

Call for a Paradigm Shift on (and to) the Left - Responding to Davidson and Katz on the 2004 Elections

by Steve Bloom

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In their article which has received a wide circulation on the internet, *Moving from Protest to Politics: Dumping Bush's Regime in 2004*, Carl Davidson and Marilyn Katz base their argument on two fundamental premises:

- 1) Ruling circles of the United States are ideologically divided into hegemonists and globalists. Anti-imperialist and progressive forces have an interest in which of these two factions occupies the White House, because this will make a *qualitative* difference in what kinds of policies are carried out by the US government.
- 2) The way to affect which of these factions is in the White House is to get involved in Democratic Party electoral politics in 2004.

I believe that both of these premises are incorrect. I will state the premises behind this reply to Davidson and Katz straight up so that the reader can understand our primary disagreements from the outset:

- 1) Big questions of war and peace, broad social policies in the USA such as affirmative action, welfare, health care, etc. are never decided in the White House or in Congress. This is merely where the details of implementation are negotiated. The answers to the big questions are determined by the overall relationship of forces within ruling circles, which is, in turn, affected by the overall level of social resistance that exists, or that might reasonably be expected, to reactionary social and foreign policy initiatives at any given moment.
- 2) The present relationship of forces both within ruling circles, and between the ruling class in the US as a whole and the social resistance of working people and the oppressed, has been shaped by a long process, over many years (and elections), from the 1960s to today. That relationship obviously affects who is in the White House, but it is not decisively shaped by this. There are multiple causes for the dramatic shift to the right in US political discourse during the last three decades. But one significant factor has been, precisely, the choice made by many on the left, in the labor movement, and in communities of oppressed nationalities, to follow the kind of policy suggested by Davidson and Katz whenever we are confronted with a choice between a reactionary Republican and a somewhat less reactionary Democrat every two or four years.

What is at stake?

Is there something new and dangerous in the rhetoric of regime change and pre-emptive military strike, amounting essentially to naked imperial conquest, that accompanied Bush's campaign against Iraq? There certainly is. But if we want to combat that danger we have to understand

precisely what it is, and where it comes from. The new danger does not reside in the program of regime change, pre-emptive military strike, or naked imperial conquest per se. These things have been around for a long time (think Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, and many more.) What makes Iraq new and different is that Bush chose to declare these aims more or less openly, with a mere fig leaf (which few really believed) about weapons of mass destruction, rather than manufacturing a pretext for intervention--such as the Gulf of Tonkin incident in Vietnam--or taking advantage of a real incident--like the Coup against Maurice Bishop in Grenada.

But the ability of Bush to simply declare his war aims openly in Iraq and get away with it, the willingness of broader ruling circles in the USA to let him try this approach, is only partially a reflection of who happens to occupy the White House--and this is a relatively small part of the equation at that. A far bigger part is the overall ideological assumptions that underlie political discourse in the USA today, which, in turn, is fundamentally a reflection of the successful campaign by both the Democratic and Republican parties to shift political discourse increasingly to the right over the last three decades.

We will examine this shift, and its implications for an antiwar electoral strategy, more thoroughly in a moment. But first, a closer look at the division within US ruling circles that Davidson and Katz place at the center of their argument.

Globalists and Hegemonists

Davidson and Katz never define what they mean by globalists and hegemonists. Based on their line of argument, however, the distinction seems to be between those--the Bush administration and its supporters--who would like to pursue a naked policy of imperial conquest (with the US acting unilaterally if necessary), and those whose goal is establishing a collaboration with the UN and other nations of the world.

This division, however, reflects merely the appearance of things in the lead up to the Iraq war, not their substance. There is, in fact, no wing of the US ruling class which is committed, *as a matter of principle,* to globalism in this sense. True, there are some who are more reckless and others who are more cautious in the pursuit of hegemony. The latter group, however, has never rejected the militarist option, even a unilateral militarist option, if it thought this was needed and that the US could get away with it. In the case of Iraq, however, this particular wing of the capitalist class felt more secure in the effort to get away with a military campaign if there was an alliance with the UN and other global forces. This is a purely tactical/strategic division relating to the war against Iraq, not one which reflects any disagreement of a principled nature about the use of US military power. This becomes obvious in the wake of the war, when the entirety of the opposition within ruling circles dissolved away, and everyone joined in the flag-waving. The war was fought, and Bush got away with it. End of disagreement.

