

MIKE DAVIS

## THE DEMOCRATS

### AFTER NOVEMBER

**W**AS THE NOVEMBER 2006 midterm election an epic political massacre or just a routine midterm brawl? In the week after the Democratic victory, partisan spinmeisters offered opinions as contradictory as those of the protagonists in *Rashomon*, Kurosawa's famously relativistic account of rape and murder. On the liberal side, Bob Herbert rejoiced in his *New York Times* column that the 'fear-induced anomaly' of the 'George W. Bush era' had 'all but breathed its last', while Paul Waldman (*Baltimore Sun*) announced 'a big step in the nation's march to the left', and George Lakoff (*CommonDreams.org*) celebrated a victory for 'progressive values' and 'factually accurate, values-based framing' (whatever that may mean).<sup>1</sup> On the conservative side, the *National Review's* Lawrence Kudlow refused to concede even the obvious bloodstains on the steps of Congress: 'Look at Blue Dog conservative Democratic victories and look at Northeast liberal GOP defeats. The changeover in the House may well be a conservative victory, not a liberal one.' William Safire, although disgusted that the 'loser left' had finally won an election, dismissed the result as an 'average midterm loss'.<sup>2</sup>

#### I. VICTORY AND ITS WOES

But Safire doth spin too much. Although the Democratic victory in 2006 was not quite the deluge that the Republicans led by Newt Gingrich, Dick

Armev and Tom DeLay unleashed in 1994 (see Table 1), it was anything but an ‘average’ result. Despite the comparatively low electoral salience of the economy, the opposition’s classic midterm issue, the Democrats managed to exactly reverse the majority in the House (the worst massacre of Republicans since 1974) and reclaim the Senate by one seat. Indeed, the Senate gained its first self-declared ‘socialist’, Bernie Sanders of Vermont, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats.

Democrats, for the first time ever, did not lose a single incumbent or open House seat. Independent voters (26 per cent of the electorate) swung to the Democrats by an almost two-to-one ratio—‘the biggest margin ever measured among independents since the first exit polls in 1976’.<sup>3</sup> With the strongest female leadership in American history, they outpolled Republicans among women 55 to 45 per cent in House races; but more surprisingly, they also managed to reduce the GOP’s famous lead among white men (a staggering 63 per cent in the 1994 House contests) to 53 per cent.<sup>4</sup> According to veteran pollster Stanley Greenberg, one out of five Bush voters moved into the blue column; but none so dramatically as the electoral market segment of ‘privileged men’ (college-educated and affluent) where the GOP’s 2004 margin of 14 per cent was transformed into a slim Democratic majority. Although the slippage among the GOP hardcore—evangelicals and white rural and exurban voters—was slight, the party of the moral majority declined 6 per cent among devout Catholics, while angry Latinos, recoiling from the GOP grass roots’ embrace of vigilantes and border walls, murdered Republicans in several otherwise close contests in the West.<sup>5</sup>

In state races, the Democrats demonstrated even more traction. On election eve, the GOP boasted a majority of governorships (28 to 22) and a slight lead in control of state legislative chambers (49 to 47, with

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Herbert, ‘Ms. Speaker and Other Trends’, *New York Times*, 9 November 2006; Paul Waldman, ‘A Big Step in Nation’s March to Left’, *Baltimore Sun*, 12 November 2006; and George Lakoff, ‘Building on the Progressive Victory’, *CommonDreams.org*, 14 December 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Kudlow, ‘Reach Out to the Blue Dogs’, *kudlowmoneypolitics.blogspot.com*, 8 November 2006; and William Safire, ‘After the Thumpin’’, *New York Times*, 9 November 2006.

<sup>3</sup> William Schneider, ‘Swing Time’, *National Journal*, 11 November 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Edsall, ‘White-Guy Rebellion’, *National Journal*, 11 November 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Borosage, James Carville and Stanley Greenberg, *The Meltdown Election: Report on the 2006 Post-Election Surveys*, Democracy Corps, Washington DC, 15 November 2006, pp. 2–3.

2 tied).<sup>6</sup> Contrasted to overwhelming Democratic dominance in state legislatures before 1994, when Republicans controlled only 8 states, this rough parity—according to John Hood, the president of a North Carolina conservative think-tank—has been ‘one of the most significant and lasting products of the Republican Revolution’. But it is a legacy now lost as the Democrats have exactly reversed the partisan ratio of governors (leaving Republican executives in only 3 of the 10 most populous states), while winning control of 8 more state chambers (now 56 Democrat versus 41 Republican, with 1 tied). ‘What’s worse for the GOP’, Hood points out, is that the majority parties in state legislatures will control congressional redistricting in the wake of the rapidly approaching 2010 Census. ‘If Democrats retain their current edge, the US House will get a lot more blue.’<sup>7</sup>

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TABLE I: 1994 versus 2006

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	<i>Republican gains</i>	<i>Democrat gains</i>
	1994	2006
House	54	31
Senate	8	6
Governorships	10	6
State legislatures	20	4
State representatives	472	c.320

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Source: Storey and Moore, ‘Democrats’, and Hood, ‘GOP’.

Regionally, Republican candidates were decimated in the GOP’s original heartland, New England—including notoriously conservative New Hampshire, where Democrats took over the legislature for the first time

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<sup>6</sup> There are 98 partisan chambers in 50 states, but Nebraska, thanks to its great Progressive, George Norris, has had a unicameral, non-partisan legislature since 1937.

<sup>7</sup> John Hood, ‘GOP Car Wreck’, *National Review*, 4 December 2006. Democrats doubled the number of states (from 8 to 16) where they control both the legislature and the governor’s mansion. See analysis in Tim Storey and Nicole Moore, ‘Democrats Deliver a Power Punch’, *State Legislatures*, December 2006.

since the Civil War—and the Mid-Atlantic states, leading one prominent conservative to lament that ‘the Northeast is on its way to being lost forever to the GOP’.<sup>8</sup> Democrats also made surprising gains in the Midwest and the ‘red’ interior West, especially in Colorado where hi-tech money leveraged a growing Latino vote.<sup>9</sup> Even in the South, the Democrats managed to arrest their long-term decline and claw back 19 seats in state legislatures. (Despite the prevalent myth of a solidly Republican South, the Democrats still retain a 54 per cent majority in Dixie state houses.)<sup>10</sup>

In Kansas—Tom Frank’s icon state of voter false consciousness<sup>11</sup>—Democrat Nancy Boyda defeated incumbent Jim Ryun (the former Olympic track star) in a congressional district that Bush had carried by 20 percentage points two years earlier. Popular Democratic Governor Kathleen Sebelius was easily re-elected, while the other top state offices, the lieutenant and attorney generalships, were won by former Republicans running as Democrats—a startling reverse in the trend of political conversion. The state’s foremost cultural conservative, the fanatically anti-abortion attorney general Phil Kline, was pulverized: receiving barely one-third of the vote in the usually Republican exurbs of Kansas City (Johnson County).<sup>12</sup> Nothing seemed particularly ‘wrong’ with Kansas in the fall of 2006.

