

*Editorial*

TESTING FORMULA TWO

**T**HE US ELECTION of November 2000 attracted more international interest than any Presidential race on record. In part, this was a reflection of the unprecedented peak reached by American power in the last decade of the century, felt in all areas of the world; in part, of the unusual character of the outcome. The significance of the result, however, should be considered in a wider historical context. The past twenty years have seen two political cycles in the Euro-American core of advanced capitalism, each under the sign of neo-liberalism. The long downturn of the world economy that set in from the early seventies broke on a chequered regime field, without consistent partisan alignment: Ford, Wilson, Giscard, Schmidt. A few years later, the turn towards monetarist solutions to the crisis was initiated by administrations on the left of the established spectrum—Carter and Callaghan. But at the turn of the decade there was a break, as this mongrel scene gave way to a clear-cut political pattern. By 1982, governments of the radical or moderate Right had taken power across the whole of the North Atlantic world: in the United States, Canada, Britain, West Germany, the Low Countries and Scandinavia. Their overall mission was to change the relation of forces between capital and labour, where necessary—principally in Britain and America—after tough class struggles to crush resistance to a new order. Deregulation, tax reduction, de-unionization and privatization became the main engines of a sustained drive to install a neo-liberal economic framework. The pioneering regimes of this wave were Thatcher's government in Britain and Reagan's administration in the United States, which set the terms of the decade—followed with lesser degrees of zeal by governments of

the Right across Northern Europe, including traditional zones of social-democratic dominance in Scandinavia. In the Southern Europe of the same period, historically less advanced as a social environment, governments of the Centre-Left predominated, often for the first time. But in policy terms, Paris, Rome or Madrid were obliged to operate within the parameters set in Washington, London and Bonn. In the Antipodes, the Labour governments of Hawke and Lange went yet further than Mitterrand or González in pursuing the common objectives of the time. The Right dominated the international landscape, and set the standard for variant administrations everywhere. To adapt a phrase of Gramsci's, the 'organic formula' of neo-liberalism—that is, the most powerful and coherent version of its hegemony—was embodied in the Reagan and Thatcher regimes.

As the Cold War came to an end, this pattern changed. Over the next decade, Centre-Left regimes came to power in the US, UK, and throughout most of Western Europe. Once again, Washington and London led the way, as the Clinton and Blair regimes set the tone and direction of the new period. With their arrival, the 'organic formula' of neo-liberalism was significantly modified. A continuing dynamic of deregulation—of financial and labour markets alike—was now surrounded with gestures of social conciliation: homeopathic drops of fiscal redistribution, job creation or school reform. Globally, the geographical spread of this wave has been wider than its predecessor. By the latter part of the decade, Centre-Left parties held office in the USA, Canada, and nearly all—twelve out of fifteen—countries of the European Union.<sup>1</sup> Once again, exceptions could be found in the South: regimes of the Centre-Right in Spain, Australia and (till recently) New Zealand, obliged in their turn to respect imperatives defined further North. Structurally, neo-liberal hegemony was further strengthened in this period, not merely by ongoing policy measures—welfare reform and repeal of Glass-Steagall under Clinton, independence of the central bank and introduction of private finance initiatives in the health service under Blair, corporate tax bonanzas and pension reform under Schroeder, accelerated privatizations under Jospin—but more generally by the disappearance of any programmatic alternatives from the scene.

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<sup>1</sup> Currently Britain, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Portugal and Greece all have social-democratic premiers. Apart from Aznar in Spain, the only EU country now governed by the Right is Austria, though Italy is likely to change colour this spring.

The first form of neo-liberal dominance lasted just over a decade. The second type is now nearing a similar span, posing the question: is it going to prove more durable? Institutionally and ideologically, the original regimes of the radical Right in America and Britain were more creative than those which followed them. Aggressive and innovative, they reshaped the whole landscape of *fin-de-siècle* capitalism. The Centre-Left governments are, by contrast, regimes of consolidation: they have accepted and extended the legacy of their predecessors, without substantially modifying it. In implementing their programmes, however, both forms have faced the same political problem. The pure doctrine of the free market that is the animating spirit of neo-liberalism is, by itself, too arid and abstract a creed to offer satisfying fare for any mass electorate. Success at the polls always requires an ideological supplement. The Reagan and Thatcher regimes had this ready to hand, since both came to power in the wake of international setbacks for their respective societies—Vietnam and Iran for the US; prolonged economic decline in the UK—and promised their redress. National reassertion was a more powerful mobilizing force than straightforward *laissez faire* in rallying voters to their cause—however much the first, as they never tired of explaining, depended on the second. Successes in the battle against Soviet Communism or Argentine militarism clinched their authority. These were consensual victories. More divisive were other ingredients in the ideological supplement of each. In America, fundamentalist religion became an increasingly strident note in the patriotic concert of the Republican Party. In Britain, chauvinist fervour was eventually turned against allied states in Europe. Each of these strains in the make-up of the Right antagonized otherwise well-disposed sectors of opinion—suburban women or well-heeled professionals; multinationals and City bankers—more than they attracted grass-roots support. Thatcher split her party over Europe and fell. Bush was victim of a recession, but by then much of his party had forfeited secular trust.

