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## THE YEAR OF SURRENDERING QUIETLY

**E**VERY FOUR YEARS, liberals unhitch the cart and put it in front of the horse, arguing that the only way to a better tomorrow is to vote for the Democratic nominee. But unless the nominee and Congress are pushed forward by social currents too strong for them to ignore or defy, nothing will alter the default path chosen by the country's supreme commanders and their respective parties. In the American Empire of today, that path is never towards the good. Our task is not to dither in distraction over the lesser of two evil prospects, which will only turn out to be a detour along the same highway.

As now constituted, presidential contests, focused almost exclusively on the candidates of the two major parties, are worse than useless in furnishing any opportunity for national debate. Consider the number of issues on which there is tacit agreement between the Democratic and Republican parties, either as a matter of principle or with an expedient nod-and-wink that, beyond *pro forma* sloganeering, these are not matters suitable to be discussed in any public forum: the role of the Federal Reserve; trade policy; economic redistribution; the role and budget of the CIA and other intelligence agencies (almost all military); nuclear disarmament; reduction of the military budget and the allocation of military procurement; roles and policies of the World Bank, IMF, WTO; crime, punishment and the prison explosion; the war on drugs; corporate welfare; energy policy; forest policy; the destruction of small farmers and ranchers; Israel; the corruption of the political system; the occupation of Iraq. The most significant outcome of the electoral process is usually imposed on prospective voters weeks or months ahead of polling day—

namely, the consensus between the supposed adversaries as to what is off the agenda.

To be sure, there are the two parties who vituperate against each other in great style, but mostly this is only for show, for purposes of assuaging blocs of voters in the home district while honouring the mandate of those paying for the carousel. In the House, on issues like dumping the us Constitution in the trash can of the Patriot Act, there are perhaps thirty representatives from both sides of the aisle prepared to deviate from establishment policy. The low water mark came on September 14, 2002, when a joint resolution of Congress authorizing the president to ‘use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001’ drew only one No, from Barbara Lee, the Democratic congresswoman from Oakland. A stentorian July 2004 endorsement of Bush’s support for Sharon’s ‘peace plan’ by the House of Representatives elicited 407 ayes and 9 lonely noes.<sup>1</sup>

### *Imperial entropy*

On the calendar of standard-issue American politics, the quadrennial nominations and presidential contests have offered, across the past forty

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<sup>1</sup> Calls to arms seldom find much resistance among the prudent legislators. Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening were the only two in the upper chamber to vote against the Tonkin Gulf resolution in 1964. In 2003 we heard an eloquent echo of those two from Robert Byrd, and from one or two others including Ted Kennedy. But entropy is flattening the landscape relentlessly. Byrd, of West Virginia, is 86. Ernie Hollings of South Carolina is heading out to pasture, pursued by the curses of the Israel lobby for having dared to kick up his heels earlier this year, writing in a column for the *Charleston Post Courier* in May that ‘Bush felt tax cuts would hold his crowd together, and spreading democracy in the Mideast to secure Israel would take the Jewish vote from the Democrats’. Congress is an infinitely drearier, more conformist place than it was two or three decades ago. Vivid souls like Wright Patman and Henry Gonzalez of Texas, in whose hearts the coals of populist insurgency still glowed, are long gone, along with men like Gruening, Morse and Harold Hughes of Iowa. Hughes, a former truck driver and reformed alcoholic, was a tremendous fellow, who in 1976 explained to a tv interviewer who had asked him if he was a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination: ‘When I tell you that if, as president, I was informed that the Soviets had launched a surprise nuclear attack and its missiles were speeding towards our shores, I would order No Response, you will understand that I am not a candidate for the nomination’. Probably the most independent soul in the current House is Ron Paul, the libertarian Republican from Texas.

years, a relentlessly shrinking menu. Back in 1964, the Democratic convention that nominated Lyndon Johnson saw the party platform scorn the legitimate claim of Fannie Lou Hamer and her fellow crusaders in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to be the lawful Mississippi delegation. The black insurgents went down to defeat in a battle that remained etched in the political consciousness of those who partook in or even observed the fray. There was political division, the bugle blare and sabre slash of genuine struggle. At the Chicago convention of 1968 there was still a run against LBJ, albeit more polite in form, with Eugene McCarthy's challenge. McCarthy's call for schism was an eminently respectable one, from a man who had risen through the us Senate as an orthodox Democratic Cold War liberal.<sup>2</sup>

Four years later, when George McGovern again kindled the anti-war torch, the party's established powers, the labour chieftains and the money men, did their best to douse his modest smoulder, deliberately surrendering the field to Richard Nixon, for whom many of them voted. And yet, by today's standards, that strange man Nixon, under whose aegis the Environmental Protection Agency was founded, the Occupational Safety and Health Act passed, Earth Day first celebrated, diplomatic relations established with Mao's China and Keynesianism accepted as a fact of life, would have been regarded as impossibly radical. Of course, it was the historical pressures of the time that moulded Nixon's actions—the Cold War context, the rising tide of Third World struggles (Vietnam foremost among them), labour victories, inner-city insurgencies, the counter-culture. The same goes for judicial appointments, often the last frantic argument of a liberal urging all back under the Big Democratic Tent. The Blacks, Douglases, Marshalls and Brennans were conjured to greatness by decade-long movements for political and cultural change, and only later by the good fortune of confirmed nomination. The decay of liberalism is clearly reflected in the quality of judges now installed in the Federal district courts. At the level of the us Supreme Court, history is captious. The best two of the current bunch, Stevens and Souter, were nominated by Republican presidents, Ford and G. H. W. Bush.

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<sup>2</sup> McCarthy himself saw the limits of his 'test of the system'. 'It might have been better', he remarked to the reporter Andrew Kopkind in the midst of his campaign, 'to let things run wild—to have a peasants' revolt. Maybe it would have been better to stand back and let people light fires on the hill'. As he well knew, the Democratic Party exists to suppress peasants' revolts and snuff out fires on the hill.