Such results convincingly refute the legend of invincibility that had been woven around Karl Rove’s signature strategy of intensive base mobilization (usually stimulated by hysteria over some imperilled Christian value) and massive negative advertising (usually perpetuating some outright lie or slander against the opposition). According to Stanley

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Martin, ‘Damn Yankees’, *National Review*, 18 December 2006.

<sup>9</sup> For a hysterical view of ‘how liberal millionaires are buying Colorado’s politics’, see John Miller, ‘The Color Purple’, *National Review*, 4 December 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Storey and Moore, ‘Democrats’.

<sup>11</sup> Frank’s brilliantly written and highly influential 2004 book, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, portrays a white working class that has surrendered any rational calculation of its economic interests to hopeless, manipulated cultural rage. Like many other progressives, he calls for the Democrats to counter Rovian cultural populism with their own economic populism. My 2005 critique of Frank, ‘What’s Wrong with America?’ (prepared for a UCLA debate) appears in *In Praise of Barbarians: essays against empire*, Chicago 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Slevin, ‘Trounced at Polls, Kansas GOP Is Still Plagued by Infighting’, *Washington Post*, 30 December 2006. Slevin argues that the culture wars—evolution and abortion particularly—have deeply, perhaps irreparably split the Kansas GOP.

Greenberg, ‘the Republican Party has ended up with the most negative image in memory, lower than Watergate’. But the Democratic pollster (writing in collaboration with Robert Borosage and James Carville) was adamant that Republican losses are not necessarily Democratic gains. ‘The Democratic Party also ended up being viewed more negatively during this election than in 2004 . . . Democrats have only modest advantages—and are chosen by fewer than 50 per cent on such key attributes as being “on your side”, “future-oriented” and “for families”.’<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Edsall agrees that ‘Democratic triumphs are fragile’ and warns that they are ‘based far more on widespread dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq than on the fundamental partisan and ideological shift that was apparent in 1980 and 1994 Republican breakthroughs’.<sup>14</sup> Partisan registration remains closer to parity (38 per cent Democrat versus 37 per cent Republican) than at any time since the late nineteenth century, and control of the House is arbitrated by swings of just a few percentage points: the reason the Republicans have been so keen to undertake controversial midterm redistrictings and gerrymanders to buttress their power.<sup>15</sup>

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TABLE 2: *Percentage of popular vote in House elections*

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	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>
2000	48	48
2002	51	46
2004	50	47
2006	46	52

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Source: Charlie Cook, ‘Rebalancing Act’, *National Journal*, 2 December 2006.

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<sup>13</sup> Borosage, Carville and Greenberg, *Meltdown Election*. Republican pollster Frank Luntz agrees with Greenberg: ‘So much of it [the election] was a statement of disappointment in Republican leadership rather than an embrace of the Democratic alternative. The election was a referendum on the national GOP.’ Storey and Moore, ‘Democrats’.

<sup>14</sup> Edsall, ‘White-Guy Rebellion’.

<sup>15</sup> The Senate, in which Wyoming with less than 500,000 people has the same representation as California with nearly 35 million, provides the Republicans (dominant in the rural, more thinly populated states) with a notorious advantage.

The victors, moreover, share no consensus about the direction of their party. In contrast to 1994, when the GOP was rapturously united around the programme of its congressional ‘revolution’, Democratic ideologues at the end of 2006 were fundamentally split. While progressives like Ezra Klein (*American Prospect*) fretted that Blue Dogs and DLC-ers were ready ‘to lock liberals out of the halls of power’, Christopher Hayes (*Nation*) applauded the ‘new Democratic populism’, and Michael Tomasky (*American Prospect* editor) argued that the party was cleverly moving to the centre and to the left simultaneously (‘the party managed to sustain this left–centre coalition and render the distinctions between the two groups less important’).<sup>16</sup> Hillary Clinton and her chorus of sycophantic voices boasted of the miracle of the ‘vital, dynamic centre’, while other Democrats pessimistically agreed with Safire’s acid prediction that the party was headed towards civil war.

In any event, the Democrats led by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid have two years to consolidate their enhanced electoral support and effectively arm Hillary Clinton for a very nasty brawl with either John McCain or Rudy Giuliani in 2008.<sup>17</sup> (Neither of the two mystery phenomena—Republican Mitt Romney and Democrat Barack Obama—are likely to survive the brutal scrutiny of the presidential primaries, although they may be recycled as vice-presidential timber.)<sup>18</sup> The 110th Congress will

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<sup>16</sup> Ezra Klein, ‘Spinned Right’, *American Prospect online*, 8 November 2006; Christopher Hayes, ‘The New Democratic Populism’, *Nation*, 4 December 2006; and Michael Tomasky, ‘Dems put the “big tent” back together’, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 November 2006.

<sup>17</sup> The backlash of independent voters against Bush pumped wind into the sails of both McCain and Giuliani, perceived as the only Republicans who can win that segment of the electorate; but even more dramatically, it increased the value of ‘Terminator’ futures. California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose political fortunes collapsed in 2005 after a disastrous stint as a conservative Republican, has returned from the dead in a new, hugely popular incarnation as a big-spending stealth-Democrat. His backers are currently canvassing the possibility of a constitutional amendment that would allow the foreign-born actor to run for president in 2012.

<sup>18</sup> An Opinion Research/CNN poll of whom voters did *not* want to be their party’s 2008 candidate found Mitt Romney at 50 per cent among Republicans (just behind retired Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist) and Barack Obama at 38 per cent among Democrats (behind Al Gore and the luckless John Kerry). See ‘Poll Track’, *National Journal*, 2 December 2006.

give the Democrats extraordinary opportunities to repeal the reactionary agendas established in 1994 by the ‘Republican Revolution’ and in 2001–02 by the ‘War on Terrorism’. But the Democrats will be torn between two categorical imperatives: on the one hand, to sink as many Republicans as possible with George Bush’s ship of state; and, on the other hand, to reclaim the mystic ‘centre’ and the support of corporate lobbyists. If the recent past is any guide, a seriously populist and ideologically combative Democratic politics is totally incompatible with the Clintonite project of making the Democrats the representatives *par excellence* of the knowledge economy and corporate globalization.

More specifically, the new Democratic majority must test its ambiguous promises of crusading populism *and* inclusive centrism against the recalcitrant realities of the four mega-issues that will inevitably dominate the new Congress: (1) the Iraq fiasco and the War on Terrorism; (2) the legacy of Republican congressional corruption and corporate fraud; (3) urgent, unmet social needs (including the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast) in the context of the huge Bush deficits; and (4) the growing unrest over the social costs of economic globalization. In each case, the hopeful expectations of last November’s voters for real changes in Washington are likely to be betrayed by the higher imperatives of electing Hillary and assuaging big business.

## II. SMALLER OR BIGGER WAR?

Unlike the 2004 presidential election and the controversy over the importance of ‘values voters’, there was nothing equivocal about the key issue that mobilized a majority of voters in November 2006. With the housing-bubble economy still pattering along (although a real-estate-induced recession may not be far away), and with Mexican- and gay-bashing failing to ignite significant national backlashes, the defining issue was the looming defeat of the US intervention in Iraq.