The Centre-Left regimes, by contrast, have avoided any sharp ideological edges. The dietary supplement on which they depend is a soothing emulsion whose themes are the interdependence of responsibility and community, the compatibility of economic competition with social cohesion. This is an ideology that corresponds to generic longings to square the circle of contemporary life, combining market efficiency and civic solidarity, high consumption and affordable charity, individual success and social security. As a discourse without enemies, its popular appeal

is virtually guaranteed. By the same token, its capacity for independent initiative is very limited. Its triumph as the organic formula of the period has relied on an underlying policy momentum inherited from its predecessor, and the economic upturn of the later nineties. The Third Way is a fair-weather formation, whose performance in more turbulent conditions has yet to be tested. But it is not an artificial one. It corresponds to objective needs of the system, which it has so far served well, neutralizing any dissent or opposition to it more effectively than regimes of the classical Right ever could.

## II

The Presidential elections of 2000 offered the first serious test of the stamina of this order. What conclusions can be drawn from the result? The structure of American politics differs significantly from European counterparts. Half the population never votes. Since these are overwhelmingly the least well-off, the result is the virtual equivalent of a property franchise. The whole political spectrum is ranged further to the right, excluding any force of even nominally social-democratic complexion. Thus Reagan could gain a much wider consensus for his brand of conservatism than Thatcher for hers. If in policy terms the British variant was always more incisive, electorally it was far weaker: Thatcher never won more than 44 per cent of the electorate, where Reagan at his height commanded close to 60 per cent. Behind Republican dominance in the eighties, in turn, lay a historical development without equivalent in Europe—the detachment of Southern Bourbons from their century-long allegiance to the Democratic Party, putting an end to a sociological anomaly dating back to the Civil War. This was an inter-generational change thirty years in the making, whose dynamic persisted after Reagan was gone and which, eventually, gave the Republicans control of Congress in the nineties—still beyond reach while he was in the White House. The centre of political gravity has shifted steadily away from the markers of the sixties.

In these conditions, the Democratic victory of 1992 was more adventitious than its counterparts in Europe—due largely to Perot's candidacy, which split off enough disaffected popular votes to give Clinton the White House with only 43 per cent of the poll. Four years later, however, Clinton held it easily, in the lowest turnout since 1924, with a

decisive victory over his Republican opponent. He then presided over the fastest—productive and speculative—boom in postwar history. By early 2000, opinion surveys were reporting record satisfaction with the performance of the administration. Against this background, the Democratic and Republican candidates for the White House waged their campaigns in the autumn. In the event, Gore won a narrow popular majority—a margin of less than 0.51 per cent, on a turnout of 50.7 per cent of the electorate. About a quarter of American adults voted for him. It is possible that he would have won a majority of the Electoral College as well, had a manual recount of all counties in Florida occurred. He was not, however, confident enough of the outcome of such a recount to demand one, preferring instead to mine only his own strongholds for extra votes, a decision that may have cost him the Presidency. The courts at all levels followed partisan preferences without compunction, but a request for a full manual recount after the second mechanical recount on November 8 could not have been blocked. What is clear, however, is that Nader's substantial Green vote in Florida—a hundred times the margin of difference between Democratic and Republican tallies—denied Gore the Presidency.<sup>2</sup> Rarely has a third party in a first-past-the-post system been so decisive in settling the result of a national election.