There is also some overlap between the group that was more cautious about Iraq and those who would still be mostly inclined to pursue the goal of US world hegemony *primarily* through the mechanism of economic domination and the market rather than *primarily* through military methods--though they have no moral opposition to using the military when they believe they really need to. This makes it tempting to respond to Davidson/Katz simply with the old joke

about how the US ruling class might go about electing Mussolini president of the country: They would run him as a Democrat, and have the Republicans nominate Adolph Hitler. Then all the liberals would vote for Mussolini as the lesser evil. It is worth remembering that not so long ago many of us were busy building the biggest possible demonstrations against the World Bank and the IMF--that is, against globalization in its most rapacious capitalist sense.

It does not seem that Davidson and Katz are using the term globalist to indicate those within the US ruling class who are still in favor of this non-militarist strategy as the best means to hegemonize the world. But the terminological similarity is not an accident. Every globalist in the sense that Davidson and Katz want to support, is also a globalist in the sense that the left in the US (and around the world) has opposed so strongly since Seattle. Does it make sense to now work in favor of this group of capitalists just because there is a seemingly more dangerous group of capitalist rulers that has gained hegemony?

To answer that question it will be useful to look a bit at the history of the last three decades.

How we got to where we are today

I think we will all agree that at the dawn of the 21st century, political discourse in the USA is further to the right than it has been at any time since the 1950s. If we look back to the late 1960s and early '70s the contrast is stark indeed. The social policies followed by Richard Nixon when he was in office were miles to the left of the social policies pursued by Bill Clinton, who was attacked effectively by the right and the media as a liberal. In the '70s we got an end to the Vietnam war, the Freedom of Information Act, and the formal dismantling of COINTELPRO. Now we get the war on terror, unregulated detentions of immigrants, military courts, and Patriot Acts I and II. In the '70s there was an expansion of affirmative action programs for women and minorities. Today affirmative action is rolled back everywhere. The list could go on, but the point should be clear enough.

The difference, of course, is that during the 1960s and early '70s there was a dramatic upsurge of struggles in the USA, beginning with the civil rights rebellion in the South, continuing with the anti-Vietnam war movement, and then with the new wave of feminist struggles, the rise of the gay liberation movement, etc. Today that mass movement has subsided--except during the last six months with a new round of antiwar demonstrations, which will almost certainly not continue at the same level now that the most direct military phase of the war in Iraq is over. One thing that happened during the late '70s and '80s in particular was the siphoning off of the energy of these movements into more mainstream forms of electoral politics. Instead of having real movements of people in struggle that could help set the political agenda, political discourse in the media and elsewhere was increasingly shaped *solely* by the concerns and conversations of Democratic and Republican Party politicians.

At first there were politicians who were still occupying some of the political space that had been opened up by the mass struggles of the '60s and '70s. Many on the left confused this occupation of a political space by these politicians with the creation of that space by these politicians. But this was an illusion. The political space was created by the mass struggles and the politicians had only moved into it. As the mass movements faded (often at the behest of the politicians who

urged activists to get involved in politics rather than merely in protest) the spaces got smaller and smaller, and the number of politicians who were able to occupy that space shrank as well.

Something else happened at the national level whenever there was a presidential election campaign, and often at the state and local levels too when there were senatorial, or congressional, or state and municipal elections. Many on the left pursued the following logic: The election of an anti-imperialist president [senator, congressman, whatever] [this year] is simply not possible. However, the differences between the [fill in the less reactionary name] and [fill in the more reactionary name] are not unimportant and cannot be a matter of indifference. [More reactionary name] is the greater danger; if not defeated this party will [fill in the blank]. A similar approach was taken by the organized labor movement, consistently supporting the Democrats no matter how little the unions got in return for their electoral loyalty, figuring they would get even less if the Republicans were in power. The Black and Hispanic communities also locked themselves electorally to the Democratic Party.