Six out of ten voters told pollsters that they were upset at Bush’s management of the war—the spiralling carnage in Baghdad and the paralysis in the White House—and had voted accordingly. Editorial page punditry, likewise, was united with exit-poll surveys in agreeing that Iraq was the Archimedean lever that had shifted independent voters so massively

TABLE 3: Voters' priorities

	<i>Democrats</i>	%	<i>Independents</i>	%	<i>Republicans</i>	%
1.	War in Iraq	61	War in Iraq	52	War in Iraq	38
2.	Economy	19	Economy	18	Fuel prices	20
3.	Health care & fuel prices	18	Health care & fuel prices	14	Immigration	19
4.	Energy crisis	10	Energy crisis	13	Terrorism	18
5.	Disaster relief	10	Immigration	9	National Security	12

Voters were asked what the President's 'top priorities' should be. Source: Gallup Poll 28–31 August 2006, cited in Jeffrey Jones, 'Iraq War Dominates as Americans' Top Priority for Government', Gallup Organization, Princeton, 8 September 2006.

toward the Democrats.<sup>19</sup> Conservative ideologues and business lobbyists, meanwhile, were appalled to see their domestic agendas upstaged by the Frankenstein monster of Iraq.<sup>20</sup> Even that 'wholly-owned subsidiary of the Republican Party' (as columnist Rosa Brooks has called it), the military electorate, has begun to bolt the stable: *Military Times* polls show the percentage of soldiers identifying as Republicans declining from 60 per cent in 2004 to 46 per cent in late 2006. Only slightly more than one-third of GIs currently approve of Bush's handling of the war.<sup>21</sup>

After twelve years of arrogant majority rule in Congress, the GOP has seemingly foundered on the contradictions of the new imperialism.

<sup>19</sup> William Schneider was fascinated by an almost exact numerical correlation in every region between disapproval of the war and disapproval of the president: 'Swing Time'. Charlie Cook, another well-known psephologist, gave Iraq credit for 70 per cent of the national shift from red to blue. Charlie Cook, 'The War's Wave', *National Journal*, 11 November 2006.

<sup>20</sup> See Bara Vaida and Neil Munro, 'Reversal of Fortunes', *National Journal*, 11 November 2006.

<sup>21</sup> As Brooks emphasizes, the aggressive Republicanization of the professional military is a relatively recent phenomenon (since Reagan and the Second Cold War) that has been reinforced by GOP policies that have shifted military bases and officer-training programmes to more conservative Sunbelt states. Rosa Brooks, 'Weaning the military from the GOP', *Los Angeles Times*, 5 January 2007.

Or has it? The irony of the anti-war vote, of course, was that it elected Democrats who are under no obligation to actually end the barbarous US occupation. Writing shortly after the election, Tom Hayden praised the citizen groups in Chicago and elsewhere who had fought to make the election a plebiscite on an increasingly unpopular war, but warned presciently that ‘neither party is prepared to accept that the war is a lost cause’ and that the Iraq Study Group report would offer the Democratic leadership common ground with congressional Republicans ‘to eliminate “immediate withdrawal” as an option’.<sup>22</sup>

Despite majority public belief that Iraq is a ‘bad war’ and the troops should come home, the current Democratic strategy is to snipe from the sidelines at Bush’s ruinous policies while avoiding any decisive steps to actually end the occupation. Indeed, from the standpoint of cold political calculus, the Democrats have no more interest in helping Bush extract himself from the morass of Iraq than Bush has had in actually capturing or killing Osama bin Laden. Accordingly, as the *Los Angeles Times* recently reported, ‘Pelosi and the Democrats plan no dramatic steps to influence the course of the war’.<sup>23</sup> Democratic National Committee chair Howard Dean, who once claimed to be the very incarnation of the anti-war movement, now cautions that the most the public can expect from the new majority is ‘some restraint on the president’.<sup>24</sup> Likewise Pelosi has renounced from the outset the Democrats’ one actual power over White House war policy: ‘We will have oversight. We will not cut off funding’.<sup>25</sup>

The real Democratic opposition to the war (John Murtha’s highly publicized defection aside) has come from the ranks of the Black Caucus, whose members—including John Lewis, Charles Rangel and Barbara Lee—are also the chief instigators of the recently organized Out of Iraq

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<sup>22</sup> Tom Hayden, ‘Election Interpretation’, handout to his class at Pitzer College, 9 November 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Noam Levey, ‘Democracy To-Do List is Modest at Outset’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2 January 2007.

<sup>24</sup> William Schneider, ‘Warring Sects’, *National Journal*, 18 November 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Levey, ‘Democracy To-Do List’. Pelosi echoes the position of chief Democratic Leadership Council ideologue, Will Marshall, that ‘those mindful of history [e.g., Vietnam] will shy away from trying to take over Iraqi policy by, for instance, cutting off funding for the war.’ James Kitfield, ‘Next Steps in Iraq’, *National Journal*, 11 November 2006.

Caucus, chaired by Los Angeles's fiery Maxine Waters. The substantial overlap between the anti-war caucus (which also includes ten or so Latino representatives led by New York's outspoken José Serrano) and the House membership most strongly committed to urban social programmes is expressive of a fundamental political trend that the media has all but ignored: the widespread consciousness in communities of colour that the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan (costing more than \$2 billion per week) are stealing critical resources from human needs in poorer inner cities and older suburbs, as well as putting immigrant communities under the shadow of disloyalty.

This new equation between urban needs, immigrant civil rights and anti-imperialism could become a potent counter-agenda in American politics if it were reinforced by grass-roots activism and consistent protest. But here is the rub. Although the Out of Iraq Caucus has grown to 74 members (more than one-fifth of Democratic House membership) in the wake of the November vote, its clout is considerably diminished by the absence of a national anti-war movement, as well as by the failure of the major progressive trade unions such as SEIU, HERE-UNITE and the AFT to make withdrawal a political priority.

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TABLE 4: *Democrat Congress Members affiliated to ideological caucuses*

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<i>On the Left</i>		<i>On the Right</i>	
Progressive Caucus	70	New Democrat Coalition	60
Black Caucus	43	Blue Dog Coalition	44
Out of Iraq Caucus	74	Democrats for Life	32

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Some memberships overlap. Source: 'Democrats to Watch', *National Journal*, 18 November 2006, pp. 23–6.

Indeed the electoral landscape in November was shaped by the central paradox of soaring anti-war sentiment without a visible anti-war movement. In contrast to 1968 and 1972—or even, for that matter, 1916 and 1938—voter opposition to intervention overseas was not buttressed

by an organized peace movement capable of holding politicians' feet to the fire or linking opposition to the war to a deeper critique of foreign policy (in this case, the War on Terrorism). The broad, spontaneous anti-war movement of winter 2003—whose grass-roots energy filled the void of Democratic opposition to Bush's invasion—was first absorbed by the Dean campaign in spring 2004 and then politically dissolved into the Kerry candidacy. The 2004 Democratic Convention, which should have been a forum for wide-ranging attacks on Republican foreign and domestic policies, was transformed into an obnoxious patriotic celebration of John Kerry as the Brahmin Rambo.

