

Reclaiming America: Democrats Must Truly Change Course

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The Democrats' ascendancy within the US Congress could signal the regaining by the public, of its country's direction

The astounding results of the US Congressional elections of 7 November were undoubtedly a welcome sign of change, not in the American political apparatus, inasmuch as it is in the unmistakable reclamation by the public of its role as the driving force which shapes the nation's political posture

This having been said, one must not confuse the redefining of the public relevance to political discourse and processes, with the political machination and platforms entrusted with translating the people's will, grievances or aspirations into action. The early signs are not promising however, and suggest that for any practical change to be achieved and consolidated, public awareness and engagement must, for their part, be neither marginalised nor relegated.

Most analyses agree that Iraq was indeed the decisive factor that helped turn the tide against the Republicans and their president, with their tired mantras and slogan-based foreign policy. The decisive outcome of the elections was a resounding message that Americans can no longer operate on the basis of fear alone, and that the people of the United States are no longer self-absorbed and incapable of shaping their overall political outlook on the basis of exterior factors. This time, it was not the economy, but war that wrought an end, even if temporarily, to President George W Bush's administration's expansionist and even imperialist view of the world.

For a few days, one indulged in the sweetness of victory, at the sight of neo-conservative ideologues collectively disowning their hegemonic project and their once-hailed hero, now a lame duck president. The January issue of Vanity Fair magazine is scheduled to highlight the full scale of the neocons' historic disintegration. David Rose has reported on his findings, quoting the war architects themselves: former chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee Richard Perle, and former White House speechwriter David Frum, among others. Frum, who coined the "axis of evil" slogan, told Rose that the situation in Iraq "must ultimately be blamed on failure at the centre, starting with President Bush".

Coupled with an earlier assertion by former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz — now the head of the World Bank — at the National Press Club that Iraq "is not my problem", and former Defense Department official Douglas Feith's abandoning of politics altogether for a teaching position at Georgetown University, one can rest assured that the future of the disastrous "Project for A New American Century" is, at best, uncertain. Not even the most

hopeful amongst us foresaw such an outcome, nor the chain reaction that it is generating, starting with the dismissal of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the expected relegation of Vice-President Dick Cheney's position as a key player, in shaping the country's future foreign policy direction.

The post-election scene is indeed consistent with the larger picture, where the architects of war in both the US and Britain, and their faithful allies in Spain and Italy, are also plummeting. The downfall came in the form of awesome crashes for some, such as the ones that brought down Spain's Jose Maria Aznar and Italy's once invincible Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, last April. The outcome of the US elections was no less remarkable; the latest episode, in fact, is expected to reverberate for years to come.

The defeat of the Republican Party however, should not be understood as one that substantiates the ways of the Democrats. The latter offered no practicable solution to the Iraq war. Moreover, their party fought and won the elections with a majority of its nominees challenging the need, even, for a timetable for withdrawal. It is also worth noting that Democrats are equally responsible for the Iraq war: after all, a majority of their members in Congress voted for it, tirelessly justifying it on legal, moral and national security grounds.

The voters' dissatisfaction with Bush's 'staying the course' approach, perhaps inadvertently, invited Democrats back to a leadership position by a comfortable margin at the House of Representatives. This development takes place now, after years of indecisiveness and, frankly, of lack of purpose and cohesion. Despite the fact that it was the antiwar fervour that created the opportunity for the Democrat's political recovery, it could also be the reason sending them back into a state of lengthy hibernation.

The 7 November vote was a mandate that imagined a less hostile and more sensible and prudent America. The vote could be said to envisage a country that neither negotiates its civil liberties, nor 'pre-emptively' engages in brutal wars that damage its global reputation and compromise its national security. But does the Democratic leadership share that same vision, or will it simply try to manipulate its supposedly 'antiwar' image — illusory as it is — to advance its narrow and self-serving political ambitions?

While British Prime Minister Tony Blair — hardly known for his political autonomy — had the audacity to concede to the long-held argument that solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the key to a stable Middle East, the Democratic leadership continues to reassert its unwarranted allegiance to the government of Israel. This latter's violent, long and cruel occupation of the Palestinian territories has brought tremendous harm to the Palestinian people, serving as a rallying cry for anti-Americanism and, indeed, terrorism throughout the Middle East, and far beyond.

Rep Nancy Pelosi, groomed to be the speaker of the House when the Democrats claim the Congressional throne next year, not only disagrees with Blair's recent revelations to the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, but is so archaic and self-defeating in her ideas that she sounds more like an iconic Zionist figure, than a moderate American politician. In her speech to the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) last year she asserted that, "There are those who contend that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is all about Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. This is absolute nonsense. In truth, the history of the conflict is not over occupation and never has been: it is over the fundamental right of Israel to exist."

If this supposed 'progressive' figure continues to deceive the American people regarding the iniquitous nature of her country's role in prolonging the instability of the Middle East, thus committing America to more violence and counter violence, then, Pelosi and the entire Democratic Party behind her would find themselves answering to the same discontented public two years from today. Moreover, if Israel, despite its horrendous crimes in the region, which again serve as a powerful force behind counter violence and international terrorism, continues to be treated as a Sacred Cow by American politicians, then Americans should expect that their country, willingly or not, will 'stay the course', if not in Iraq, then elsewhere.

It is mind-boggling that after so many years, and particularly five years of reprehensible bloodshed that has been mainly inspired by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, few American politicians possess the courage to say it as it is. However, while discounting this conflict as an 'internal Israeli affair' in past years was acceptable by American political standards, it will no longer suffice. Such a summary dismissal is now threatening global stability altogether, and will continue to inch America closer to more pointless, albeit bloody conflicts.

To prevent the exodus of Empire-driven neo-conservative ideologues from being replaced by self-deceiving, Israel-comes-first Democrats, the American public must not be satisfied with its democratic revolution of early November. Americans must continue to push for a truly equitable, sensible and revolutionary foreign policy. It should be one that goes beyond hollow dictum and reasserts America's leadership globally. If it fails to do so, then America's Middle East conflict will perpetuate at an exorbitant price. This will be paid by ordinary Americans, and innocent people everywhere.

Ramzy Baroud's latest book: *The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle* (Pluto Press, London) is now available in the US from the University of Michigan Press and from Amazon.com.

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