What has been the result? In each election, the less reactionary Democrat, secure in his support from the left and from labor and oppressed minorities, has had no reason whatsoever to give the left or labor or minority communities anything that they wanted-- either in terms of campaign promises or in terms of policies once elected. Instead, all of the concessions have been made to the right, in order to win the support of more conservative, white middle-class voters. With each election the rhetoric shifted to the right. Little by little, through this process, we have arrived at the point where liberal is now a dirty word and the need for social welfare is dismissed as something of concern only to special interests.

There is an obscenity in this political discourse, of course. But there is an even bigger obscenity in the process through which many on the left have allowed themselves to become trapped within that political discourse, still seeing some difference worth supporting between candidates as the entire package of establishment electoral politics moves further and further to the right with each election. Nothing will change in this process until we try a different approach. We need to let the scoundrels (both more reactionary and less reactionary) know that we will *not* support them electorally unless and until they give us something we really want. Then, and only then, is there a chance to begin moving the electoral discourse back to the left again.

How to avoid the dilemma

The very first thing we need to do is reject the counter position in the title of Davidson and Katz's article: Protest *is* politics. It is a far more effective and important form of politics than voting in elections, and far more likely to affect the relationship of forces in our favor (as it did in the 1960s and early '70s). The growth and development of an antiwar movement in the USA between October 2002 and March 2003 moved the general political discourse in this country significantly to the left, and resulted in many of the other political manifestations of antiwar sentiment--like the resolutions adopted by city councils across the nation. If we want even to keep the political discussion where it is, not to mention moving it further to the left, it is *essential* that we remain in the streets as much as we can. To the extent that we counterpose electoral politics to this we will be shooting ourselves in the foot.

Of course, almost all antiwar activists are going to want to do something about the elections, and this need not be counterposed to continuing to build a protest movement. That said, what kind of electoral effort ought to be pursued? I would suggest that one thing is obvious: Antiwar activists are going to be divided on this question. The antiwar coalition *as a whole* ought not attempt to engage in electoral politics directly (that is, the endorsement of candidates), because doing so will split us right down the middle. Some will certainly pursue the Davidson/Katz approach. Others will support the Greens, or some other independent campaign. Still others will no doubt advocate an abstention. We will have to simply agree to disagree, and continue to unite where we can--which will be to engage in education and street actions on those key programmatic issues that unite us.

One initiative we could take as a movement, however, would be to develop a non-partisan questionnaire that we would ask all candidates regardless of party affiliation to fill in, posing hard questions about their positions on war and foreign policy, economic priorities, national health care, affirmative action, social welfare, police brutality, capital punishment and prisons, and other issues of concern to activists. We could then publish a voters' guide which would inform the public at large of the answers we get back, and of who declined to fill in this questionnaire.

Such an initiative could, in my judgment, be a very powerful intervention by the antiwar movement into the electoral arena, at a time when this will certainly be a major focus of attention in the media and in mass consciousness. It will be far more powerful, it seems to me, in moving the electoral discourse in the direction we want than any decision to support a lesser-evil Democratic candidate who will inevitably be very far from our political agenda.

Affecting what party occupies the White House

The strategy advocated by Davidson and Katz assumes that the results of elections are determined by how people vote. On one level that is true, of course. But what determines how people vote? The most significant factor, in most elections, is what kind of coverage is given to which candidates in the mass media, and who has the most money to pay for advertising and other forms of promotion. Both of these things are controlled by people with money, and primarily by those I have referred to in these notes as the ruling class in the USA.