Although many activists hoped that an autonomous peace movement would re-emerge from the ruins of the Kerry campaign, there have been only a few regional pockets of sustained protest. One of Howard Dean's principal assignments as national Democratic chair (and the major reason for his selection) has been to keep anti-war forces immobilized within a diffuse and hypocritical Anybody But Bush coalition. By making Bush and his political parents Cheney and Rumsfeld the paramount issues, Democratic sophistry has avoided a real debate on Iraq. Leading Democrats may bash the President for the chaos in Baghdad, but none of them has offered a critique of American responsibility for the larger anarchy that is rapidly engulfing a vast arc of countries from Pakistan to Sudan. There has been no debate on the Bush administration's green light for the Israeli massacre of Lebanese civilians or, more recently, on the CIA's sinister role in instigating the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia and the US air strikes there. The Israeli right, meanwhile, knows that Hillary Clinton will be as intransigently supportive of its policies in Gaza and on the West Bank as any Texas fundamentalist eagerly awaiting Armageddon.

Indeed the Democratic leadership—the Black Caucus and a few notable progressives aside—has exploited domestic resentment against Bush policies in Iraq to *consolidate*, not debunk, the underlying Washington consensus about the War on Terrorism. Whereas a national anti-war movement would presumably have linked the apocalypse in Iraq with looming catastrophe in Afghanistan and a new regional war in the Horn of Africa, the Democratic platform, in contrast, reaffirmed commitment to the war against Islamists as part of a larger programme of *expanding*, not reducing, global counter-insurgency. 'Bring the troops home now' was not a Democratic plank, but doubling the size of the Special Forces

‘to destroy terrorist networks’ and increasing spending on homeland anti-terrorism are centrepieces of the Democrats’ ‘New Direction for America’ (a collection of sound bites and slogans that offers a pale shadow to Gingrich’s robust 1994 ‘Contract with America’).<sup>26</sup>

The Democratic leadership likewise has deliberately avoided a debate on the constitutional implications of the Patriot Act; not a single prominent Democrat has proposed the straightforward rollback of the totalitarian powers claimed by the presidency since 9/11. Indeed Hillary Clinton has signalled that she favours imprisonment without trial and even the use of torture in certain circumstances. Speaker Pelosi, meanwhile, has emphasized that the chief Democratic goals in the 110th Congress will be, first, to pick the uncontroversial, low-hanging fruit of mainstream reform (minimum wage, prescriptions, student loans and so on), then move quickly to pass an ‘innovation agenda’ for hi-tech industries. Foreign policy debates in the House—thanks to the hawkish counterweight of more than 100 New Democrats and Blue Dogs—will not reach beyond the bipartisan assumptions of the Baker–Hamilton Plan or whatever new, coercive strategy for Palestinian national self-liquidation is proposed by Condoleezza Rice.

What then has the anti-war vote actually won? At the end of the day, public disillusionment with the messianic politics of the neo-Conservatives has paved the way for a ‘Realist’ restoration under the aegis of the Baker–Hamilton plan that reconciles the foreign-policy establishments of Bush Senior and Clinton. The bloodbath in Iraq has opened every sarcophagus on the Potomac, disgorging a palsied army of ancient secretaries of state and national security advisors (Scowcroft, Eagleburger, Brzezinski and, of course, the chief mummy, Kissinger himself) eager to lecture Congress on ‘rational’ approaches to imposing American will on the rest of the world. Hillary Clinton, of course, is the Queen of the Realists (except when it conflicts with Israeli interests), and the new Democratic majority in the House is unlikely to stray very far from the already manifest script of her 2008 campaign. In future debates with Rudy Giuliani or John McCain (who has recently appointed himself

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<sup>26</sup> When the *National Journal* asked Ike Skelton, the new chair of the Armed Services Committee, about his priorities, he responded: ‘Are they getting jammers? Are they getting body armour? The infantry and the Special Forces need to be larger, better trained, and have better equipment.’ ‘Democrats to Watch’.

saviour of 'victory' in Iraq), Hillary is poised to be a hard-muscled GI Jane, parrying every macho gesture with even tougher stances on al-Qaeda, Iran, Palestine and Cuba.

The silver lining, if it exists, is that the Democrats in Congress, with the Black Caucus and its allies lobbying for withdrawal, are more likely to be swayed by public anger as insurgency and civil war in Iraq continue to exhaust the resources of the Occupation. In a desperate gambit to appease Sunnis and defend a zone of control in Baghdad, the Bush administration is currently weighing an all-out assault ('surge' is its military precondition) on the slum militias of Muqtada al-Sadr. A new war with the Mahdi Army (hugely enlarged and better trained since its first battles with American troops in 2004) would open another Pandora's box, risking unsustainable American casualties and an explosive response from the entire Shiite world. (Inevitable US air strikes on Sadr City would produce grim scenes reminiscent of the Israeli bombardment of southern Beirut.)

If Condoleezza Rice and Robert Gates sanction this ultimate escalation, they have a good chance of bringing some macho Democrats aboard (although they will almost certainly lose some leading Republicans). Senate leader Harry Reid has already demonstrated his epic confusion by endorsing and then quickly retracting support for the proposed 'surge' of 35,000 more US troops into Baghdad. In the Senate, the hawkish Joe Lieberman, who was re-elected as an independent after his defeat in the Democratic primary, will be a powerful swing vote in favour of escalation. Pelosi, at the time of writing, is considering resistance to new monies for the 'surge', but will not tamper with funding for existing troop levels.

What stance Pelosi and Reid ultimately assume, and how hard they actually push for the 'phased withdrawal' proposed in their six-plank November programme, will be largely determined by the resurgence—or not—of the anti-war movement. Last November's voters certainly had fewer illusions than their candidates about the hopelessness of the situation (according to exit polls, 'only about one in five voters say they think that either the President or the Democrats have a clear plan for Iraq'),<sup>27</sup> and public opinion may again find volcanic alternatives to an impotent

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<sup>27</sup> Pew Research Center data cited in William Schneider, 'The Price of Patience', *National Journal*, 2 December 2006.

Congress. Indeed, only mass protest, unfettered from the Realpolitik of Howard Dean and MoveOn.org, can shift the balance of power in Congress towards a decisive debate on withdrawal.

### III. THE LIMITS OF INQUIRY

One of the most savoury moments of the November vote was the election of Nick Lampson to Tom DeLay's old seat in the 22nd District of Texas. Lampson—a school teacher who was formerly the Democratic congressman from Galveston—had been one of the principal victims of DeLay's infamous 2003 redistricting of Texas: an unprecedented mid-decade gerrymander that was made possible by the massive and illegally laundered corporate donations that the House Majority Leader had deployed to elect a Republican majority in the Texas Legislature the year before. Thanks to the courage of a local grand jury and Travis County DA Ronnie Earle, DeLay was indicted for perjury in September 2005, and soon afterward, under federal investigation for his close ties to corrupt lobbyist Jack Abramoff, he was forced to resign his majority leadership, then his congressional seat.