With Jimmy Carter came the omens of neoliberalism, whose hectic growth was a prime feature of the Clinton years under the guiding hand of the Democratic Leadership Council. But in the mid-to-late 1970s Carter had to guard his left flank, whence he sustained eloquent attacks from Barry Commoner and his Citizens' Party in 1976, and then in 1979–80 from Senator Edward Kennedy, who challenged Carter for the nomination under the battle standard of old-line New Deal liberalism. The fiercest political fighting of the 1980s saw Democratic party leaders and pundits ranged shoulder to shoulder against the last coherent left-populist campaign to be mounted within the framework of the Democratic Party: that of Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition. As JoAnn Wypijewski pithily resumes Clinton's payback to the Rainbow forces:

By a brisk accounting of 1993 to 2000, the black stripe of the Rainbow got the Crime Bill, women got 'welfare reform', labour got NAFTA, gays and lesbians got the Defence of Marriage Act. Even with a Democratic Congress in the early years, the peace crowd got no cuts in the military; unions got no help on the right to organize; advocates of DC statehood got nothing (though statehood would virtually guarantee two more Democratic Senate seats and more representation in the House); the single-payer crowd got worse than nothing. Between Clinton's inaugural and the day he left office, 700,000 more persons were incarcerated, mostly minorities; today one in eight black men is barred from voting because of prison, probation or parole.<sup>3</sup>

### *All for Clinton*

By the time Clinton launched his run for the presidency at the start of the 1990s resistance from the left, inside the Democratic Party and beyond, was at a low ebb. It stayed that way throughout his two terms. Battered from his first weeks for any deviation from Wall Street's agenda, Clinton—like Carter before him, who also had a Democratic majority in Congress—had effectively lost any innovative purchase on the system by the end of the first six months, and there was no pressure from the left to hold him even to his timid campaign pledges. By the end of April 1993, Clinton had sold out the Haitian refugees; handed Africa policy to a Bush appointee, Herman Cohen, thus giving Jonas Savimbi the green light to butcher thousands in Angola; put Israel's lobbyists in charge of Middle East policy; bolstered the arms industry with a budget in which

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<sup>3</sup> JoAnn Wypijewski, 'The Rainbow's Gravity', *Nation*, 2 August 2004; republished in Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St Clair, eds, *A Dime's Worth of Difference, Beyond the Lesser of Two Evils*, Counterpunch/AK Press 2004.

projected spending for 1993–94 was higher in constant dollars than average spending in the Cold War from 1950 onwards; increased secret intelligence spending; maintained full Drug Enforcement Agency funding; put Wall Street in charge of national economic strategy; sold out on grazing and mineral rights on public lands; pushed NAFTA forward; plunged into the ‘managed care’ disaster offered as ‘health reform’ by Hillary Rodham Clinton and himself.

Year after year the women’s movement, labour unions, the mainstream environmentalists, civil-liberty watchdogs, liberal advocacy groups and public-interest networks stayed mute, as Clinton triangulated Republican positions and sold poor single mothers, working people, forests, mountains and constitutional protections down the river. A representative figure was Marian Wright Edelman, a friend of the First Lady, head of the Children’s Defence Fund and a Democratic Party loyalist stretching back to the savage wars on Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom people in 1964. In May 1996, Edelman organized a Save the Children rally at the Lincoln Memorial. She pledged commitment to building a just America. She invoked Lincoln and obliquely criticized George Bush Sr. The name of the current occupant of the White House, who had just endorsed a Republican programme in Wisconsin proposing to end welfare as an entitlement and putting a five-year cap on lifetime benefits, never once passed her lips.

The collapse of the liberal advocates for children was matched by kindred surrender across the entire terrain of public policy, from budget balancing to civil liberties, crime to health care. Pressed for explanations for their pusillanimity, the liberal advocates explained that the Republican hordes who had swept into Congress in 1994 were so barbaric, as was the prospect of a Dole presidency, that they had no choice but to circle the wagons round Clinton.<sup>4</sup> Liberals were aghast when, during his 1996 re-election campaign, Clinton took for his own the Republican proposal for ‘welfare reform’—but they did nothing. There was no insurgency, no

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<sup>4</sup> The surrender was signal enough to draw some public sarcasms from the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan who, amid a savage denunciation of Clinton’s proposals to ‘reform’ welfare, declared from the floor of the Senate: ‘There are very few advocacy groups outside. You can stand where I stand and look straight out at the Supreme Court, not one person in between that view. Not one of those flaunted, vaunted advocacy groups forever protecting the interests of the children and the helpless and the homeless and the what-you-will.’ This from the exponent in early Nixon-time of ‘benign neglect’ of black poverty.

rocking of the boat, no ‘divisive’ challenge on that or anything else. The Democratic Party, from DLC governors to liberal public-interest groups, mustered around their leader and marched arm-in-arm into the late 1990s, along a path signposted toward the greatest orgy of corporate theft in history, deregulation of banking and food safety, rates of logging six times those achieved in the subsequent Bush years, a vast expansion of the death penalty, re-affirmation of racist drug laws, the foundations of the Patriot Act and the criminal bombardment of Yugoslavia.

