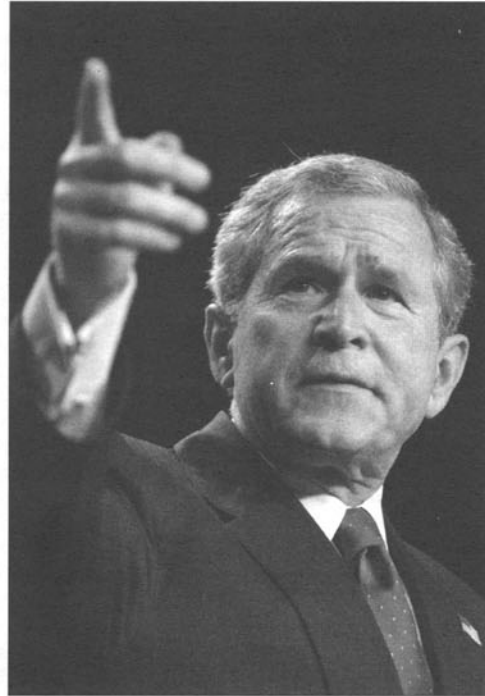


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The 2004 U.S. Elections What Is at Stake?

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It is a cliché that elections for a second presidential term are relatively unimportant in the United States, because incumbent presidents tend to be reelected if they keep the economy in good shape. The sign Bill Clinton used to keep on his desk that read, “It’s the economy, stupid,” is famous; it was to remind him that the economy, like no other issue, determines the election (as George Bush, Sr. knows very well). However, the traditional parameters cannot

be applied so easily today, with the 9/11 terror, the obsession with security and the military occupation of Iraq at center stage. We could resort to another golden rule of U.S. politics: if the country is in crisis, Americans always rally around their president. However, favorable public opinion is also increasingly weak and is polarizing around the policy of preventive war.

The analysis of scenarios for the November elections is difficult and necessarily inconclusive. On the one hand, the economy seems to have begun to

recover; however, it has not recovered as much as expected and not everyone sees growth. So, we cannot predict that President Bush will be reelected, at least, not easily. On the other hand, although there is a crisis, frustration at not catching Bin Laden and the recent photos showing clear mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners bring into question the means for confronting the U.S. security crisis. What is more, criticism has increased recently about the way the Republican president has waged the war against terrorism.

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The upcoming elections are of historic importance because, regardless of who is elected, a neo-conservative revolution that has been brewing and, once established, will be very difficult to de-activate, may be consolidated. Either the neo-conservatives harden up their unilateralist, unipolar agenda or the Democrats take office and try to reverse some of the changes of the Bush era. The outcome will have a great impact on the United States and the world. The task seems easier for the Republicans, who dominate the three branches of government. By contrast, if the Democrats win, they will be faced with a divided government.

In this article, I will review the elections and the two golden rules of the U.S. political system and look at the issue of the neo-conservative revolution in the United States. Campaign strategists have realized that the economy has not been able to consolidate its recovery and are centering Bush's reelection campaign on what a great war leader he has been, trying to infuse fear among the public and putting forward the crisis to make the most of the second rule (Americans unite in a crisis). The question, then, would be whether this strategy has been successful and whether there will be another terrorist attack or not.

Two points should be emphasized here. On the one hand, the belief that the Iraq war would come to a rapid conclusion has turned out to be unfounded. It seems that none of the military strategists was capable of predicting what is really happening in Iraq. Although people talked about the end of the war, reality has turned out to be different. With the occupation and the apparent initial military victory, a second type of armed clash was born: an urban guer-

rilla war that has caused more casualties than the war itself. This has led to a kind of reversal in the famous May 24, 2004 speech. Bush proposed five points in that speech: 1) returning sovereignty to the Iraqis through a provisional government and scheduling the beginning of the withdrawal of the U.S. army after June 30; 2) reestablishing security; 3) building infrastructure; 4) seeking greater international participation; and 5) carrying out elections for the new government. The idea is to create an assembly to draft a Constitution, under which elections would be organized.

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Bush's speech sparked more questions and confusion than answers. He talked about leaving Iraq and handing over sovereignty to different groups who would build their democratic government. What will happen if instability continues in Iraq? What will happen if a radical, anti-U.S. group takes power? And what if Al Qaeda takes advantage of the vacuum of power to set up its center of operations? How would the paradox be interpreted if instead of propagating democracies, they help propagate instability, conflict and hunger? It is to be expected that people are already asking these questions in the White House because they do not seem very naive. Many observers imagined that it would not be an easy war. In any case, a rapid withdrawal would be the best course of action. However, the problem could be made much greater if tragic decisions were made hastily be-

cause of the approaching elections. If they have already made the mistake of going in without taking into account all the consequences, hopefully they will not leave making the same mistake.