DeLay, of course, was the Robespierre of the 1994 'Republican Revolution', perhaps the most ruthless crusader for one-party government in US history. As one of the co-founders of the so-called 'K Street Project',<sup>28</sup> along with Rick Santorum and Grover Norquist, he was notorious for coercing huge campaign contributions from corporate lobbyists (as well as promises to hire only Republicans) in exchange for allowing them to directly write GOP legislation. As Majority Leader (or 'Hammer' as he was known to Republicans as well as Democrats), he imposed unprecedented ideological discipline on the GOP (even defying a White House attempt to give a small tax break to low-income families) while slashing at every vestige of bipartisanship and collegial civility. In partnership with the infamous Abramoff, he was also the advocate of the sleaziest causes in the Capitol,

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<sup>28</sup> 'K Street'—after the office address of many corporate lobbyists—is the metonym for the revolving door that punctually turns former members of Congress (especially committee chairs) and their aides into highly-paid lobbyists for pharmaceutical companies, oil giants, real-estate brokers, arms dealers and foreign dictators. Although civics textbooks have yet to acknowledge its enormous importance, 'K Street' is truly the fourth, 'financial' branch of national government in the United States.

ranging from support for indentured labour in the sweatshop paradise of the Northern Marianas (a US territory without the protection of US labour laws) to under-the-table favours for a giant Russian corporation that in turn kicked back money to DeLay-related causes.<sup>29</sup>

After more than a decade of being roadkill in the wake of DeLay's sleaze-financed campaign juggernaut (with Karl Rove as hit-and-run driver), the Democrats now have the opportunity to begin to roll back the Republican Revolution—which is to say, to break up the corrupt flows of money and power personified by DeLay and the K Street Project. Congress, of course, has always been about 'pay to play' and the lubrication of politics by lobbyists, but never before 1994 had the Republicans employed such stark coercion to impose themselves as the obligatory rather than simply the natural party of business. (In part, this was a reaction to Democratic successes in attracting support from bicoastal, new-economy sectors like entertainment, media, software, bio-tech and gaming.)

The exhilarating promise of the November victory is that a cadre of veteran liberal Democrats—Charles Rangel (Ways and Means), Barney Frank (Financial Services), Henry Waxman (Government Reform), David Obey (Appropriations), Ike Skelton (Armed Forces), and John Rockefeller IV (Senate Intelligence Committee)—will use their hard-won committee chairmanships to mount sweeping inquiries of the Himalayan corruption and collusion of the DeLay years. With subpoena power finally in the hands of the opposition, the interlocking special interests that dominate the Bush administration will face the comprehensive exposure and accounting that they managed to elude in the aftermath of the Enron scandal. Indeed, as the skeletons come tumbling out of the Republican closet, and the public realizes how vast the extent of graft and fraud in the occupation of Iraq, the non-reconstruction of New Orleans, 'homeland security' boondoggles like the phony Bioshield programme, and the subsidization of the insurance, pharmaceutical and oil industries—then voters will overwhelmingly endorse a new regime of government oversight, renewed environmental and health-and-safety regulation, and serious campaign finance reform.

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<sup>29</sup> See Lou Dubose and Jan Reid, *The Hammer: Tom DeLay, God, Money, and the Rise of the Republican Congress*, New York 2004.

This is the real opportunity to which the Democrats could rise in theory, but there is little chance that their leadership will actually allow congressional probes to follow money and corruption all the way upstream. Progressive hopes that Congress might return to the heroic days of Thurman Arnold's anti-trust investigations of the late 1930s, or the Watergate Committee's exposés of Republican law-breaking in the 1970s, are pipe dreams in face of Pelosi's insistence that Democratic watchdogs be tightly leashed, in the interests of building 'centrism'. She has already extracted humiliating loyalty oaths from the two senior Black Democrats most likely to rock the bipartisan boat: forcing John Conyers (chair of the Judiciary Committee) to recant his advocacy of impeachment ('the country does not want or need any more paralysed partisan government', he said recently) and making Charles Rangel, who has hammered Dick Cheney like no one else in Congress, sing a chorus or two of the company song ('I have to take a leadership view', he promised).<sup>30</sup> Even more diabolically, she has put Henry Waxman ('White House Enemy No. 1') in charge of ensuring (in the words of analyst Brian Friel) that congressional oversight does not 'open Democrats up to charges of obstructionism and extremism in the next campaign cycle'.<sup>31</sup>

In the absence of relentless pressure from labour and environmental groups, the Democrats are unlikely to discomfort powerful business interests that they would otherwise delight in wooing away from the Republicans. Certainly there will be some reckoning with Halliburton and contract fraud in Iraq, and perhaps the perjury trial of Scooter Libby (Cheney's indicted chief of staff) will be spiced with new revelations from Rockefeller and his Senate Intelligence Committee about the administration's lies and fabricated evidence on the road to Baghdad; but a widening circle of exposure will meet increasing resistance, not simply from Republicans fighting for their lives, but from Democrats trying to protect their renewed ties to the very corporate groups at the core of corruption and scandal. The opportunity to expose and reform will be counter-balanced at each step by the temptation to make deals and collect campaign contributions. As the *Economist* cynically but accurately put it, 'the new house chieftains do not see themselves as

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Cohen, David Baumann and Kirk Victor, 'Going Blue', *National Journal*, 11 November 2006, p. 16; and 'Democrats to Watch'.

<sup>31</sup> Brian Friel, 'Junkyard Dogs, on a Leash', *National Journal*, 11 November 2006.

revolutionaries. Their goal, after all, is not to enact a specific agenda, but to prepare the ground for the presidential election of 2008.<sup>32</sup>

Because corporate lobbyists are scared of the subpoena power wielded by Rangel and Waxman (however constrained by Pelosi), they will happily seek refuge in Democratic campaign committees. The fusion between Corporate America and the Republican Party appears less permanent and unassailable than it did a year ago and, as *BusinessWeek* predicted shortly after the election, ‘companies will be rushing to stock up on lobbyists with Democratic credentials’.<sup>33</sup> The Democratic leadership, for its part, is brazenly cruising for cash. The next election cycle will be the most expensive in history, and Hillary Clinton is unlikely to relish congressional hearings into the crimes of the pharmaceutical, oil and military-construction industries that could unleash massive corporate retaliation against her in 2008. From a strategic perspective, it makes far more sense for the Democrats to concentrate congressional exposés on a handful of Administration villains, while quietly rebuilding parity of representation on K Street, where many of the winged monkeys are reputedly rejoicing at their recent liberation from DeLay, the wicked witch of Texas.