Clinton presided over passage of NAFTA, insulting labour further with the farce of side agreements on ‘rights’ that would never be enforced. End result: half the companies targeted by organizing drives in the us intimidate workers by saying that a union vote will force the company to leave town; 30 per cent of them fire the union activists (about 20,000 workers a year); only one in seven organizing drives has a chance of going to a vote, and of those that do result in a ‘yes’ for the union, less than one in five has any success in getting a contract. Polls suggest that 60 per cent of non-unionized workers would join a union if they had a chance. The Democrats have produced no legislation to help labour organizers; on the contrary, they have campaigned against laws that might have done so.<sup>5</sup>

### *The incumbent*

There is no need to labour the details of Bush’s ghastly incumbency in these pages. His performance and personality have been etched well past caricature by dozens of furious assailants, culminating in Michael

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<sup>5</sup> As Adam Lapin pointed out back in 1948 in *The Third Party*, a pamphlet published in support of Henry Wallace and his Progressive Party: ‘the hard facts of roll call votes show that Democrats are voting more and more like Republicans. If the Republican Taft–Hartley bill became law over the President’s veto, it was because many of the Democrats allied themselves to the Republicans. Only 71 House Democrats voted to sustain the President’s veto while 106 voted to override it. In the Senate 20 Democrats voted to override the veto and 22 voted to sustain it.’ The law that was to enable capital to destroy organized labour when it became convenient was passed by a bipartisan vote—something you will never learn from the AFL-CIO, or from a thousand hoarse throats at Democratic rallies when the candidate is whoring for the labour vote. As Lapin put it: ‘The Democratic administration carries the ball for Wall Street’s foreign policy. And the Republican party carries the ball for Wall Street’s domestic policy . . . Of course the roles are sometimes interchangeable. It was President Truman who broke the 1946 railroad strike, asked for legislation to conscript strikers and initiated the heavy fines against the miners’ union.’

Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the Democrats' prime campaign offering.<sup>6</sup> He came by his fortune and his presidency dishonestly. Official rebirth in Christ led him not to compassion but to vindictiveness. Genes and education turned into a Mendelian stew of all that is worst and most vulgar in the anthropology of the Northeastern and Texan elites.<sup>7</sup> But despite his unalluring personality and severe limitations Bush does not merit the weight of those hysterical comminations heaped on his head on a daily basis. Reagan was much worse. So, in some significant ways, was Clinton. Bush stands accused of killing some 3,500–4,000 Afghan civilians, and 12,000–14,000 Iraqis. On conservative estimates, Clinton supervised the slaughter, by direct military assault or by sanctions, of nearly ten times that number; many more if you throw in those who died in the Rwandan genocide, in part because Clinton wanted to keep the international spotlight on Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup>

The other cherished liberal myth, that a vast gulf separates Bush's foreign policy from what Al Gore's would have been, is belied by the latter's own words—replicating his 1992 onslaughts on George Bush Sr for not having finished off Saddam Hussein. Gore proclaimed in the us Senate that Saddam was

a threat to regional and even global security . . . The threat he represents is so severe that responding with force is not only legitimate but could be

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<sup>6</sup> As such, Moore's film studiously avoided any mention of Israel or the footage of multi-million-strong anti-war marches—let alone Clinton's record on Iraq.

<sup>7</sup> For the structural deficiencies in his psychological make-up I would be inclined to blame his mother Barbara, one of those unpleasant people who visibly rejoice in displays of their own bile, in marked contrast to George Sr's delightful mother, Dorothy. Justin Frank's recent *Bush on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President* (New York 2004), a Kleinian excavation of Bush's psyche, provides a chilling account. While George Sr gallivanted round the Southwest and Mexico she was marooned in a dingy apartment in Odessa, Texas, on the edge of the Permian basin, far from polite Connecticut. She regularly thrashed her children, refused to cook for them and, when her daughter Robin died of cancer, did not tell George Jr but went off for a round of golf. She would not attend her own awful mother's funeral, suggesting that Bush's own refusal to attend those of soldiers killed in Iraq may have deeper roots than the politic eschewing of any visual link with war's downside.

<sup>8</sup> Bush figures: for Afghanistan, see Marc Herold's 'Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States' Aerial Bombardment of Afghanistan', accessible via the University of New Hampshire website; for Iraq, see the Iraq Body Count website, based on news reports. Clinton figures: Richard Garfield, 'The Public Health Impact of Sanctions', *Middle East Report* 215, Summer 2000, p. 17: 'a conservative estimate of "excess deaths" among under five-year-olds [in Iraq] since 1991 would be 300,000'.

unavoidable . . . Saddam Hussein has more troops than Hitler did in the early years of World War II.

During the 1992 campaign, Gore wrote in the *New York Times* that ‘we can no more hope for a constructive relationship with Saddam Hussein than we could hope to housebreak a cobra’, that Saddam Hussein ‘is not an acceptable part of the landscape’ and that ‘his Ba’athist regime must be dismantled as well’. As he put it on *Larry King Live*: ‘We should have bent every policy—and we should do it now—to overthrow that regime and to make sure that Saddam Hussein is removed from power’.

### *Ghost senator*

The Kerry candidacy in 2004? As an inspirational candidate, he’s a dud, even damper a political squib than Michael Dukakis and, by dint of his chill snobbery, less appealing. Democrats know this in their hearts. Twit them about Kerry’s dreariness, reminiscent of tepid chowder on a damp day in Boston or of Weeping Ed Muskie amid the snows of New Hampshire, and one gets the upraised palm and petulant cry, ‘I don’t want to hear a word against Kerry!’ It is as though the Democratic candidate has been entombed, pending resurrection as president, with an honour guard of the National Organization of Women, the AFL-CIO, the League of Conservation Voters, Taxpayers for Justice and the NAACP. To open the tomb prematurely, to admit the oxygen of life and criticism, is to blaspheme against political propriety. Amid the defilements of the political system, and the collapse of all serious political debate among the liberals and most of the left, the Democratic candidate becomes a kind of Hegelian Anybody, as in Anybody but . . .<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Many ABB-ers have spent 2004 identifying Bush as off the usual spectrum in his obeisance to the corporate and neoliberal agenda, with this year’s election therefore representing the last opportunity for resistance to fascism. Thus the Bush-As-Monster frenzy, which has every bookstore piled with hysterical tracts making the president out as a cross between Caligula and Nero, without even the latter’s fiddle playing as a redeeming quality. Ironically, ‘Anybody but Bush’ has engendered a forced perspective which leaves Bush as the dominant, indeed lone substantive feature of the political landscape. In the huge demonstration on the eve of the Republican convention, there were ‘maybe 450,000 people on the streets of Manhattan, all of them hating Bush and I saw ten people with Kerry/Edwards signs. Maybe two with Nader/Camejo signs. People don’t connect hating Bush with voting for Kerry’: JoAnn Wypijewski.



