

POLITICS  
and  
ELECTIONS

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The left shares a collective experience of a presidential election campaign in 1964, which clothed the real politics of the country in politicians demagoguery. Then, decisive sections of the left lost their ability to speak to the needs and grievances of the people from a position of independence. Now, at a much more critical historical moment, there is a certain similarity in the political situation and there is a real possibility that the left will repeat its past mistakes with even more disastrous consequences. On the one hand we see the classical symptoms of sect mentality - groups which loudly proclaim their revolutionary character but which don't organize anybody for any struggle. On the other hand, we see an enlarging flow of left people oiling the machinery of bourgeois parliamentary politics.

To avoid these dual dangers, the electoral picture, and particularly the presidential campaign, must be kept clearly within the context of an understanding of the real politics of the country. This is just what is not being done. The vote for McCarthy in New Hampshire Wisconsin and Connecticut; the entrance of Kennedy into the campaign; the subsequent withdrawal of Johnson; have misled the left into acting as if the urgency had gone out of the political situation - as if the crisis were over, or had narrowed down to the issue of race. The feeling is that McKennedy is going to end the war in Vietnam and that its programs and rhetoric are going to absorb or delude most of the present and future constituency of the left. Again there have been two responses in the left. One argues for a mobilization behind, or to the side of, McKennedy to maintain the "relevance of the left". The other would build an unscalable moralistic wall between the left and any sort of democrat to "maintain the identity of the left".

Both responses are equally wrong for much the same reason. They each confuse the flexibility within the electoral system in an election campaign with the flexibility in the system as a whole - with the system's capacity to grant substantial concessions. The trends on the left can be put within this framework quite easily. One favors maximum unity on a minimum program to gain reform victories, the other fears an increased ability of the system to absorb or co-opt reform movements and sticks to agitation and "raising consciousness". The fact is that the revitalization of "liberalism" in the electoral process is a measure of the magnitude of the political problems facing the system, not a measure of the degree to which these problems have been solved.

CRISIS

If the term crisis has any meaning, this country is in one, a deep political, economic and social crisis. Essential parts of contemporary U.S. capitalism have led the country to an impasse. The struggle to maintain the American empire; the reliance on state corporatist techniques - on militarization and bureaucratization of the society - to keep the essence of capitalism through changing its form; the dependency on institutionalized racism and anti-communism to mute the internal class struggle and absorb popular insurgencies before they begin the challenge the root premises of the system; are all in deep trouble. These problems can best be seen in the context of the war in Vietnam. Vietnam is a dilemma for U.S. capitalism. The cost of losing is incalculable and is growing all the time, but the cost of continuing to try to win is of similar magnitude and is growing even more rapidly. An awareness of the urgency of the situation, not yet coupled with an understanding of its totality, is the source of the deep tactical splits in the ruling class and the resultant upheavals in the electoral situation.

While the very urgency of the situation compels the ruling class to develop a unified and coherent position based on realistic political estimates, the left does not have to protect its control of state power and is under no such compulsion. But such a common position must be developed, or we will remain largely ineffectual, if we remain at all. A good way to begin to develop such a position is with an examination of the implications of the war in Vietnam.

It would be a mistake, if the left were to accept the argument of a Fulbright that U.S. involvement in Vietnam has been based on a gross overestimation of its interests in that country, and is a major policy blunder - the wrong war at the wrong time in the wrong place. If anything, the truth is that the importance of a victory for U.S. imperialism in Vietnam has been understated in the official explanations of the war. Vietnam has become a decisive test of strength in the international class struggle. Failure in Vietnam would mark the limits on the ability of the U.S. to crush socialist-led anti-imperialist revolutionary movements in the third world and would provide a number of important object lessons to the socialist world system, and in particular, to the leadership of similar revolutionary movements elsewhere.

This test of strength must be placed in the context of two other realities facing U.S. imperialism. Since the beginning of this decade the conditions of life in non-socialist Africa, Asia and Latin America have steadily worsened in absolute terms. This change is more dramatic in comparison with the improvements in such socialist states as Cuba, North Vietnam, and North Korea. This fact has undercut ideas about the possibility of economic development within the framework of the capitalist world market and about various "third road" schemes which had a good deal of currency in the latter half of the fifties.