Often it is a matter of indifference (or only of marginal importance) to most in the ruling class which party wins the election. They have many other means at their disposal to make sure the government carries out policies that are in their interests. The programmatic differences between the two major parties are not significant enough to matter for the most part. It is even common for big corporations, or rich individuals, to give money to both the Democratic and Republican candidates in order to have a finger in the pie no matter who is elected. At times, however, there is a decisive disagreement with one candidate or another by significant ruling class forces--for example, during the 1964 election when Goldwater was deemed too dangerous and provocative and an overwhelming ruling class support was given to Lyndon Johnson, or when McGovern won the Democratic nomination and was seen as a danger from the left.

Today, George Bush's policies are no less right-wing than Goldwater's agenda in 1964. The difference is in the political moment. There is no longer a fear among ruling circles that such a

right wing agenda will stimulate an unacceptable resistance from working people and the oppressed. And so they are perfectly comfortable with Bush in the White House. If our desire is to get Bush out of the White House, then, we need to make it too dangerous and costly for the ruling elite to keep him there.

Once again the conclusion can only be that our main task is to turn up the heat in terms of social protest and resistance. When the only thing ruling circles in the USA have to fear from people who are angry about George Bush's policy of military hegemony is that we might elect another party that is in favor of hegemony through other means, they have very little to fear, and no reason to stop supporting Bush with their campaign dollars and favorable coverage in the media which they control. If we really want Bush out we have to convince those who hold the purse strings that they will pay a real price for keeping him in. Voting for the Democrats is no way to accomplish that.

But what if the war party wins?

Here I will appeal briefly to history, to demonstrate the assertion I made at the beginning of this article: Who is in the White House is never the decisive question when we are dealing with issues like war and peace.

* The overwhelming majority of wars the USA was involved with during the 20th century--from WW I through the Bay of Pigs invasion through Vietnam--have been initiated with a Democrat in the White House, not a Republican.

* The Vietnam war was brought to an end by Richard Nixon, a notorious hawk. By his own admission this was because the mass movement against the war made it impossible for him to use his secret plan to end it--that is, the use of nuclear weapons against Hanoi.

* It was Lyndon Johnson, a southern cracker, who had to be taught to say negro instead of nigger when he became president of the USA (and never quite got it right, always pronouncing it something like nigra) who signed the most sweeping civil rights legislation in the history of the country, and who initiated broad social reforms in the name of the great society.

* COINTELPRO was created by the FBI in 1967, under the liberal Johnson administration, in response to the rise of Malcolm X, the Panthers, and the militant Black nationalist movement generally.

* Affirmative action programs in the USA were delivered their final and most decisive blow under the liberal Clinton administration, and it was also during these years that the war on welfare became a bi-partisan campaign.

This list could also be extended, but the point, once again, ought to be clear enough: What matters in terms of developing an anti-war and human rights discourse in the context of US electoral politics and government policies is not **primarily** the desires and programs of either Democratic or Republican politicians, but the degree to which we succeed in creating a militant mass movement independent of any politicians--in the streets, on the campuses, in the workplaces and communities of the oppressed--making demands in a clear and powerful way on

Congress and the White House, on state legislatures, city councils, etc. Even if the war party wins the election in 2004, *we can stop them from implementing their policies*--as we did in Vietnam--if we continue to build a consistent movement of opposition. Such a movement can threaten to exact too high a price for the continuation of the war policies, by exposing their sheer hypocrisy, the fraud of an anti-terrorist and human rights façade. The danger of this (if we make it real) can force those who have the power to tell the president of the United States what is and what is not acceptable--and get instant acquiescence--to limit the options available to the war party or whatever party happens to occupy the White House..

The Davidson/Katz strategy, by contrast, which urges us to move out of the streets and into the Democratic Party (*from* protest *to* politics) would be a real disaster from this point of view. It will not stop the war party. It will embolden the hegemony through war party because it will know that the worst price they will be forced to pay for pursuing a militarist option is to be confronted with a victory by the hegemony through globalization party. This will not deter them. Our task is to build a genuinely anti-war and anti-hegemony party, both in the streets and (in the opinion of this writer) at the ballot box. That would really make them sweat.