Kerry's inner emptiness is thus peculiarly appropriate. Insecurely positioned from childhood on the margins of the elite, a heavily calculating opportunism has been his life's guiding compass, whether pursuing wealthy women or plotting his political career. His four months in Vietnam—during which he bagged five medals (see overleaf), enough to get him transferred to a desk job as an admiral's aide in New York, and to earn the soubriquet Quick John from the crew members he left behind—were followed, after a year and a half's cautious consideration, by five months of high-profile media coverage as a leading spokesman for Vietnam Veterans Against the War, the springboard for his first (unsuccessful) Congressional bid. His tour in Vietnam became the target of damaging campaign ads in late August 2004 that clearly rattled Kerry, who fumed at these onslaughts on his martial honour from a president so indifferent to the Call to Arms that he declined even to undergo a routine medical check to maintain his status in the National Guard. But Kerry has only himself to blame, since it was his decision to exploit what he once, with no less opportunism, repudiated, preening at Boston with the medals he so carefully declined to toss away during the anti-war rallies in which he insisted on a starring role back in the early 1970s.

Kerry's three terms since entering the us Senate in 1984 have left almost no footprints of interest. Karl Rove's propagandists have been hard put to transform this utterly conventional figure into a seditious radical, hell-bent on putting the Pentagon out of business.<sup>10</sup> A seasoned staffer on one of the military appropriations committees described him deprecatingly to me as 'the ghost senator; around here he doesn't count for anything.' Instead, Kerry's time was more profitably spent, raising funds at a rate that put him in the top decile of incumbents. By 1990 he was already able to spend \$8 million on his re-election, climbing to \$10 million by 2002, though he had raised even more than this—\$15 million compared to an average of less than \$5 million for senatorial incumbents running for re-election during that year. The vast bulk of his money came from finance, insurance, real estate and lawyers and lobbyists.

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<sup>10</sup> In the early days of his Senate career Kerry made headlines with hearings on contra-CIA drug smuggling and on BCCI, the crooked Pakistani bank linked to the CIA. Some of the Senate elders must have told him to mind his manners. The watchdog's barks died abruptly.

## Kerry's Vietnam—Four Months, Five Medals

The liberal press has been loath to probe—or even report—the substance of fellow Swift veterans' doubts about how Kerry got his medals. Arriving in Vietnam on November 17, 1968, Kerry took part in Operation Sea Lords, the post-Tet Offensive programme aimed at terrorizing the Mekong Delta peasants into turning against the National Liberation Front. The entire area, except for certain designated 'friendly villages', was a free-fire zone—meaning the Americans could shoot at will and count anyone they killed as Viet Cong. Night after night, the Swift boats plied the waters, harassing and often killing villagers, fishermen and farmers. On daylight missions the boats were accompanied by Cobra Attack helicopters that strafed the riverbanks and the skeletal forest, ravaged by napalm and Agent Orange.

Kerry was notoriously zealous in this task. As his machine-gunner James Wasser admiringly described: 'Kerry was an extremely aggressive officer and so was I. I liked that he took the fight to the enemy, that he was tough and gutsy—not afraid to spill blood for his country.' A telling incident occurred on a Christmas Eve patrol near the Cambodian border. Kerry ordered Wasser to open up a barrage of machine-gun fire near a small fishing village. In Brinkley's *Tour of Duty*, Wasser describes how he had killed an old farmer leading a water buffalo. 'I'm haunted by that old man's face. He was just doing his daily farming, hurting nobody. It may have been Christmas Eve, but I was real sombre after that.' It turned out that Kerry's boat had shot up one of the few 'friendly' villages, with a garrison of South Vietnamese ARV soldiers. It is very striking that we never find, in any of Kerry's diaries or letters of the time, the slightest expression of contrition or remorse. Contrast Wasser's sad reflections with Kerry's self-righteous diary account of such salvoes: 'I have no doubt that on occasion some innocents were hit by bullets that were aimed in self-defence at the enemy, but of all the cases in Vietnam that could be labelled massacres, this was certainly the most spurious.'

On the night of December 2, 1968, Kerry went on his first patrol. He and his crew opened fire on some Vietnamese, fleeing from a sampan pulled up on the bank. According to Kerry's report, 'the air was full of explosions . . . a stinging piece of heat socked into my arm and seemed to burn like hell'. According to fellow crew member William Schachte and commanding officer Grant Hibbard, Kerry had fired an M-79 grenade launcher too close to the shore. The grenade exploded against a rock and a tiny fragment of metal, barely 2 mm wide and less than 1 cm long, had ricocheted onto his forearm. The medic who treated him was surprised Kerry had managed to keep the splinter embedded in his arm on the journey to the field hospital. It was removed with a pair of tweezers and the scratch covered with a bandaid. Back at base, Kerry informed his sceptical commanding officer that the wound merited a Purple Heart, and persisted until Lt Cdr Hibbard finally said ok.

On February 20, 1969, Kerry incurred the wound that won his second Purple Heart. His own operating report recounts 'intense rocket and rifle fire . . . a piece of hot shrapnel bore into [Kerry's] left leg . . . blood running down the deck'. Those with him recall no enemy fire or 'blood on the deck', and there is no report of any boat in the convoy sustaining damage; they suggest another ricochet from his own misfired M-79 was probably responsible. Kerry's leg was briefly treated on an offshore ship, and he 'returned to duty hours later'.