Of much greater significance than the legal disputes between Democrats and Republicans in Florida was the pattern of the vote nationwide. While the ideological divide between the two sides was muted during the campaign, the sociological polarization in their support widened. Gender, race and class all show the same disparities. Gore took an 11-point lead over Bush among women—Bush an 11-point lead over Gore among men. Gore increased the Democrat share of the black vote to a record 90 per cent, held the Hispanic vote at over two-thirds, and improved its Asian vote substantially (up 11 points) to over half, while Bush scored a 12-point lead among whites. Family income correlated with voting preference at every level through the social scale, the Republican vote falling and the Democrat increasing at each step from top to bottom. Starkest of all as a gross division, Gore got over 70 per cent of voters in metropolitan areas of over 500,000, while Bush

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<sup>2</sup> Less noticed, but equally decisive, Nader took New Hampshire—where his vote was three times the margin of Bush's victory—out of Gore's column. Had Gore carried New Hampshire, he would have won the Presidency with a majority of 271 to 267 in the Electoral College, even conceding Florida to Bush.

took 60 per cent of the rural vote. Such figures make it clear where the underlying political advantage in US politics lies. The organic formula of neo-liberal hegemony still leans to the Centre-Left, as in Europe. Not only does virtually every demographic trend favour the Democratic bloc, but if half Nader's vote were added to Gore's, a national majority 7 points larger than Clinton's in 1992, and a point above his comfortable victory in 1996, already exists. Viewing the American scene in international context, the Presidential race offers little statistical sign of a break in the dominance of Third Way politics.

### III

The election was held in the course of the longest business expansion in a century, amidst high employment, high growth, a buoyant stock market, and a sizzling consumer boom—all indices far above those of the Reagan period. Why then, with such a spectacular economic inheritance, and such favourable social trends, did the Democrats actually fail to keep the White House? The relevant standard for comparison is the 1988 election, a virtually symmetrical contest, when Bush Sr as incumbent Vice-President crushed Dukakis without difficulty at the end of eight years of Republican ascendancy. What prevented Gore from achieving a victory of similar, if not greater, proportions? The explanation favoured by most Democrats, and widely shared on the American Left, blames his limitations as a candidate. The Party possessed in Clinton—so the received account runs—a President widely admired for his management of the economy and country, offering Gore a straightforward run to victory, had he only hewn to the record of the White House and assailed Bush for his nefarious gubernatorial performance and empty or reactionary campaign promises. Instead, Gore ran a disastrously ineffective campaign, keeping his principal asset—the President—at arm's length, compromising the party's record with populist rhetoric, while failing to land any tough punches on his Republican opponent. Even so, he was the real winner of the election, robbed of the Presidency only by a mixture of intimidation and fraud: denial of votes from black electors in Florida, and illegal interference by the Supreme Court. The result is little short of calamitous, since Bush in Washington will subvert civil rights for women and blacks, demolish worker protection, destroy the environment, mismanage the business cycle, and retreat from internationalism abroad.

Little in this version is tenable. The limitations of Gore's personal appeal were real enough, but no greater—indeed, doubtless fewer—than those of the elder Bush, universally regarded as a dry stick, on the stump or off. Nor, despite misgivings in the DLC, is there any evidence that Gore's occasional—all too evidently gestural—criticisms of corporations alarmed moderate opinion, given the blandly centrist tenor of his campaign as a whole. Credit for 'peace and prosperity' under the Democrats was regularly claimed, and if this failed to create much of a landslide, it was surely because—as Kevin Phillips predicted at mid-term—voters increasingly dissociated economic success (though not economic failure) from the direct responsibility of either party, rather than because the Vice-President was lukewarm about them.

What, then, explains the failure of the Democratic succession? The answer is obvious enough. Clinton, though his poll ratings were high at the end of his term (when voters knew they would see the back of him), was an albatross in a way that Reagan was not. Partly this was because, unlike Reagan, it was plain that Clinton had no particular convictions, beyond the desire to stay in office—he attracted no broad or dedicated following. More acutely, however, the scandals that surrounded his Presidency made it impossible to convert into any kind of a rallying-point. He was plainly guilty of the charges—molestation in Arkansas, perjury and obstruction of justice in Washington—against him, which were fully impeachable: the Constitution calling for the removal of a President culpable even of 'misdemeanours' short of such breaches of the law, which in other fields of office would have swiftly led to resignation or dismissal. Widespread resistance to this logic, strong enough to block it, comprised a number of elements. Partisan loyalties were affronted among Democrats and the academic following attached to the Party. Cultural susceptibilities were aroused by fears of Grundyism. Popular aversion to impeachment, however, rested on a much more powerful bedrock of sentiment—attachment to the quasi-monarchical status of the Presidential office itself, as embodiment of national identity in the world at large, a late-twentieth-century fixation foreign to the Founders. But if popular opinion did not want impeachment, instinctively seeking to protect the Presidency, for the same reasons it did not relish Clinton's conduct, an indignity to the office not easily forgotten.