As *BusinessWeek* reassured nervous readers, any tendency toward populist excess in the new Congress would be counteracted by the millionaires, corporate lawyers and hi-tech entrepreneurs in the ranks of Democracy itself, especially the fervently pro-business New Democrat Coalition (the House arm of the Democratic Leadership Council) chaired by Rep. Ellen Tauscher of California. ‘In a narrowly divided Democratic House, Tauscher’s band of about 40 economic moderates would wield extraordinary power to influence tax, trade and budget policy.’ Moreover, CEOs worried about possible indictment or evil corporations fearful of losing their lucrative federal contracts could always appeal to K Street’s new wonder, George Crawford, who as Nancy Pelosi’s former chief of staff has positioned himself to be Washington’s chief deal-maker. (‘In recent months,’ reveals *BusinessWeek*, ‘he has added Exxon Mobil Corp. and Amgen Inc. to his client roster.’)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Old dogs; few tricks’, *Economist*, 11 November 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Dunham and Eamon Javers, ‘The Politics of Change’, *BusinessWeek*, 20 November 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Dunham and Javers, ‘Politics of Change’.

Beyond the uncontroversial agenda of the ‘100 hours’, few of the promised reforms that have attracted progressive voters to the Democrats are likely to make any headway against the coming hurricane of corporate lobbying and political fundraising organized by Crawford and other Democratic insiders. Energy policy, for example, has been one of the party’s highest-profile issues, and Senator Barbara Boxer (new chair of the Environment and Public Works Committee) has rallied a broad coalition of environmentalists around tough emissions and fuel economy standards for automobiles. But as journalist Richard Simon recently reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, the Detroit automakers and Texas oil men are surprisingly unworried. ‘We’re confident that there are plenty of Democrats who know and understand us’, a leader of the National Petrochemical and Refiners Association told him.<sup>35</sup>

The ‘understanding Democrats’ in the 110th Congress will include senators from energy-exporting states, such as Mary Landrieu (Louisiana) and Jeff Bingaman (New Mexico), as well as the powerful chair of the House Energy Committee, John Dingell (Michigan), who will fight to defend every last molecule of carbon dioxide emitted by a Ford Explorer or Chevy Suburban. Nancy Pelosi may take away some of the oil industry’s more outrageous tax breaks, but Barbara Boxer will never take away rich Americans’ SUVs or reduce their dependence on foreign oil. No matter how many millions of people may be terrified by global warming’s ‘inconvenient truth’, there will always be Democrats to help filibuster any cap on greenhouse emissions or vote to preserve the oil industry’s special entitlements.

#### IV. DEFICITS AND DOG POUNDS

In contrast to most European parliamentary systems, the American party system is only partially ‘nationalized’, and regional and local agendas preserve exceptional salience in the operation of Congress. The 2006 election is a spectacular case in point: whether or not the electorate actually shifted left, congressional clout—in one of the most dramatic geographical power-shifts in memory—moved back to the Blue coasts. Texas, Florida, Virginia and Georgia (whose suburbs were the strategic pivots of the 1994 Republican revolution) are out, and California and

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Simon, ‘Green laws no slam-dunk in new Congress’, *Los Angeles Times*, 18 December 2006.

New York (the pariahs of the age of Bush) are in. Or, to be more precise, Democrats representing the golden triangle of Wall Street, Hollywood and Silicon Valley now rule Congress.

Although California and New York (together with Massachusetts and Washington) hegemonize the knowledge economy and the US export of technologies, entertainment and financial services, they have become cash cows for regionally redistributive Republican policies since 1994. California is perhaps the extreme case. For fifty years, from Lend-Lease until the fall of the Berlin Wall, California's aerospace and electronics industries had been irrigated by an aqueduct of defence dollars; since 1990 at the latest, fiscal subsidies have switched direction and California now exports its federal taxes to heavily Republican states. Whereas California once received \$1.15 in federal expenditure for every dollar it paid in federal taxes, it now gets back only 79 cents. (The inequities are worse than depicted in Table 5, since California and New York are also the largest ports of entry for new immigrants and finance services that should be federal mandates.) Partly as a result of this shortfall, the

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TABLE 5: *Ratio of federal spending to taxes*

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<i>Red States</i>		<i>Blue States</i>	
Texas	1.00	California	0.79
Florida	0.98	New York	0.80
Virginia	1.59	Illinois	0.72
Georgia	0.96	Massachusetts	0.79
Arizona	1.23	Connecticut	0.67
Alabama	1.68	Minnesota	0.69
N. Carolina	1.08	Wisconsin	0.83
S. Carolina	1.36	Michigan	0.86
Kentucky	1.51	Oregon	0.99
Alaska	1.90	Washington	0.91

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Source: 'State Blaming Washington for Budget Woes', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 February 2005.

world's premier science-based regional economy is supported by scandalously decayed physical, social and educational (at least, primary and secondary school) infrastructures.

But the Democrats will have to fight themselves, and not just Republicans, if they want to reverse the relative decline of federal expenditure, especially in the ageing cities of the Bluest states. While the new Congressional leadership, especially Pelosi and Clinton, have individually lobbied with great ferocity for their own districts' and states' needs, they have collectively tied the party's hands with a cargo-cultish commitment to deficit reduction and fiscal frugality. Although Iraq and political corruption were the most important issues amongst voters, that ancient Republican battle cry—'fiscal responsibility'—was the programmatic centrepiece of the Democrats' 'New Direction for America'.

Despite claims in the *Nation* and elsewhere that the Democrats are now channelling their 'inner populist', the party remains completely in thrall to 'Rubinomics'—the fervent emphasis on budgetary discipline rather than social spending that characterized the reign of former Goldman Sachs CEO Robert Rubin as Clinton's Secretary of the Treasury. In practice, this translates not simply into a Democratic reluctance to undertake new spending, but also a refusal to debate the rollback of any of Bush's \$1 trillion in tax cuts for the affluent. 'Tax and spend, tax and spend, tax and spend', Senator Kent Conrad (chair of the Budget Committee) told the *New York Times*, 'we're not going there'.<sup>36</sup> The president can give away the Treasury to the super-rich and run up colossal debts as he invades the world, but the Democrats are now sworn to a path of anti-Keynesian rectitude that would have made Calvin Coolidge blush.