Kerry's Silver Star, lofting him to the useful status of 'war hero', was awarded for an incident on February 28, 1969, when his boat came under small-arms fire on the Dong Cung River. Against standing orders, Kerry beached the boat and opened up at the source of the shots with .50 and .60 calibre machine guns. His motive in going ashore, as a crew member

explained to Brinkley, was to verify the kills: 'We never knew whether we killed any vc or not'. The crew took evidence (undescribed) from the body of a Vietnamese boy killed by the machine-gun bullets and then carried on downstream, where they were fired on once more by a young Vietnamese with a B-40 rocket grenade launcher. As Kerry recounted the story to Jonathan Carroll of the *New Yorker* in 1996: 'It was either going to be him or it was going to be us. It was that simple. I don't know why it wasn't us . . . He was standing in front of us, aiming a rocket right at us, and, for whatever reason, he didn't pull the trigger—he turned and ran.' Kerry's machine-gunner Tommy Belodeau found no mystery in the Vietnamese soldier's failure to fire: he had not reloaded the RPG after the first shot at Kerry's boat, and was effectively unarmed. As Belodeau explained to the *Boston Globe's* David Warsh, he himself had opened fire with his M-60 machine gun on the Vietnamese at a range of ten feet, shooting him in the legs. The wounded man crawled behind a nearby hooch. At this point, Belodeau said, Kerry had seized an M-16 rifle, jumped out of the boat, gone up to the dying man and finished him off. Or, in the words of Kerry's Silver Star citation (issued by Admiral Zumwalt, based on an incident report written by Kerry himself):

With utter disregard for his own safety and the enemy rockets, he again ordered a charge on the enemy, beached his boat only ten feet from the vc rocket position, and personally led a landing party ashore in pursuit of the enemy . . . The extraordinary daring and personal courage of Lt Kerry in attacking the numerically superior force in the face of intense fire were responsible for the highly successful mission.

Two weeks later, on March 13, 1969, Kerry got his Bronze Star and his third Purple Heart in the 'rescued from the water' incident that is now a \$50 million TV ad. In Kerry's account, a mine goes off alongside his boat, blowing Special Forces lieutenant Jim Rassman into the water and badly wounding Kerry. With his arm bleeding heavily and enemy fire raging all around, Kerry heroically hoists Rassman to safety. The others present claim there was no enemy fire, that Kerry had at first fled when the mine blew up, and only returned to help Rassman when he saw the coast was clear. Medical reports certify that Kerry suffered only minor bruising to his arm, caused when the detonation threw him against a bulkhead—plus minor shrapnel wounds on his buttocks, apparently from an incident earlier that day. Kerry's boat had been ferrying Green Berets, US Navy SEALs and Nung assassins who, not for the first time, had mistakenly targeted a friendly village. The Green Berets and SEALs opened fire on South Vietnamese troops interrogating a group of women and children. At least ten of the villagers were killed. Meanwhile, against orders, Kerry had left his boat, attached himself to the Nung and was, in his own words, 'shooting and blowing things up'. One of the Nung (or, on some accounts, Kerry himself) threw a grenade into a hut filled with sacks of rice. Grains of rice and some tiny metal fragments got embedded in Kerry's backside—Purple Heart Number Three, meaning he could file a request for transfer out of Vietnam.

The Nixon tapes record a piquant moment in April 1971, after Nixon had been watching Kerry's performance as a Vets Against the War spokesman on TV. 'He is a sort of phony, isn't he?' the president remarked; adding later, 'only good from a PR standpoint'.

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*See the longer excavation of Kerry's conduct in Vietnam by Jeffrey St Clair and myself: 'What Kerry Really Did in Vietnam', CounterPunch, 29 July 2004. Douglas Brinkley's highly admiring Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War, New York 2004, based almost entirely on Kerry's diaries and letters, offers many telling vignettes. See also Michael Kranish, Brian Mooney and Nina Easton, John F. Kerry: The Complete Biography by the Boston Globe Reporters Who Know Him Best, New York 2004; and John O'Neill and Jerome Corsi, Unfit for Command, Washington, DC 2004.*

Although once his nomination was assured he regularly hammed it up in photo-ops with the barons of big labour, as a senator Kerry voted for NAFTA, the WTO and virtually every other job-slashing trade pact that came before the Senate. He courted and won the endorsement of nearly every police association in the nation, regularly calling for another 100,000 cops on the streets and even tougher criminal sanctions against victimless crimes. He refused to reconsider his fervid support for the war on drug users, and minimum mandatory sentences. Like Lieberman in 2000, Kerry has marketed himself as a cultural prude, regularly chiding teens about the clothes they wear, the music they listen to and the movies they watch. But even Lieberman did not go so far as to support the Communications Decency Act. Kerry did. (Fortunately, even this Supreme Court had the sense to strike the law down, ruling that it trampled across the First Amendment.) All of this is standard fare for contemporary Democrats, but Kerry always went the extra mile. The senator duly voted for Clinton's 1996 bill to dismantle welfare for poor mothers and their children.

### *Punishing countries*

Kerry enthusiastically backed both of Bush's wars. In June 2004, at the very moment Bush showed signs of wavering, the senator called for 25,000 new troops to be sent to Iraq, with a plan for the US military to remain entrenched there for at least the next four years. Kerry supported the Patriot Act without reservation or even much contemplation. Let one conclude that this was a momentary aberration sparked by the post-9/11 hysteria, consider the fact that Kerry also voted for the Act's two Clinton-era predecessors, the 1994 Crime Bill and the 1996 Counter-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act.<sup>11</sup> In mid August a senior aide of Kerry said that his boss supported '96 per cent' of the Patriot Act and indeed had drafted some of its language. In his 1997 book *The New War* Kerry wrote, five years before Guantánamo: 'We now need to consider experimenting with our closest partners in a system that sets up special courts to try cases at home involving victims abroad'. He went on:

In dealing with states that are outright criminal, the United States may, at times, need to take unilateral action to protect its citizens, its interests, its

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<sup>11</sup> Kerry professes personal opposition to the death penalty, albeit with exclusions for terrorists and cop killers. Such concertina exclusions usually expand as circumstances warrant, to take in child-killers and other unpopular categories.

integrity. This need not take as dramatic a form as our invasion of Panama and arrest of Noriega, though it would be unwise to rule out that option *a priori*. It does mean that we can and should punish countries that wilfully refuse to protect our citizens and in effect become state sponsors of criminality, as we now are doing with Myanmar and Nigeria.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond his dedication to ‘seeing it through’ in Iraq, Kerry’s global policies are virtually indistinguishable from those of Bush—although his prostrations toward Israel have been slavish even by normal Democratic standards; expressing his understanding for Israel’s assassination of Hamas leader Rantissi, for instance. His chief foreign-policy adviser, Rand Beers, worked first for Clinton, then Bush as a ‘counter-terrorism’ official. Beers was one of the architects of Plan Colombia, ardently defending the coca-eradication programme that saw peasants and their farms doused with glyphosate. Kerry has lashed Bush for being soft on Chávez, and has accused the Venezuelan leader of aiding drug traffickers and being too close to Castro. According to Beers: ‘The Bush administration has a somewhat tainted record on Venezuela. They’ve been unprepared to do everything necessary to speak out on the issues of democracy.’