Thus the very same—non-partisan, independent—sectors of opinion that produced big poll majorities against impeachment, well beyond

the Democratic electorate, were also those that, on the same grounds, did not want to be reminded of Clinton two years later. They saved him for the sake of an office that he had nevertheless—in their eyes—besmirched. It was no good invoking him as a great President. Gore's decision to distance himself from Clinton in 2000 was not stupidity or pique. It was the same kind of calculation as Clinton's decision to move towards Gingrich in 1995. Clinton was a capable communicator, if not in the Kennedy–Reagan class, but no outstanding tactician, as a glance at his first phase in office shows. What made him the dextrous professional who could finesse a Republican Congress was the hiring of expert polling advice—essentially, David Gergen and Dick Morris—on what would play best with voters. Similarly, Gore made no move during the campaign that was not intensively researched and developed by his pollsters and strategists, certainly not less proficient at their trade than Clinton's. Their key finding, widely reported, was that the independent voters whom either candidate had to win were put off by Clinton's name by a 2-to-1 margin. Faced with this evidence, however difficult it might be for loyalists to credit, Gore could not risk clinging to coat-tails to which so many swing voters were averse. Polls taken since the election (but before the final debacle of cash-for-pardons) show why. Asked how Clinton would be remembered as a President, 44 per cent rated him above-average or outstanding, 53 as average or below. But when asked what he would be remembered for, 14 per cent said 'economy/budget', 6 per cent 'foreign policy', and 74 per cent said 'scandals'.<sup>3</sup>

## IV

Here lay the shadow that cost Gore the election. It was not the candidate, however lacking in magnetism, but the incumbent, widely attributed

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<sup>3</sup> See *Los Angeles Times*, 14 January 2001, for this poll. Commenting on the campaign, Gore's campaign adviser Carter Eskew put it very simply: 'Clinton was the elephant in the living-room'. See his retrospect in the *Washington Post*, 30 January 2001. State by state, there was an all but perfect match in exit polls between Clinton's image and the electoral result. Gore took every state where Clinton's 'favourability rating' was average or above (57 per cent), with the exception of Florida, while Bush won every state where it was even a mere point below average, except for Oregon and New Mexico (where he lost by less than 0.25 per cent of the vote). Clinton was a dead weight on Gore even in Arkansas. For these calculations by Thad Beyle, see the *Economist*, 27 January 2001.



with it, who converted what ought logically to have been an easy victory into what accidentally became a wafer-thin defeat. Clinton's misconduct was the pebble on the line that derailed the Democratic express. Trivial enough in broader perspective, allowing no inference to international trends, his trial was not a bagatelle in national context. The Republicans went after Clinton for partisan reasons, initially looking for evidence of financial corruption, then fastening onto sexual misconduct. In due course, it became clear that here Clinton had broken the law in a series of ways, certainly constituting grounds for his impeachment as the Founders conceived it (the Senate had impeached even lesser officials for perjury within recent memory). But though in no doubt of his guilt, the American public did not want to see him impeached. This was widely taken as evidence of a progressive popular revulsion at intrusion into the private life of a public official. In fact this was a real, but politically secondary element in public reaction. The primary reason for popular hostility to the impeachment of Clinton was identification with the cult of the Presidency itself, not to be degraded by the criminal conviction of any incumbent.<sup>4</sup>

From any genuinely radical perspective, of course, it is just this attitude that should be uprooted. No value is more insistently claimed by Western societies than the rule of law. Rulers themselves, however, are increas-

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<sup>4</sup> The best study of Clinton's impeachment is Richard Posner's *An Affair of State* (New York 1999), which covers not only the legal proceedings—the author is a Federal Appeals Judge in Chicago—but the political struggle and emotional *Kulturkampf* that accompanied them. An *esprit fort* of the libertarian Right, with no time for sexual puritanism, Posner concludes unequivocally that 'Clinton's violations of federal criminal law' were 'felonious, numerous and non-technical'. At the same time he openly deplores the decisions of the Supreme Court that allowed Paula Jones's suit—the occasion for these felonies—to go forward, as 'naive, unintended, unpragmatic and gratuitous body blows to the Presidency'. Without this disastrous error, exposing the President to the hazards of the ordinary citizen, the nation would have been spared a painful ordeal: 'The principle that even the highest officials in the land are subject to the ordinary processes of the law is an important component of corrective justice, which is fundamental to the ideology of the rule of law. But some principles are better left in aspirational than in implemented form.' After all, 'no one supposes that Lincoln or Roosevelt should have resigned to atone for their violations of law', and 'even Nixon, and more plausibly, Reagan in the Iran–Contra affair could argue reasons of state in extenuation of illegal acts committed in time of (cold) war' (pp. 9, 13, 194, 151). Here, *in nuce*, are all the reasons why the American Left should have supported impeachment.