Indeed Congress's most 'rabid budget-balancers' (this is the official description on their website) are the Blue Dogs, a caucus of conservative Democrats organized in 1995 in jealous emulation of Gingrich's Republicans. Hailing mainly from rapidly growing smaller cities and exurbs such as Merced, Tallahassee and Hot Springs, the Blue Dogs cultivate a downhome guns-and-bibles image in contrast to the cappuccino-drinking New Democrats (who tend to represent wealthier suburbs in Connecticut and California). Although they share the

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<sup>36</sup> Edmund Andrews, 'The Democrats' Cautious Tiptoe Around the President's Tax Cuts', *New York Times*, 4 January 2007.

hawkish politics of the DLC New Dems, they are less friendly to hedge funds and free-trade agreements. The real fire in the belly of the Blue Dogs is their demagogic opposition to state welfarism and, especially, federal aid to Black and Latino-majority big cities. With 44 members in their expanded ‘dog pound’ and plentiful allies on the Republican side, the Blue Dogs vow to cap spending in the next Congress, while gathering votes for a constitutional amendment to require an annually balanced federal budget.<sup>37</sup> One of their chief allies, South Carolina’s John Spratt, will be chair of the House Budget Committee and, with Pelosi’s blessing, the Party’s ‘chief enforcer’ of budgetary austerity.<sup>38</sup>

Terrified of the perceived electoral and financial repercussions of attempting to reform the current tax system, and with the Blue Dogs barking at their heels, the leadership prefers to let Republican deficits and tax cuts dictate Democratic policy. Karl Rove proposes to do precisely that and, in the New Year, Bush invited the Democrats to join him in balancing the budget, ‘a goal that would tie the hands of the Democrats’, leaving them ‘little or no room to manoeuvre their priorities through Congress’.<sup>39</sup>

#### V. NEW ORLEANS VERSUS SILICON VALLEY

The Democratic leadership’s public preference for balanced budgets over human needs is thus partly a reflection of the balance of power within the party, where the Blue Dogs (either alone or in combination with the New Dems) now claim de facto veto power over new legislation. It was presumably this pressure from conservative white Democrats that led congressional election strategists under the command of Illinois representative Rahm Emanuel to deliberately delete any mention of New Orleans from 2006 campaign advertising.<sup>40</sup>

The fate of New Orleans, of course, is one of the great moral watersheds in modern American history, but most Democrats shamelessly refused

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<sup>37</sup> Blue Dog Coalition, ‘12-Point Reform Plan for Curing Our Nation’s Addiction to Deficit Spending’, at [www.bluedogdemocrat.org](http://www.bluedogdemocrat.org).

<sup>38</sup> ‘Democrats to Watch’.

<sup>39</sup> Joel Havemann, ‘Bush wants budget balanced by 2012’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4 January 2007.

<sup>40</sup> ‘It’s as if this year, Katrina was the subliminal issue.’ Michael Tisserand, ‘The Katrina Factor’, *Nation*, 1 January 2007.

to make federal responses to Hurricane Katrina or the subsequent ethnic cleansing of the Gulf Coast central issues in the campaign. Although President Bush himself had declared in his Jackson Square speech that ‘we have a duty to confront this poverty [revealed by Katrina] with bold action’, the Democrats have shown no greater sense of ‘duty’ or capacity for ‘bold action’ than a notoriously hypocritical and incompetent White House. Their priorities were exemplified by the six-plank national platform in November that stressed deficits and troop buildups but failed to mention either Katrina or poverty.

Even the Black Caucus, with some individual exceptions, has been surprisingly listless in its response to an unending series of Bush administration provocations (including, most recently, the decisions to knock down 4,000 units of little-damaged public housing in New Orleans and abruptly end housing aid to thousands of Katrina refugees outside the city). Although Harlem’s Rangel has promised new congressional hearings on poverty in the light of the New Orleans catastrophe, he is unlikely to defy the leadership’s deficit-reduction fetish. It will be easier to hand out more blame (richly deserved, of course) to Republican policies than to roll back tax cuts for the rich to pay for new social spending.

But Nancy, Harry and Hillary do have one domestic crusade whose importance transcends other dogmas and constraints: the promotion of the ‘innovation agenda’ that the Democrats hope will dramatically solidify their support among hi-tech corporations and science-based firms across the country. If you wanted to find the missing urgency and passion that the Democrats should have focused on Katrina and urban poverty, it was evident last year in the rousing speeches that Pelosi and other leading Democrats delivered in tech hubs like Emeryville, Mountain View, Raleigh and Redmond.

Unlike bringing the troops home from Iraq or rebuilding homes and lives in New Orleans, the innovation agenda is a ‘real’ Democratic priority. Angry at the Republican failure to renew all-important R&D tax credits for Silicon Valley firms, tech industry leaders, including the CEOs of Cisco and Genentech, worked with Pelosi and her Bay Area Democratic colleagues to develop a list of key demands—including new stock option accounting rules, permanent R&D credits, patent reforms, subsidies for alternative energy, a doubling of funding for the National Science Foundation, and ‘network neutrality’ for the internet—that the

Democrats have promised to pass in 2007.<sup>41</sup> (Democrats have also long supported the H1-B visa programme that keeps Silicon Valley awash with cheap foreign engineers, most of whom do not have the right to join unions or organize.)<sup>42</sup>

The Democrats' avid interest in patents and innovation was punctually rewarded with a 50 per cent increase (over 2004) in campaign contributions from hi-tech industries to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, while in 2000 the Republican share of Silicon Valley political money 'was 43 per cent, now it's 4 per cent'.<sup>44</sup> Since the first days of the Clinton administration, seducing the software and biotech sectors and their allied venture capitalists (along with deepening already profound ties to entertainment and media industries) has been the Democrats' equivalent of the Republicans' K Street Project.<sup>45</sup> Now, with Al Gore sitting on the boards of Google and Apple, and Pelosi plotting virtual futures with Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the Millennium has arrived. Indeed with the ascent of Bay Area Democrats to such commanding positions in Congress, New Orleans may continue to moulder in misery, but Silicon Valley and its outliers can now trade pork as equals with the oil men and defence contractors still bunkered inside the White House.

## VI. DARK POPULISM

The Democrats, as Thomas Edsall frequently points out these days, represent two very different and largely incompatible population universes. Two out of five Democratic voters fit the stereotype of 'well-educated, well-off, culturally liberal professionals', but the rest of the party's base are people who are 'socially and economically disadvantaged' in the new Gilded Age: the Black and Latino working classes, white women in

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<sup>41</sup> Jim Puzzanghera, 'Pelosi likely to speak up for tech industry', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 November 2006.

<sup>42</sup> David Bacon, 'Immigrants Find Hi-Tech Servitude in Silicon Valley', *Labor Notes*, September 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Puzzanghera, 'Pelosi likely to speak up'.

<sup>44</sup> CRP communications director Massie Ritsch in one of the *National Journal's* 'Technology Daily' communiqués, August 2006.

<sup>45</sup> See Sara Miles, *How to Hack a Party Line: The Democrats and Silicon Valley*, New York 2001.

lower-end information-sector jobs, and white men in traditional but rapidly shrinking industrial occupations.<sup>46</sup> The post-New Deal Party led by the Clintons is entirely mobilized to articulate and defend the interests of affluent knowledge workers and the globalized industries in which they work; the rest of the Democrats ride in the back of the bus on the cynical assumption that Blacks, immigrants and Rustbelt whites have nowhere else to go and thus are an automatic blue vote.

Since the rise and fall of Jesse Jackson's electrifying 'Rainbow Coalition' campaign in 1984, there has been no serious challenge to the dominance of the New Democrats and their version of 'Third Way' ideology, alloying economic neoliberalism and cultural tolerance. Yet the dream of a new populist, anti-Yuppie uprising, fuelled by righteous blue-collar anger and rousing the party's long neglected majority, has continued to inspire progressives and veterans of the Rainbow as they have suffered under the arrogant yoke of DLC centrists and economic globalizers.