Mixing the timing of the U.S. elections with the timing of Iraq reconstruction may be explosive. Each process has different rhythms and confusing them would be another grave mistake. If Bush and his strategists are only thinking now of the imperious necessity of winning the elections and of how good it would look to voters to begin to withdraw troops from Iraq, they are running the risk that once the elections are

over, the situation in Iraq and in the rest of the region could be unmanageable. Hopefully, the strategists are taking into consideration that, if there is a sharp clash in Iraq, the start of the U.S. withdrawal would have to be postponed until after the elections, meaning that they could deal with this problem later with more reflection and care. Winning the elections at any cost may lead to transcendental consequences in the international order, which would end by affecting all the actors involved. Among other things, this is due to the hike in oil prices that will inevitably have a new impact on the U.S. and world economies, a process that has actually already begun.

This is not an easy time in the United States. The public wants to believe in its leaders, but there are more and more reasons to doubt them. The first is that until now, no one has found weapons

of mass destruction. Second came the abhorrent photographs of torture, so staggering that we could easily have believed they were doctored, but that the military high command almost immediately accepted as real. About the lack of weapons of mass destruction, the neo-conservatives immediately began to change the justification of the war, arguing now that while the weapons had not been found, no one could deny that the Iraqis are better off without Hussein's repression. They argued something that in general is undeniable: the world today is better off without constant threats from Hussein. But a short time later the photographs of torture were released and then the difference between the good guys and the bad guys began to blur. The U.S. public could easily accept that, despite everything, Hussein had to be done away with, and the legitimacy of the leaders, although threatened, remained unstained. However, the evidence of tortures and humiliating treatment of Iraqi prisoners of war has sparked serious questions, and there is a feeling that the photos are not even the tip of the iceberg. The point is whether the whole iceberg will be revealed before or after the elections.

Until now, the polls show the public's great disillusionment, with lower and lower approval ratings for the way in which President Bush has managed the war against terrorism. According to May 29 CNN surveys, 46 percent approved Bush's performance and 49 percent disapproved it. We cannot ignore that many Americans feel that anyone who questions the president's performance is unpatriotic, and that a large part of the population believes there is a direct link between Hussein and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. That is

why Congress approved the Patriot Act soon after the attack on the Twin Towers. But today, with the passage of time, people are beginning to realize how that law is infringing in practice on civil liberties: it allows, for example, searches without a warrant, jailings for long periods without trial, violations of privacy, controls on the kind of reading people do in public libraries and the isolation of the prisoners in Guantánamo. What at first was seen as an unavoidable necessity is today beginning to be seen with certain reservations. Rights and freedoms that

tributed to Al Gore losing his bid for the presidency—launched his own independent candidacy, which will undoubtedly take votes away from the Democratic candidate.

One of the central factors in this election will no doubt be the money each of the candidates raises to fuel his campaign. By early July, Bush had U.S.\$214 million, while John Kerry said he had raised U.S.\$148 million. The big oil companies and large consortia are not willing to give up power so easily. The big tax cuts under Bush, Jr. and the promise of more to come

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had appeared to be battles won by Americans now seem to be belittled by the threat. The question is whether once the crisis is past, those rights will be reinstated, or if these changes are simply part of the neo-conservative revolution, which may be unstoppable.

Despite the fact that not the entire right wing is happy with the size of the domestic deficit or the administration's migratory policies, it is a Republican Party success that no other candidate was fielded threatening Bush's campaign.¹ For the time being, the Christian right is satisfied with promises of the prohibition of homosexual marriage and the establishment of certain limits for abortion, as well as the renewed debate about banning the teaching of the theory of evolution in schools.

By contrast, the liberals were not able to close ranks around a single candidate. Ralph Nader—who con-

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tributed to Al Gore losing his bid for the presidency—launched his own independent candidacy, which will undoubtedly take votes away from the Democratic candidate. One of the central factors in this election will no doubt be the money each of the candidates raises to fuel his campaign. By early July, Bush had U.S.\$214 million, while John Kerry said he had raised U.S.\$148 million. The big oil companies and large consortia are not willing to give up power so easily. The big tax cuts under Bush, Jr. and the promise of more to come have undoubtedly benefited them, and they will not want to see their profits affected by new taxes that the Democrats would responsibly have to institute given the enormous growth of the budget deficit. If the 2000 election showed anything, it is that the population is divided. But it is also important to point out that the division was more over candidates than platforms, which were not very different. Today, that division marks a clear, visible difference between one party and the other. The proposals of both parties are more distant than ever before. While the last elections had a low turn-out, in this election, Americans will probably come out to vote in greater numbers. This will make a big difference no matter who the winner is, and, in addition, people have already learned that every vote counts, as could be seen by the Florida scandal in 2000. In the current

elections, the redefinition of the United States is at stake. They will either consolidate what Paul Krugman has called the neo-conservative revolution, or the Democrats will be able to stop it.² In the last elections, the Democrats went to the party's grass roots to get out the vote. In the 2004 elections, the Republicans have woven electoral networks with the same aim. According to June CNN polls, currently the candidates are practically tied: Bush is supported by 47 percent of the voters and Kerry by 49 percent, with a margin of error of +/- 2 percent. Also in early June, only

would lead everyone to close ranks around the president), then Democratic candidate John Kerry has big possibilities. If a situation arises that is perceived as a crisis and Bush is reelected, the so-called neo-conservative revolution will begin to consolidate. That revolution looks with disdain at the United Nations and thinks it is an unnecessary risk acting within it because it sees it as an institution that intervenes in its sovereignty and twists its interests. Therefore, neo-conservatives resort to arrogant unilateralism that ignores the rest of the world's countries. Behind

today it is clear that the neo-conservatives hold ideological sway over the party.