ingly *legibus solutus*—in practice, as once in Roman principle, above the law. In most of today's capitalist democracies, supreme office is a tacit guarantee of immunity from punishment. Few doubt that Mitterrand was guilty of illegal wire-tapping, Kohl of crooked funding, Chirac of municipal rake-offs, González of complicity with assassination, Scalfaro of pocketing payments from the secret service. *Dura lex sed lex* never applies: none ever faced charges. Yeltsin in Russia, Salinas in Mexico, Takeshita in Japan offer further picturesque examples. Compared with the crimes of many of these, Clinton's were lightweight. The institution that protected him, however, was not: it is far more dangerous than any other. The Imperial Presidency that has emerged in the United States since the Second World War is not only a deeply reactionary development at home, eroding original Enlightenment-inspired safeguards against over-personalized executive power, but a standing liability to the security of the world at large. Once invested with this mystique, successive Presidents—starting with FDR—have broken the law with impunity, at a time when the international power of the Presidency has increased immeasurably.<sup>5</sup> Spectacular examples of such law-breaking have included Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan.

In these conditions, little could be more urgent than to curb this power and reduce the office to legal and accountable limits. From a republican standpoint, as classically understood—with a small 'r'—the summary removal of *any* President would be desirable, as a lesson to all others. Clinton's offences were certainly less than Reagan's. But it is to the credit of the Republicans that, for partisan reasons, they made a determined effort to bring Clinton down, as the Founders would have wanted them to do, where the Democrats were so gutless that, confronted with the far greater legal enormity of Iran-Contra, they lifted not a finger to bring Reagan to book. Forgetting any republican spirit, however, too many on the American Left tailed along behind the Democratic Party, in the absurd position of doubting or denying Clinton's guilt, or treating it as an amiable peccadillo—as if sexual molestation, the origin of Clinton's troubles, were not supposed to be a burning social issue tirelessly raised by the Left itself. A fall-back argument was more cynical: no matter what the validity of the case against the President, the Right could not be allowed to score such a victory as his removal. In fact, all

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<sup>5</sup> It is no accident that Clinton's efforts to distract attention from illegalities at home led to the gratuitous bombing of Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq abroad.

that would have happened is that Gore would have moved into the White House, without change in party or policy, and no doubt gone on to win the elections in 2000. The argument from fear was no better than the argument from denial. The Left that adopted it exposed itself as a frightened dependency of the Democratic establishment.

## V

Gore's loss of the Presidency has predictably given rise to partisan legend depicting it as an unprecedented theft of the popular will, ushering in a regime of the direst social and political consequences. There is every reason to take a coolly sceptical view of both claims. Gore probably commanded a narrow majority of voters' intentions in Florida, even if reading the runes of contested or imperfect ballots was never likely to yield an unambiguous result.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that African-Americans suffered a whole series of impediments in casting their votes—more antiquated machines, less familiarity with complicated ballots, tougher identity checks—that Anglos did not. They have every reason for their anger. The Democratic Party, however, is in no position to complain about the outcome. Its own officials were responsible for the design of the most confusing ballots (in Palm Beach). Racist obstacles to black voting were in no way new—just as many ballots were disqualified in previous Presidential contests—and had never marred its satisfaction with elections that it won. Electoral monopolism was taken for granted, Gore not only refusing to debate with Nader, but physically barring him from his debate with Bush. Above all, of course, the margins one way or the other in Florida were insignificant compared with the huge voter disenfranchisement—half the whole electorate—the party has lived off and colluded with for decades. Not the result in Florida is scandalous, but the structure of the political system of which the Democrats have always been a corrupt and manipulative pillar. Similarly, protests that

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<sup>6</sup> Scrutiny of under-votes in the four counties of Broward, Volusia, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade, where Gore demanded a manual recount, has revealed they would have left him 140 votes short of Bush. See *Miami Herald*, 26 February 2001: 'Inclusion of the revised totals would have stripped the Gore campaign of most of its grounds for the law-suit that ended in a late-night decision by the US Supreme Court on December 12'. On the other hand, there is little doubt that a majority of spoiled ballots (over-votes) were Democratic.

the Supreme Court pronounced in partisan fashion for Bush, accurate enough, have little weight coming from those content with no less committed decisions from Florida's highest bench. Neither was, in any case, in a position to stop the state legislature from exercising its archaic but constitutional prerogatives. It is plain that, had the positions been reversed, Democrats—from the Presidential candidate through party appointees at the various levels of the judiciary, on down to state and county officials—would have behaved exactly as the Republicans did this time, and vice versa.