Internationally, Kerry offers himself largely as a more competent manager of the Bush agenda, a steadier hand on the helm of Empire. Domestically, the best that can be hoped for from him is a return to the disgraceful *status quo ante* on income tax, plus modest funding increases for Medicare/Medicaid and higher-end insurance claims—though these are unlikely to get through a Congress filled to the brim with loyal representatives of commercial health interests, and will anyway be subordinate to Kerry’s first task, lowering the deficit. Whoever settles down in the Oval Office next January will be facing a very serious economic situation, with the level of the national debt as a proportion of GDP at an all time high, and the distinct prospect of a break in the bubble in housing prices which would most likely shove the country back deep into the recession from which it has barely emerged.

Kerry’s pedigree has all the appropriate quarterings. He was a founder member of the Democratic Leadership Council, the camarilla of neo-liberals that reshaped the image of the Democratic Party as a hawkish and pro-business party with a soft spot for abortion—essentially a stingier

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<sup>12</sup> John Kerry, *The New War: the Web of Crime that Threatens America’s Security*, New York 1997, p. 182.

version of the Rockefeller Republicans. DLC strategy has been to concentrate on the white-collar professionals and the corporations, particularly in the area of the ‘new economy’, whose CEOs Clinton so successfully courted—layers capable of generating campaign contributions far outweighing those of organized labour. The Democratic Party, the argument went, would always be able to count on the working-class vote—it had nowhere else to go. Targeting the New Economy billionaires has had its own, unstoppable logic. As David Friedman of the New America Foundation put it in the *Los Angeles Times*: ‘the cleansing of working-class concerns from America’s once-progressive politics’ reflects the interests of ‘a new, fabulously privileged elite—including website and computer gurus, actors, media magnates and financial power brokers’, who now exercise ‘unparalleled influence’ over mainstream liberalism and the Party itself.<sup>13</sup> In the categories of this year’s Democratic convention sponsors—Platinum Plus (over \$2 million), Platinum (over \$1 million), Gold (over \$500,000), Silver (over \$250,000)—even the largest organized-labour contributions are ranked way down in Bronze.

### *The great liberal silence*

The obsessive ‘Anyone but Bush’ posture across the liberal-progressive spectrum has ensured that Kerry has not had his feet held to the fire by any faction of the Democratic Party. This has been the year of surrendering quietly. Dean’s candidacy expired in Iowa, its prime consequence having been to lure a large chunk of the anti-war movement into the Democratic fold—which, as Dean imploded, then agreed that ABB was

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<sup>13</sup> Cited in Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy*, New York 2002, p. 342. The top contributing sectors, professions and industries to Kerry in 2004 thus far: law firms, the retired; education, securities and investment, health care, real estate, Hollywood, printing and publishing, civil servants and public officials. Top individual contributors: donors allied with the University of California, Harvard, Goldman Sachs, Skadden Arps, Time Warner, Citigroup, VBS Americas, Robbins Kaplan et al, Piper Rudnick LLP, Microsoft, Morgan Stanley, Viacom, Bank of America, JP Morgan, Stanford, University of Michigan, IBM. Top fundraisers: Alan Solomont of Massachusetts-based Solomont Bailis Ventures, Orin Kramer from NY-based Kramer Spellman, Ben Barnes (the lobbyist who got Bush his safe slot in the National Guard) from Entrecorp in Texas, Richard Ziman from Arden Realty in California, Mark Weiner of Financial Innovations, Rhode Island, Bob Clifford of Clifford law offices in Illinois, Hassan Nemaze of Nemaze Capital NY, James Johnson of Perseus Corp in Washington DC. In addition there are huge donors such as Soros, ladling out the juice via 527 operations.

the bleach of choice and committed to the support of a pro-war candidate. Looking for evidence of active protests against Kerry on the liberal-left in America in the late summer of 2004 was like trudging through the grey ash around Mount St. Helens, after the eruption. In thirty years I can recall nothing like it.

One cannot fault Kerry on truth in packaging. In the months after his nomination became assured, he methodically disappointed one vital section of his liberal constituency after another. In April, organized labour was admonished that Kerry's prime task would be to battle the deficit. In May and again in July, women were informed that the candidate shared with the anti-abortion lobby its view of the relationship between conception and the start of life, and would be prepared to nominate anti-choice judges. In June it was the anti-war legions, to whom Kerry pledged four more years of occupation in Iraq.

Touting his brief stint as a Massachusetts prosecutor, Kerry vowed to put more cops on the streets and promised there would be no intermission in the war on drugs. The grand total of those caught in the toils of the criminal-justice system is now nearly 6.9 million, either in jail, on probation or on parole, amounting to 3.2 per cent of the adult population in the United States. In many cities a young black man faces a far better chance of getting locked up than of getting a job, since jail is the definitive bipartisan response of both Democrats and Republicans to the theories of John Maynard Keynes. Blacks have got less than nothing from Kerry, aside from his wife's declaration that she too is an African American, yet the Congressional Black Caucus cheers the man who voted for welfare reform and devotes its time to flaying Ralph Nader.<sup>14</sup>

War in Iraq? A majority of the country wants out, certainly most Democrats. Kerry wants in, even more than Bush. When the Democratic National Committee told Dennis Kucinich what to do with his peace plank, the Representative from Ohio tugged his forelock and told his followers to shuffle back in under the Big Tent and help elect a man who pledges to fight the war better and longer than Bush. Feminist leaders kept their mouths shut when Kerry flew his kite about nominating anti-choice judges. Gay leaders did not utter so much as a squeak when

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<sup>14</sup> The very well-heeled Teresa, widow of Republican Senator John Heinz and heir-ess to the ketchup and Starkist fortune, was born in Mozambique in 1938, of European/Portuguese extraction.

