

What Difference Will a Democratic Congress Make ?

It now seems quite likely, short of a major miracle for the Republicans, that the Democrats will win at least one, and probably both, houses of the U.S. Congress in the elections on Nov. 7. What difference will that make? I should say that I personally will vote the Democratic ticket. But like a lot of people, I will vote it primarily as a negative vote against George W. Bush and secondarily against the Republican majority in both houses. I shall do this for many reasons, but first of all because I think the invasion of Iraq was immoral, counterproductive, and in general a fiasco - for the United States, for Iraq, and for the entire world. There are many other complaints I have about the current regime - its attacks on the fundamental liberties of the American people, its retrogressive domestic economic and social policies, and its inept and unwise foreign policy in general. But Iraq tops them all as a reason. So I shall vote in protest, and to try to stop things from getting even worse.

But what will a Democratic Congress do that is better? That, as everyone has remarked, is not at all clear. Indeed, one has to doubt that the Democrats collectively have a really better foreign policy to offer. The primary problem of the leadership of the Democratic party is that they believe, at least as much as the Republicans, that the United States is the center of the world, the font of wisdom, the great defender of world freedom - in short, a deeply virtuous nation in a dangerous world.

Worst of all, they seem to believe that, merely by purging the element of exaggerated unilateralism practiced by the current regime, they will be able to restore the United States to a position of centrality in the world-system, and regain the support of their erstwhile allies and supporters, first of all in western Europe and then everywhere else in the world. They seem really to believe that it's a matter of form, not substance, and that the fault of the Bush regime is that it wasn't good enough at diplomacy.

It's true that not all Democrats feel that way, and indeed for that matter not all Republicans and independents. But at this moment, those who are ready to take a real look at the fallacies of U.S. policies are a minority - furthermore, a minority without a clear agenda themselves and certainly without a major political leader to express an alternate view.

So what will happen? It is probably, not certainly, the case that the United States will be forced to withdraw from Iraq before the presidential election in 2008. It is also almost certainly the case that the Republicans will blame the Democrats for "losing" the war, and the Democrats will say it isn't so. But beyond the usual political claptrap, the withdrawal will come as a deep shock to the American people, even if a majority will see no alternative.

One has to put such a withdrawal in the context of wars the United States has fought since 1945. The Korean War and the first Gulf War ended at the starting line. Neither side really won. The most important war for the United States - in terms of its geopolitical impact, its economic cost, and the emotional involvement of the American people - was Vietnam. And that war, the United States lost. The result has been a deep cleavage in the American people - about "who" lost the war, and whether the war could have been "won," had other policies prevailed.

The so-called Vietnam syndrome has never been healed. With the attacks of September 11, 2001, there was a patriotic upsurge among the American people, and the country seemed

temporarily reunified. But George Bush has squandered all that, and no Democratic president can resurrect it. Withdrawal from Iraq will, I predict, be even more traumatic than the flight from Saigon in 1975. Two defeats will be devastating and also persuasive of the real limits of U.S. power.

There are really only two possibilities at that point. One possibility is that there occurs a sort of profound soul-searching which would lead the United States to reevaluate its self-image, its sense of what is possible in the world-system now and in the future, and what kind of values it really believes in. If that happens, maybe forces within the Democratic Party will come forward to incarnate this reevaluation. Or maybe the whole political framework of the United States and its parties will change to reflect such a reevaluation.

But of course there is a second possibility. It is that the nation is overcome with deep anger about the "loss" of its primacy, will seek scapegoats (and find them), and eventually move in the direction of gutting the U.S. Constitution and the liberties it presumes to defend. Something like that happened in Weimar Germany. And while the situation is different in many respects, and while I am not predicting in any sense the emergence of a Nazi party, nonetheless it will be a grievous disaster for the United States and the world if the United States moves to any significant degree in this direction.

It is what the United States thinks about itself and does about itself that matters, not only for the United States but also for the rest of the world. For a wounded elephant can indeed go on a rampage. On the other hand, one can think of times when the rude shock of the kind that a defeat in Iraq would inflict could have the salutary effect of reviving the best in the American tradition - that of a libertarian, socially-conscious people who would once again welcome, in the words engraved on the Statue of Liberty, "the huddled masses yearning to be free."

by Immanuel Wallerstein