In response to these developments the policies identifiable as neo-colonialism; the maintenance of imperialist-colony relationships through indirect techniques, through manipulation of trade and financial policies, etc, have lost more and more of their viability. By the beginning of this decade, the U.S. which was the pre-eminent practitioner of neo-colonialism, was forced to rely increasingly on more direct methods of maintaining imperialism. Development of the policies of counter-insurgency with their reliance on military and para-military methods, was underlain by an implicit decision that the stability of imperialism was dependent upon the maintenance of compradorial or military regimes in the colonial territories - that even a limited political independence was too dangerous. Of course, these methods had never been abandoned as evidenced by Iran, Guatemala and Lebanon during the Eisenhower years. But they became much more central as the image of the threat to imperialism began to center on the Cuban model. The Alliance for Progress was, perhaps, the final major attempt to maintain the policies of neo-colonialism, and it was quickly overshadowed by the direct intervention in Cuba, Indonesia, Ghana, Brazil, Bolivia, Guatemala, The Dominican Republic, and, above all, in Vietnam.

But reliance on the use or the threat of the use of overt force creates its own problems. The more that the U.S. invests militarily and politically in Vietnam without gaining a victory, the more plausible become the arguments that popular revolutionary movements are invincible if they pursue correct tactics, and the less efficacious will be the future, more discriminate, deployments of U.S. military power. If U.S. imperialism is defeated in Vietnam, it will not be dead, but the combination of the lessons learned by the world revolutionary movement from this victory and from the defeats previously mentioned will constitute a major blow to the continued viability of the American empire. And while the U.S. may be able to pass off a defeat as a victory for domestic consumption, though this will be very difficult, there is no such possibility to delude the world revolutionary movement.

To understand some important additional costs of losing the war in Vietnam, the war must be seen as an organic development out of contemporary U.S. capitalism. Since WWII, political stability in the U.S. has rested on its ability to maintain a measure of economic stability and growth that would permit it to defer the accumulated social costs of capitalist development. The form in which this has been partially accomplished has been the merger of the dominant sections of capital with the apparatus of government and the increasing control over all aspects of social existence by this merged entity. The symbol and the epitome of this is the military industrial complex. At one and the same time the objective potential for the system to absorb and pre-empt popular insurgent movements through selective concessions, and a social base from which to isolate the left with the ideological weapons of racism and anti-communism through selective repression, have been created and maintained.

By the beginning of the Kennedy administration this process faced increasing difficulties. Following the Korean war, the economy entered a period of relative stagnation, accompanied by a failure to make any meaningful attack on the major social issues of racial inequality, poverty and urban decay, while these problems grew more acute. A new movement for social reform began to gather momentum - the civil rights movement. Just below the level of conscious articulation it contained a radically different conception of national priorities than that on which capitalist stability had rested for two decades - the priorities of a domestic reconstruction, as opposed to those of an American Century. The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom marked the peak of this mass insurgent movement. Its goals were clearly different from those set by the needs of the military industrial complex and the dominant sections of capital. It was obviously not what was going to be "good for General Motors".

In retrospect the response of the system to this dual threat of economic stagnation and a mass insurgent movement is clear. In 1961 Kennedy had gained office amid much talk of "missile gaps", of "inflexible deterrents". Counter doctrines; counter-insurgency, development of modern conventional military techniques and equipment development of a first-strike counterforces nuclear capability, all of which involved a sharp acceleration of military spending, were developed. Anti-Communism, with Cuba, not the Soviet Army, symbolizing the external threat to U.S. capitalism, and with the focus on the dangers of the national liberation movement in the third world, not on threats to the stability of capitalism in Europe, was revived as a justification of the costs involved in these measures.

But more was required to meet the challenge to the dominance of the military industrial complex. The specter of a foreign communist threat had to gain more immediacy to convince people that to press their demands would endanger the security of the nation. The level of demand had to be greatly increased without challenging the profitability of existing investment to prevent a reversion back to the patterns of stagnation of the latter fifties. This combination would provide the ideological tools to divert the movement and the economic flexibility to grant it some significant concessions without jeopardizing the priorities of profit maximization. In order to perpetuate itself, institutionalized militarism and anti-communism led with inexorable logic to a real war against a real communist enemy. For a time the mechanism appeared to be working. A substantial tax cut was matched by major increases in Government spending in areas where pressures had been mounting - medicare, the war on poverty, the model cities programs. But now the solutions of three years ago have turned into causes of the reappearance of the same issues in a much sharper form. The war, from a way to meet social pressures within the framework of capitalism, has become the barrier to the containment of these pressures. Both continuing the war and ending it unsuccessfully mean to face the issues which it temporarily deferred in a much more critical form and with much less material and moral flexibility. Finally, an effort to maintain the credibility of anti-Communism has turned into a mechanism which impels more and more people to identify their interests with a victory for Communism.