Kerry declared his opposition to same-sex marriages. Did we hear a peep from Norman Lear and People for the American Way as Kerry, the man who voted for the Patriot Act, revived his Tipper Gore-ish posturing about the evils of popular culture and said he would draft laws to elide the constitutional separation of church from state, permitting 'faith-based organizations' to get some purchase on Federal funds?

In spring 2004 Kerry told James Hoffa of the Teamsters that, though he would not touch the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, he would 'drill everywhere else like never before'. There was not a bleat from the major environmental groups. He pledged the same policy again to the American Gas Association a couple of months later, throwing in the prospect of a new trans-Alaska-Canada pipeline for natural gas from the Arctic. Once again the big environmental organizations held their tongues. True, Andy Stern, head of the Service Employees, tossed a firecracker onto the Convention floor by confiding to the *Washington Post's* David Broder that another four years of Bush might be less damaging than the stifling of needed reform within the party and the labour movement that would occur if Kerry becomes president. After a short period of re-education, however, Stern recanted and said he was 'a hundred per cent' for Kerry.<sup>15</sup> Thus ended labour's great revolt against a candidate who has cast his full share of votes in Congress to ensure job flight from America, and whose commitment to the living standards of working people is aptly resumed in his pledge to raise the minimum wage to \$7 an hour by 2007, far below where it stood in real terms nearly forty years ago.<sup>16</sup>

### *Joblessness and war*

From June 2004, a bet on Kerry as the winner in November rested on two conspicuous features of the political landscape: the war and the economy. Bush had landed the us in a costly mess in Iraq, press-ganging reservists into open-ended tours of duty, a widely resented tactic. The economic

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<sup>15</sup> The SIEU spent the weeks after the convention in states such as Oregon working to keep Nader, a man who has done more for working people than John Kerry ever has or will, off the ballot.

<sup>16</sup> Contrast the liberal-progressive refusal to raise any sort of trouble with the robust comment of the conservative organizer Paul Weyrich: 'For all of their brilliance, [Ken] Mehlman and Karl Rove . . . made a very serious mistake with this [Republican] Convention's line-up. It is one that the rank and file should not tolerate. If the President is embarrassed to be seen with conservatives at the convention, maybe conservatives will be embarrassed to be seen with the President on Election Day.'



recovery, such as it is, has had the worst record in producing new jobs of any since 1947. What was the Democratic candidate's response?

Kerry worked methodically to eradicate any hope that he might extricate the us from Bush's war in Iraq. Back on the campaign trail after the flag-wagging in Boston, he administered yet another wallop to wan progressives trying to persuade themselves that he was more of a man of peace than Bush: he surrendered Saddam's non-existent WMDs as an election issue. Jamie Rubin, top State Department spokesman in the Clinton years and now Kerry's foreign-policy flack, was the bearer of this huge gift to Bush. Rubin told the *Washington Post* that 'knowing then what he knows today' about the lack of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons in Iraq, Kerry still would have voted to authorize the war and, 'in all probability', would have launched a military attack to oust Hussein by now if he were president. (Previously, Kerry had only said, with typical forthrightness, that he 'might' have still gone to war.) Kerry himself then did some further clarifying in Arizona, where he told the press that, knowing then what he knows now, he would not have changed his vote to authorize the war, although he would have handled things 'very differently' from Bush.

In late August, with us forces engaged in heavy fighting in Najaf, and American casualties edging inexorably towards 1,000, Rubin apologized to the *Washington Post* for his 'in all probability' phrase. In more philosophical mode, he now explained that it was 'unknowable whether Kerry would have waged the war. "Bush went to war the wrong way," Rubin said. "What we don't know is what would have happened if a president had gone about it the right way".'<sup>17</sup> Equally unknowable is what Kerry's

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<sup>17</sup> *Washington Post*, 25 August 2004. Kerry's endorsements of Bush's war on Iraq coincided with statements from two senior Republicans saying the war was a disaster and the us should get out. Rep. Doug Bereuter, vice chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, wrote to his constituents in Nebraska's first district: 'Knowing now what I know about the reliance on the tenuous or insufficiently corroborated intelligence used to conclude that Saddam maintained a substantial WMD arsenal, I believe that launching the pre-emptive military action was not justified'. At the Iowa State Fair in mid-August, Rep. Jim Leach called for us troops to be withdrawn from Iraq by the end of the year. Leach was one of the handful of Republicans who voted against a resolution authorizing President George W. Bush to use force in Iraq. Such criticism on the Democratic side was virtually inaudible, with Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, the only us senator to vote against the Patriot Act, one of the very few to publicly criticize Kerry's stance on the war.

'very different' might mean. Under Bush, the UN has given its full backing to the ongoing Occupation and its puppet government in Baghdad; fifty Islamic states have signed up in support; NATO forces are hard at work inside Iraq's borders.<sup>18</sup>

On the economy, Kerry's message at the Boston convention was dourly clear. Sitting next to Teresa Heinz Kerry during the candidate's acceptance speech was Robert Rubin, ex-Secretary of the Treasury and Wall Street's point man during the Clinton years, whose former subordinates are now running Kerry's economic policy. Here we may as well state the obvious. As a political force on the national stage organized labour, manifested in the big unions of the AFL-CIO, is pretty much dead. As a fraction of the workforce, non-government union membership is now down to 9 per cent, and that number is sinking by a digit a year. In 1992, labour could still claim to have made at least a rhetorical input into Clinton's campaign, with its pledges about 'putting people first'. Clinton repaid labour's 'get out the vote' efforts and money by selling out on health reform and failing to do anything on labour law; unless this changes, prospects for union organizing are bleak.