Does the result of the election make much difference? In the New Deal period, there was a wide gap between Democratic and Republican policies at national level, despite the fact that the Democratic Party contained a powerful Southern wing to the right of much of the Republican Party. Today the Democrats, having lost the South, form a more homogeneous bloc that has come to look somewhat more like a first cousin of social-democratic coalitions in Europe, while the Republicans exhibit a more compact conservative cohesion than in the past. Paradoxically, however, policy differences between the two have narrowed as sociological contrasts have widened. Compared with the days of Johnson and Goldwater, let alone Roosevelt and Landon, the gap between Gore and Bush was modest. This does not mean it was nugatory. The two parties are not interchangeable. Rather, as both have moved right in recent decades, the grounds of division between them have shifted. Within common neo-liberal parameters, set during the Carter and Reagan Presidencies, the Democrats remain more inclined to limited concessions—fiscal credits, affirmative action, medicaid—to the poor, and the Republicans to further largesse—tax breaks, deregulation, vouchers—for the rich; of which Bush's opening package offers a classic example.

These are differences that make it entirely rational for hard-pressed workers, defenceless Blacks, immigrant Latinos to vote Democrat, in the absence of any alternative within reach. Without their hopes and energies, the party of Jon Corzine and Terry McAuliffe would not be competitive. The mechanism that traps them depends on the integration of those who could create an alternative, the educated and organized of each constituency, into the system. In the Clinton era the social rewards for cooperation, long available to union leaders, have been extended to black politicians across the country. Little is granted the

mass of the coloured or poor; but much has been gained by those who speak in their name.<sup>7</sup> It is the domestication of wide swathes of this stratum that closes the lid of the two-party system on the least advantaged. In practice, the only means of escape for them is a numbed indifference—the greater part never lodging a preference at all.

Bush's victory has not stirred the nation. Few decisive initiatives are in prospect, since the two parties are so evenly balanced in Congress. Rough numerical parity coexists with structural asymmetry, however. Although the Democratic party's electoral strength is now heavily metropolitan, concentrated in the two coasts and unionized industrial states of the Midwest, its legislative cohesion remains uneven, because of residual blue-dog strands in the make-up of its Southern contingent. The Republicans, by contrast, have developed higher levels of internal discipline, operating more like a political party in Europe than a mere electoral cartel. Other things being equal, this gives them a certain advantage in Congress, where on a number of issues they can hope for crossover votes more readily than the Democrats. On the other hand, the rise of fundamentalist religion as a force in the Republican camp not only isolates it from wider constituencies, but is an ideological wild card that could—should it acquire still greater salience—split it more deeply than any division within current Democratic ranks. Neither party has a clear tactical edge over the other.

The Bush Presidency, controversial in electoral origin, and checked by an impending Democratic majority in the Senate, is unlikely to alter the status quo at home very much. Inequitable tax cuts and looser regulatory arrangements will probably be the most the White House can achieve. The complexion of the judiciary—leading bogey in Democratic propaganda—will doubtless remain much the same. The most impassioned opposition to the majority ruling of the Supreme Court on the polls in Florida came, after all, from an appointee of Bush Sr. Far more decisive for the lives of most Americans than any appointments of this sort, even any particular spending decisions by the government, will be the consequences of the downturn in the bubble economy bequeathed by Greenspan. Since the Federal Reserve, under the same Chairman, will

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<sup>7</sup> For the financial operations of the Reverend Jackson and his family, see the story in the *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 2001, 'When Jackson Presses, Funds Tend to Follow'.

be continuing to manage the business cycle, it would be surprising if the change at the White House was of great moment for the outcome.

## VI

Regularly, if reluctantly, much of the American Left has been dragooned behind the Democratic Party with the argument that it represents, in a forbidding environment, the lesser evil—a case pressed with especial vehemence in 2000 against those who stuck with Nader. Historical situations exist, of course, when the argument holds. Where a genuinely urgent and formidable danger looms, even the least reliable ally is better than none. More typically, however, arguments from the lesser evil rest on exaggeration of the greater one, to coerce acceptance of what would otherwise be unacceptable. There is no shortage of recent examples of this sort of casuistry: Spanish socialists justifying the scuttling of the Republic after Franco's death, on the grounds that fascism was still round the corner; Italian leftists sustaining centrist coalitions in Italy, on the grounds that Berlusconi or Fini threatened the country with little short of dictatorship; British radicals condoning Yeltsin's bombardment of his Parliament, on the grounds that Stalinism threatened Russia once again. In cases like these, the contrast is not between a greater and lesser evil. The true distinction is between an operative and an inoperative evil—the second invoked to mask the first.