Then, a few days after his stunning upset of George Allen in Virginia, Democratic senator-elect James Webb published an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* under the provocative headline 'Class Struggle'. Webb, who was Secretary of the Navy under Ronald Reagan, warned that an 'ever-widening divide' of socio-economic inequality was plunging the United States back into 'a class-based system, the likes of which we have not seen since the nineteenth century'. While their wages stagnated and social security declined, working-class Americans were diverted by carefully orchestrated hysteria about 'God, guns, gays, abortion and the flag'. 'The politics of the Karl Rove era', warned the former leading Republican, 'were designed to distract and divide the very people who would ordinarily be rebelling against the deterioration of their way of life.'<sup>47</sup>

Webb's column predictably shocked many *wsj* readers, but it delighted progressives, who recognized that he was quoting almost verbatim from *What's the Matter with Kansas?* and endorsing Tom Frank's call for the Democrats to reclaim the mantle of economic populism. Webb argued that the Democratic victory would ensure that 'American workers [finally] have a chance to be heard' in their legitimate complaints about the social costs of free trade and job export. 'And our government

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Edsall, *National Journal*, 23 September 2006. He uses Pew Research Center data to characterize the Democratic electorate.

<sup>47</sup> James Webb, 'Class Struggle: American workers have a chance to be heard', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 November 2006.

leaders', he intoned, 'have no greater duty than to confront the growing unfairness in this age of globalization.'

Bombast or the manifesto for the long-awaited uprising? Writing in the *Nation* a few weeks later, Christopher Hayes argued that Webb's born-again concern for working-class victims of corporate globalization was part of a genuine populist trend within the Democratic Party, whose standard-bearers also include congressional victor Heath Shuler in North Carolina and new Senator Sherrod Brown in Ohio.<sup>48</sup> Certainly their appeals to economic patriotism (Shuler accused his Republican congressional opponent of 'selling out American families') and strident denunciations of 'internationalists' and 'free traders' struck real sparks in Carolina and Virginia textile towns and the Appalachian counties of Ohio, where whole industries have died in the last decade. In 2004, John Kerry lost the mountains and piedmont (including hardcore Democratic West Virginia) because he had almost nothing to say about the regional jobs crisis; this time around, the Democrats fielded first-class demagoguery in a local drawl.

But as Hayes himself eloquently emphasizes, 'economic populism has a dark side', and he allows that other analysts

have raised the spectre of the rise of a 'Lou Dobbs'-like wing of the party whose economic arguments are inextricably linked to a racialized nationalism, the kind of populism that's equally comfortable bashing corporations that outsource jobs and 'illegal aliens' who take away Americans' jobs here at home, and whose opposition to the Iraq War, like Pat Buchanan's, is rooted in an America-first isolationism.

Although Hayes prefers to believe in the progressive trend of figures like Webb and Shuler, I think he is most accurate when he compares their politics to racist media demagogues like Dobbs and Buchanan.<sup>49</sup>

A careful reading of Webb's 'class struggle' article, for example, reveals precisely his belief that Mexican gardeners and investment bankers are

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<sup>48</sup> Hayes, 'New Democratic Populism'.

<sup>49</sup> Hayes, 'New Democratic Populism'. I leave aside for later discussion the emergent presidential campaign of John Edwards who, in a quest to outflank Hillary on the left, has seemingly embraced a more robust and authentic progressivism than the trick-populism that disappointed his followers in 2004. For an intriguing preview, see Perry Bacon, 'The Anti-Clinton', *Time*, 15 January 2007.

coequal exploiters of the native working class, with a ‘vast underground labour pool from illegal immigration’ waiting to drown American values and wages. A strange passage about the ‘unspoken insinuation’ that ‘certain immigrant groups have the “right genetics” and thus are natural entrants to the “overclass”’ can be decoded as a reference to the Yellow Peril fantasies that infuse Webb’s public utterances. As Secretary of the Navy he was one of the principal advocates of a continuing Cold War with China, which he later saw developing a ‘strategic axis with the Muslim world’, and he broke with Bush policies in Iraq precisely because he feared that Rumsfeld was criminally ‘empowering’ the real enemies—Iran and China.<sup>50</sup>

Heath Shuler, the former star quarterback for the Washington Redskins, likewise turns many hard hats his way with passionate screeds against North American Free Trade and the export of Heartland jobs. But like Webb’s, his populist message is poisoned by a nativism that includes television campaign ads depicting Shuler as a lone hero fighting against amnesty for illegal immigrants. Ezra Klein in *American Prospect* recently argued that liberals should not worry unduly about the jingoism of Webb and Shuler, or about their reactionary positions on gays and abortion. In a Congress dominated by Democrats, Klein explains, ‘they’ll have precious little opportunity to exercise their social conservatism. Their economic beliefs, however, will get more play in a Congress aching to, at long last, turn its attention to health care, jobs, inequality, corporate regulation and all the other domestic issues Democrats so love to address.’<sup>51</sup>

Aside from Klein’s heroic assumptions about Democrats’ reforming intentions, he seriously underestimates the dangers posed by economic nationalism within Democratic ranks. Karl Rove and the White House, for their part, were dramatically blindsided over the last year by the explosion of anti-immigrant hysteria within the conservative grass roots; and the editors of *American Prospect* (the magazine of ‘progressive Democrats’) may yet rue their underestimation of Democratic xenophobia. At least half of the 30 seats that the Democrats took from Republicans were won by candidates with conservative positions on immigration. Throughout the South and Midwest, moreover, Democrats attacked Republicans for

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<sup>50</sup> James Webb, ‘What to do about China?’, *New York Times*, 15 June 1998; and ‘Heading for Trouble’, *Washington Post*, 4 September 2002.

<sup>51</sup> Klein, ‘Spinned Right’.

being 'soft on illegal immigration', and one Democratic senate campaign committee's website even juxtaposed images of people scaling border fences with portraits of bin Laden and Kim Jong Il. The Blue Dogs, in particular, are avid supporters of a continental-scale border wall and the use of local police to enforce national immigration laws.<sup>52</sup>

In the new Congress it will be interesting to see how far the Webbs and Shulers travel with their 'proletarian' attacks on the free-trade principles held sacred by New Dems and Clintonians. (My hunch is that the hidden injuries of class will matter less to both politicians after they have had some heartwarming conversations with the wealthy hi-tech types in the Research Triangle and Beltway science parks.) On the other hand, there is a very real chance that the anti-immigrant and sinophobic aspects of their erstwhile populism will be amplified in synergy with like-minded Republicans. The Democrats can take temporary delight in the self-destruction of the Republicans' 'Latino strategy', but they are not immune to such devils within their own party. In the worst-case scenario, the long-hoped-for New Populism would simply become midwife to a bipartisan regroupment of bigots and cranks, while the Democratic leadership continues to take its cues from Goldman Sachs and Genentech.

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<sup>52</sup> Brian Friel, 'Splits of Their Own,' *National Journal*, 9 September 2006.