The large, irresponsible tax cuts favoring the most privileged sectors of society have turned the U.S.\$230-billion surplus Bush inherited into a deficit of U.S.\$300 billion. Undoubtedly, this has led to the reduction of the social safety net that had been built over many years by the welfare state. But it is precisely that welfare state that the neo-conservatives oppose. They argue for a minimal state that would allow freedom to large corporations, in their opinion the driving force behind the U.S. economy's development. To conclude, we can say that more than the 9/11 crisis leading to a neo-conservative agenda, that crisis was used to impose the neo-conservative agenda. That is what is delicate about the situation.

The strategy of preventive war can be considered the heart of the neo-conservative foreign policy strategy.

between 8 and 10 percent of voters were uncommitted. The fight for this group will be ferocious.

Finally, of the two golden rules of U.S. politics, the one about the economy seems to be predominating; it has not recovered completely, which is reflected in the opinion polls. Announcements of jobs being destroyed are constant and unemployment is at 5.6 percent. GDP growth for the first quarter was 4.4 percent, and in March, it was 5 percent. Not at all bad. It is not only important, however, that it continue to recover, but that the public perceive it as recovering. A vast majority disapproves of how Bush is managing both domestic and foreign policy; 65 percent thinks the country is on the wrong track.³

The war in Iraq is now beginning to look like a disaster. And if a bigger crisis does not emerge (due, for example, to the threatened terrorist attack, which

this unilateralism the religious vision of manifest destiny, the divine mission, reemerges. At the same time, this vision demonstrates an inability to understand the profound mixture of the religious and the political in the Muslim civilization and the need to accept a plurality of models, not thinking the United States is the only model for development. Different negative reactions have emerged because of this vision.⁴

Currently, the strategy of preventive war can be considered the heart of the neo-conservative foreign policy strategy. Its main points are more than a decade old and from the start they included the possibility of an attack on Iraq and the other countries of the so-called Axis of Evil before it was too late. They also justify the intervention to —paradoxically—impose democracies. Although the most conservative wing of the Republican Party is against this unfettered foreign policy activism,

The face of the United States is changing with regard to domestic policy: support for institutions created in the period of the "New Society" to help least favored groups is being withdrawn; social support networks that compensate the least able for the roughness of the market are being deactivated; civil liberties and freedom of thought, due process for jailing suspects and respect for prisoners' rights are being threatened; environmental protection measures are being ignored when the country voted against the Kyoto Protocol about climatic change. All of this, in addition to the growth of a National Security State based on a great military-industrial complex that threatens democracy itself.⁵ In foreign policy, the conservative revolution returns to the Biblical vision in which the "Divinity" gives "manifest destiny" to the United States to act as a benevolent imperialism, exporting and imposing democracies at the same time

that it places little importance on democracy domestically, as was confirmed by the 2000 elections. And instead of aspiring to jointly building an international order ruled by international institutions, the neo-conservatives in office also voted against the creation of the International Criminal Court and resort to preventive war justified by their "need" of security. In foreign policy we find an "America unbound," and in domestic politics, every day more institutions that soften the disparities created by the market are eliminated.⁶ The coming U.S. elections are in the hands of American voters, but today as never before, for better or for worse,

the consequences will have an impact on the whole world. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Neo-conservative strategists Karl Rove and Karen Hughes are part of the Republican Party campaign. Hughes is the person who presented George Bush as a conservative with compassion. We will have to see who dominates the campaign, but it seems it will be Rove, who takes a harder line. See Elizabeth Drew, *The New York Review of Books*, 10 June 2004.

² Paul Krugman, following a model invented by Henry Kissinger, talks about a neo-conservative revolution today that does not accept the legitimacy of the system. Paul Krugman, *The Great Unraveling. Losing Our Way in the New Century* (New York: Norton & Co., 2003).

³ CBS polls, quoted in "Rumbling from the Right," *The Economist*, 29 May 2004, p. 27.

⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's security advisor, has accepted that the Taliban grew thanks to U.S. support to weaken the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. See William Pfaff, "The American Mission?" *New York Review of Books*, 8 April 2004.

⁵ The defense industry contributes large amounts to the campaigns. Between 1990 and 2002 it gave U.S.\$70 million to different candidates. To look more closely at the argument about the need to promote democracy internally and abroad, as well as the threats of the National Security State, see William E. Hudson, *American Democracy in Peril* (Washington, D.C.: C.Q. Press, 2004), p. 321.

⁶ Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound. The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).



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