At a more mundane level, real differences always exist between rival parties within an all-capitalist system, if normally more marked at the level of social support than policy in office. These certainly need to be taken into consideration—but accurately, free of rhetorical inflation. Deadly threats to civil rights from Bush appointees to the Supreme Court, the most popular scarecrow in liberal circles to deter anyone from voting for Nader, fall into the latter category. In the culture at large, the Christian Right is a paper tiger. Congress is so evenly divided, with the probability of a Democratic majority in two years time, that it is unlikely the Republican Presidency will be able to push through any controversial legislation of the kind that could be easily filibustered in the Senate. Limited gestures to conservative constituencies, principally in the area of taxation, where Bush can play on fears of a recession to prime demand, are more probable than any momentous shifts, given that the Administration will be calculating from the start how to win popular

consensus for a second term from such a precarious initial base, as Clinton did after his uncertain election in 1992.

## VII

Domestically, American Presidents have rarely made much of a difference since the Second World War—Johnson and Reagan being the exceptions, who in different ways left their mark on society. The relative nullity of Clinton's record, welfare and banking repeals apart, is the norm.<sup>8</sup> The executive office is circumscribed by the division of powers, and the normalcy of oppositional control of either or both branches of the legislature. Gridlock is more frequent than great initiatives. Internationally, on the other hand, Presidents enjoy virtually untrammelled powers, for the most part with little more than nominal constraints from Congress. No domestic actions compare in historical significance with Truman's bombing of Japan, Kennedy's invasion of Cuba, Johnson's war in Vietnam, Bush's expedition to the Gulf, or Clinton's bombing of Yugoslavia. For the Left, be it American or non-American, the primary criterion for judging contests for the White House should in principle be the external rather than internal platforms of the candidates, since this is where what they do, as hegemonic masters of the world, always matters.

Viewed in this light, Bush's victory might at first glance be considered preferable to Gore's. During the campaign, the Democratic candidate urged US military interventions *ad libitum* round the world to uphold the American values of democracy and human rights, while the Republican cautioned against conceptions of the US as universal police-

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<sup>8</sup> The *Financial Times*, for years one of his warmest admirers, concluded sadly as he left office, 'Clinton's was in the end a monumentally inconsequential Presidency' (Gerard Baker, 19 January 2001). The triviality of the ruler does not, of course, exonerate his rule. If Clinton's positive impact on American society was minimal, his negative legacies at home and abroad were considerable. For documentation of these, see articles in this journal by Tom Mertes (electoral corruption), Robert Pollin (social inequality), Joel Handler (welfare reform), Robin Blackburn and Tariq Ali (blockades of Cuba and Iraq), Robert Brenner (financial bubble), David Ladipo (carceral boom): NLR 1–7. With rare exceptions, like NATO expansion, the record is less one of active initiatives, than of passive adhesion to whatever seemed to promise local or personal advantage. Implementation of NAFTA is the typical case.

man, in principle restricting the grounds for unleashing American armed force. No candidate to the Presidency has ever been so completely identified with Israeli intransigence, the likeliest flash-point for another war in the Middle East, as Gore. Few figures in the Clinton administration were so deeply involved in orchestrating and assisting the Russian oligarchy round Yeltsin. It is no accident that Gore was unconditionally preferred to Bush by the entire European political establishment, on the grounds not only of greater economic reliability, but expressly as the better guarantor of the gains of NATO expansion and a forward US policy round the world—themes reiterated in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Conversely, Arab-Americans voted overwhelmingly for Bush, whose victory was welcomed by Koštunica as preferable to the legacy of Clinton.

It would be a mistake, however, to take campaign rhetoric at face value. The confidence reposed in Gore by Jerusalem, London and Moscow, based on solid experience of his role before and during the Clinton Administration, was well-grounded. European distrust of Bush, on the other hand, was more speculative, based in part on fears that he did not understand the importance of nurturing a client regime in Russia, whose stability could be jeopardized by scrapping the ABM Treaty more swiftly than Clinton had envisaged. In Latin America, where a more traditional conception of national interest is likely, Bush could escalate US intervention in Colombia, and menace Chávez in Venezuela directly. A more aggressive posture on Iraq and Taiwan is equally possible. If Democratic administrations have historically been more interventionist than Republican, the difference is by no means hard and fast, as the records of Eisenhower in Guatemala and Iran, Nixon in Chile and Cambodia, Reagan in Nicaragua, not to speak of Bush Sr in Kuwait, make plain. The objective requirements at any given conjuncture of the American imperium set the compass more than the subjective intentions of successive incumbents in the White House. There can be no doubt that *ex ante* commitments count for something, as the Cold War candidacies of Kennedy and Reagan, in particular, make clear. But most Presidencies can finally be judged here, where they really matter, only *post facto*. If for the moment it is a relief Gore has been defeated, it would be a mistake to be comforted that Bush has won. At most, we can say that his lack of knowledge or interest in the world outside the US is a positive sign.