In 2004, organized labour has failed to elicit a single significant pledge from Kerry. His only concern is Wall Street and the bankers. His April statement that the deficit would be his first consideration meant goodbye to any decent jobs programme. Big labour's prime political functions are, domestically, to rally its members and cash for the Democratic candidate and, internationally, to use the millions put its way by the National Endowment for Democracy and cognate operations to subvert radical organizing (as, most lately, in the efforts to oust Hugo Chávez). That is the story—just another mile-marker in the decline of labour since the late 1960s. Kerry will do nothing to arrest that decline, though his public-spending cuts, if his deficit-slashing is serious, may help to hasten it along.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> One of the more patronizing arguments of the Kerry-tilting exponents of ABB is that the Iraqi people crave a rebuff to Bush, and that it would be wrong to subvert this hope. As if those capable of identifying the UN's Vieira de Mello as a logical target are incapable of realism about the continuities of Empire, or of recalling that a Democratic president supervised eight years of lethal sanctions.

<sup>19</sup> Wall Street's waning support for Bush in late August 2004 was above all based on a desire to see the Federal deficit fall: *Financial Times*, 25 August 2004.

Progressives who have touted the 'Anyone but Bush' standard (which reached its comical nadir with furious defences of Kerry's record as an accredited war hero and winner of medals in Vietnam, accompanied by denunciations of Bush as a draft dodger) claim that the minute Kerry is sworn in as president they will be out on the streets, attacking from the left. One only has to look at the surrenders of the Clinton years, sketched in above, to predict with some confidence that these pledges of resistance are vacuous.

### *Safeguarding the duopoly*

Always partial to monopolies, the Democrats think they should hold the exclusive concession on any electoral challenge to Bush and the Republicans. The Nader campaign prompts them to hysterical tirades. Republicans are more relaxed. Ross Perot and his Reform Party actually cost George Bush Sr his re-election in 1992, yet Perot never drew a tenth of the abuse for his presumption that Nader does now.<sup>20</sup> Of course the Democrats richly deserve the challenge. Through the Clinton years the party remained 'united' in fealty to corporate corruption and right-wing class viciousness; and so inevitably and appropriately, the Nader-centred independent challenge was born, modestly in 1996, strongly in 2000 and now again in 2004. The rationale for Nader's challenge was sound as it was for Henry Wallace half a century earlier.

The central political issue in America today is the decay of the political system itself, and of the two prime parties that share the spoils. Wherever one looks, at the gerrymandered districts, the balloting methods, the fundraising, corruption steams like vapours from a vast swamp. In the House of Representatives, only some 35 seats are in serious contention. The rest have been gerrymandered into permanent incumbencies. A key attribute for entry into America's professional political caste is the ability, so well demonstrated by the Senator for Massachusetts, to cultivate the interests of a multi-millionaire donor base. Of course money has

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<sup>20</sup> As Michael Eisencher has pointed out, it was not Nader but Bush who took the important votes from Gore in 2000: '20 per cent of all Democratic voters, 12 per cent of all self-identified liberal voters, 39 per cent of all women voters, 44 per cent of all seniors, one-third of all voters earning under \$20,000 per year, 42 per cent of those earning \$20-30,000 annually and 31 per cent of all voting union members cast their ballots for Bush'. See 'The Greening of California', *Z Magazine*, December 2000.

always played a decisive role in American politics, but these days the amounts required are truly vast. It was Rep. Tony Coelho of California who oriented the Democratic Party in the 1980s towards the mountains of cash available (given suitable pledges) from corporate treasuries, thus setting the compass for the Lincoln bedroom auctions of Clinton-time and Al Gore's black-bag outing to the Buddhist temple.

There are plenty of campaigns here in the USA that pit idealism and the zeal for justice against the cruelties and oppressions of the system. They do not rise and fall in tune with the political cycle and have faced bipartisan obloquy from Democrats and Republicans. The struggle for Palestinian justice has grown from near invisibility in the early 1970s to a substantial movement active across the entire United States, notably in church and community groups and on campuses. Ralph Nader's fierce denunciations of AIPAC, of the Anti-Defamation League and of the overall malign power of the Israeli lobby would have been inconceivable even a decade ago. The fact that Nader, a Palestinian, felt emboldened to break a lifetime's public silence on the topic is testimony to the change wrought by thirty years of organizing.

If ever there was a long-haul crowd, it is the anti-death penalty organizers who saw their greatest recent victory come in Illinois when Governor Ryan conceded police torture and racism and took a dozen inmates off death row. Year after year, the anti-death penalty campaigns across the country offer vivid dioramas of the savageries of the state at every stage, from the biographies of those condemned to the death-house conveyor belts that run continuously in states such as Texas and Florida. Medical marijuana has been one important gateway in the long guerrilla campaign against the 'war on drugs', in essence a war on the poor, particularly minorities. The right of people in permanent pain to have their palliative of choice is one that has endless resonances, in combating the predations of the pharmaceutical industry and the iniquities of the law and its enforcement. The living-wage campaign, fought in city after city across the country, has kept a focus on building a movement that actually fights for the working class. Amid the decline of organized labour, these campaigns have created coalitions at the city level, below the radar of the vested powers operating through state and Federal legislatures.

Many attest to a slack political tempo this campaign season. A simple refusal to vote at all on the presidential candidate could see the turnout

drop below 50 per cent, as bleak a register of popular cynicism about the realities of the democratic mandate in the us today as the Venezuelan turnout was exhilarating. The next us president could even be denied a majority 'mandate' from the sliver of those voters going to the polls. By the same token, the shape of resistance in the coming years will not derive from a vote for Kerry, or even one for Nader, but from the harnessing of those vital, idealistic energies that always move through the American firmament, awaiting release.