is clear, has not gone the way the militarists and the neo-cons had hoped and predicted. And they are running into difficulty at home, not merely with the antiwar movement, but with conservative and centrist forces, who are bemoaning the folly and the economic cost of the invasion. It is also clear that the armed forces themselves, while they are always happy to have more money for their hardware, are quite grumpy about being caught, once again, in a military conflict that they are far from certain to win. They fear the

backlash that withdrawal would cause the armed forces themselves. The top leaders of the armed forces remember Vietnam; they were all junior officers then.

The civilian militarists seem to want to take a fast flight forward - invade Iran, invade Cuba. This is however the arena in which the Bush agenda seems least likely to succeed, or even to be tried. Aside from the increasing worldwide hostility to the U.S. as a "rogue state" (Hungary chose the day after the U.S. election to announce it was withdrawing its troops from Iraq), the foot-dragging of the top military will find considerable support among the big business constituency. They are aghast at the continuing financial drain of the wars, which threatens their ability to get the economic changes they want.

What we can expect from Bush is full speed ahead. But he risks tripping over divisions in his own camp as well as major embarrassment in the world arena, forcing a withdrawal from Iraq. The net result of that could be both a very strong antiwar movement in the U.S., which could revitalize the left, accompanied by a strong revival of isolationism, which historically had a base in both the left and the right. In the long run, thus, the Bush agenda has poor prospects in the world-system. But for the moment, it has quite good prospects on internal questions within the United States. We may indeed get a judicial system that will force social life backward. And if we do, the polarization of political life of which everyone is talking may escalate into serious internal levels of conflict. The United States is the big loser of the 2004 elections; the world may actually be a gainer.

by Immanuel Wallerstein