## VIII

Alexander Cockburn has remarked that the result of November's election was 'the best of all possible worlds'—delivering a richly merited quietus to the Clinton era, without giving undue power to Bush, while showing that Nader could indeed make all the difference. It is a felicitous verdict. But a constellation of this kind is granted only when the heavens are absent-minded. The Democrats, who can be expected to win Congress in two years' time, are waiting to consign Bush to his father's fate, as an incumbent crippled by the recession that has already begun. It will be difficult for the party to jettison Gore in 2004, whatever its feelings about his performance this time, having canonized him as the real winner in 2000. If anyone could have done it, Hillary Clinton—already object of media build-up and mass projection along Diana lines—would have been the natural candidate; but the pardons and looting of White House property have temporarily scotched her ambitions. Clan rivalries within the Democratic apparatus persist, affording ground for Republican counter-manoeuvre. For the moment, no stable direction is in view: signals are swivelling at random, in the mists of what is still an interregnum. Pending an economic dénouement—how deep the contraction turns out to be—American politics are unlikely to give clear pointers to the world.

The organic formula of the nineties was always looser than its antecedent of the eighties, and in that sense weaker. The narrow November upset was possible in part because of this: even without the contingency of impeachment, support for it lacked intensity. Still, on a larger stage the underlying balance of forces does not appear to have shifted much. A weaker consensus can last longer than a stronger one, by making fewer demands on a wider target audience. Elsewhere in North America, the Canadian Liberals have easily seen off any challenge to their rule. In Europe, where the social landscape has always been more favourable to the Centre-Left, a milder version of the prosperity that sustained Clinton has underwritten it, and the probability is now of a less abrupt downturn. In these conditions, the organic formula of the nineties is under little threat. The exception lies once again in the South, where the Italian Right is poised for victory in May—logically enough, since economically Italy has been the worst performer in the EU since Maastricht, as monetary integration has disabled the devaluations on which its exports for so long relied, while political intrigues and disputes have steadily weakened

the governing coalition. In the North, on the other hand, all three of the major states look currently secure for the Centre-Left. The German economy is slowing down but, with the windfall collapse of the CDU, Schroeder has been able to push through neo-liberal measures that Kohl could never manage, becoming the favourite son of German business. In France, too, it is the Right that has been most damaged by successive corruption scandals, however implicated the Left in others. With unemployment finally dropping, Jospin should have little difficulty displacing Chirac from the Elysée next year.

In the UK, the prospect for the elections this spring is even clearer. In 1997, New Labour won a parliamentary landslide with less than 44 per cent of the vote. However distorted by the premia of a simple plurality system, this was a much stronger political base than Clinton ever achieved, because of the Liberal Democrat vote—17 per cent—that flanked it, reducing the Conservatives to extremities the Republicans have never endured. Ever since, the British Right has been ridden by xenophobic furies much more damaging than the religious fixations of the American. Here the ideological supplement—the battle of Britain against Brussels—has choked its suppliers, to a point where for much of the time they have ceased to pose any challenge to the government. The mediocrity of New Labour's own performance to date, where its main achievements have been to run Major's growth track another four years, and tamp down trouble in Scotland and Northern Ireland, has left voters apathetic, probably ensuring a further drop in turnout this year. But that is no more likely to alter the result than it did Clinton's re-election in 1996. New Labour is a shoo-in for a second term. As the campaign approaches, the argument is likewise already rote that, whatever the shortcomings of Blair's rule, the alternative is so unthinkable that the regime must at all costs be sustained. Since the Conservatives—still hopelessly declassed and divided by Europe—have no chance of winning, there is little reason to be moved by it. Here the greater evil merely acts as a lightning-conductor for the lesser one, the imaginary silhouette of danger that shields the actual formula of power. A critical realism can dispense with such atmospherics. So long as the global economy holds up, the blander version of neo-liberalism—social sensibility, political sterilization—is likely to dominate the scene. Viewed internationally, the operative adversary has yet to change.