

Bush: The Last Battle Lost

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Reuters/John Gress

One of the main beneficiaries of the midterm elections faces the 2008 presidential race.

Three frightful phantoms pursued President George W. Bush in last November's midterm elections, three phantoms that have followed him from the beginning of his term in office. One is the presumption of electoral fraud in Florida and of the loss of the popular vote; neither prevented him from taking office in 2000, but they did weaken his presidency and prestige in the eyes of Americans and the world from the onset. Secondly, the worst of all nightmares: the September 11 terrorist attacks that devastated New York's financial district and submerged the country in the worst security crisis and loss of innocence in its entire history. What is more, from that terrible moment, Americans have been more afraid

of losing control than of death itself. Their astonishment stems fundamentally from the feeling that they were immersed in an apocalyptic future, which while it had been majestically depicted in the mass media and the world of fiction and film in U.S. iconographic culture, caught them unprepared to face such a real scene as the one that was so forcefully presented to them.

It was an event that marked the United States' social and political life forever and was certainly exploited by the president and his party to the last minute of the electoral campaign, just like the Iraq situation (the third phantom). Both became polarizing parts of extraordinary importance in the elections and in the development of a bellicose discourse which, though it invaded most of both parties' campaign headquarters, was used in a pedestrian fashion by

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the White House, apparently alienating public support more than attracting it. By attempting to latch onto the war in Iraq and use the issue for electoral ends, given the fact that the public was clearly sick of it, Bush committed perhaps the most serious mistake of his political career. And Karl Rove, his omnipotent Machiavelli *à la carte*, could not see his way forward this time with the tricks that he had always used to advance the president's cause.

The sweeping Republican defeat in the House of Representatives and the races for the governors' houses, which for the most part reverted to the Democrats, shows how difficult it was for Bush to rid himself of these three phantoms, though mainly the latter two. In any case, both his legitimacy and his declining popularity and, of course, his domestic and foreign policy decisions, have depended on the phantoms of September 11 and the Iraq war. And the political-electoral climate in the months prior to the November balloting was determined by them. They are also responsible to a great extent for the election outcome, which was much more unfavorable to the Republican Party than expected since it never even remotely considered it would lose its Senate majority.

It is common knowledge that since August 2002, President Bush proposed waging an anti-terrorist campaign that has led to the worst foreign policy and domestic policy crisis in the United States since the Vietnam War. This effort, despite its failure, was consistently fostered from the Pentagon by Donald Rumsfeld, a Vice President Cheney *protégé*, whom Bush inexplicably supported for a very long time. What was expected to be a campaign that would make it possible for a sector of

the right wing very identified with the governing party to capitalize politically, became, as the spectacular political-military fiasco it was, its Achilles heel in the recent elections. All of this, linked to other extremely sensitive domestic issues, will most probably have a favorable impact on the Democratic Party in the 2008 presidential elections.

This scenario of Republican defeat is even more underlined if we observe that in addition to the Iraq issue, the voters are very unsatisfied by other aspects of Republican rule. Particularly outstanding is that in pre-election polls about practically every key issue of the Bush administration, the public thought the Democrats could do a better job: for

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example, Iraq, 48 vs. 40 percent; the war against terrorism, 44 vs. 43 percent; the economy, 50 vs. 41 percent; the North Korean situation, 47 to 40 percent. Other points also stand out that are always central in midterm elections: at voting time, the president's approval rating was extremely low, around 35 percent, due above all to the public's disapproval of the Iraq war (57 percent); the rejection of his administration (66 percent); and, to top it all off, there is a marked perception that given Washington's foreign policy inadequacies, the United States has a bad image abroad (77 percent).

The U.S. elections, then, became mainly a kind of referendum about the administration and the president's prestige based on his Iraq policy, more than

on the big domestic issues, and the president does not seem to have passed the test. This tension made the recent campaign the most hotly contested, dirtiest and most expensive in U.S. electoral history. It also meant that a reactive vote to punish the Bush administration predominated over a vote affirming anything.

The results show that the voters opted for countering presidential power and the administration's ineffective policy in matters of extreme importance for Americans. This change of heart will undoubtedly have a big impact on U. S. policy over the next two years. And perhaps —why not?— it could also be a reason to be optimistic, given a very significant fact: conditions are being created to put an end to the policy of the two extremes. It is well known that the last six years have been very tense for Americans, but that there have also been ideological excesses, the violation of constitutional rights and government corruption, all perpetrated in the name of a cause, the war, that today may be turning into a relic.

Although for Mexico and the world the new Democratic majority in both houses of the U.S. Congress is no guarantee of a solution to the many unresolved problems with Washington, at least we might be able to relax and hope for greater moderation in solving the problems accumulated because of the White House's unilateral excesses in its world policy since 2001. In that sense, we can underline the important consolidation since the last elections of two politicians who offer some preliminary indications of the viability of aforementioned optimistic hypothesis: Hillary Rodham Clinton, the leader of the Democratic center, and John McCain, the leader of the Republican center. Both very probably presidential candidates for 2008. **MM**