Thus the consequences of losing the war in Vietnam are a major curtailment of the ability of U.S. imperialism to maintain the American empire, and growing limitations of the ability of U.S. capitalism to preserve internal economic and social stability in a form compatible with the preservation of capitalism. If these are the forces which prevent the U.S. from accepting defeat in Vietnam, then the forces for the termination of the war under conditions where the popular credulity would be strained to talk in terms of stalemate must be of comparable magnitude. After all, recent political changes are indications that the system is developing contingency plans for a forced withdrawal from Vietnam.

The war has contained unpleasant paradoxes for the ruling class, exacerbating the very issues which it was meant to allay. It was necessary to defend U.S. imperialist positions, but it has succeeded in weakening these positions, as is most apparent in the gold crisis. If the war had been a short one, the problems wouldn't have developed. But now the installment plan prosperity has worn through and the reality of declining real income is becoming apparent to larger and more centrally located groups of people. The war no longer appears to be "good" for business and thus for labor. Its continuation creates demands which strain the elasticity of the system - strain its ability politically contain groups whose basic interests are in conflict with the requirements for the preservation of capitalism. The war undermines the implicit consensus on values, priorities, and methods - the false consciousness which is the functional substitute for a mass social base for private property - on which the stability of the system rests.

The youth, the blacks and the Spanish-speaking, and the intelligentsia are increasingly alienated from the political process as the war continues. Economic and general class issues just now reaching the level of political articulation are causing increasing ferment within the entire working class. The "austerity" campaign is certain to bring these much more into the open. In the present circumstances, these grievances and demands begin to pose a clear and present danger to the system. In particular, they begin to undermine the central political integrative mechanism in the society, the Democratic Party.

The social base of the Democratic Party is the combination of organized labor, the racial minorities, and the intelligentsia - although real power in the party has always remained with a section of big capital, particularly with the section involved most heavily in military production, and operative control has always been held by their agents, the big city bosses and the Dixiecrats. Since the first term of Roosevelt, the function of the Democratic Party has been to serve as the primary instrumentality through which selective concessions to popular movements are used to obscure the realities of power in the society. The basic illusions that people have about the nature of this society are often crystallized in the form of illusions about the Democratic Party. Popular protest movements, channeled into the Democratic Party, are strained through the electoral machinery until their constituencies are so confused and fragmented that they pose no threat to the system. The continuation of the war and of the policy complex of which it is the core involves the disruption of the social base of the Party - the growing alienation of the intelligentsia, frustration of the racial minorities, and increasing rebelliousness of the workers - and the erosion of its popular credibility. That is, continuation of the war creates a mass constituency for a real left in this Country. This is the cost of continuing the war.

#### RESPONSE TO CRISIS

The foregoing is the context in which the entrance of Kennedy and the withdrawal of Johnson from the presidential campaign, and all prior and subsequent maneuvers must be placed. They are both the manifestations of the existence of the crisis and the functional response of the system to that crisis.

Thus McCarthy's campaign both grew out of the alienation of the intelligentsia and is also a functional response of the system to attempt to contain their political expressions within the two party framework, and concretely, within the Democratic Party. At the same time, his campaign must remain responsive to the pressures from these constituencies in order to maintain its credibility. The Kennedy candidacy, on the other hand functions to contain the political expression of the black and brown constituencies in the South and Southwest and in the urban ghettos. He is the most responsive on these areas, and can be expected to become more so, to the point even of developing a form of accommodation with black power concepts. Of course, this division between Kennedy and McCarthy is not a rigid thing. McCarthy is now talking about internal colonies and Kennedy is experimenting with rhetoric about "going out and organizing America" to campus audiences. The real point is that they should be understood as two aspects of a functional response to a political crisis, not as either messiahs or demons.

In circumstances where the real problems facing the country are becoming more, not less, serious, the McKennedy electoral campaign itself contains an internal logic that threatens the stability of the system. To maintain its base of support, it would have to relate to issues and demands on which the Democratic Party could not make major concessions at this time. Such a campaign would create a further polarization within the base of the Democratic Party. What else could result from an open convention fight between Johnson, who controlled the convention machinery, and McKennedy, who possessed the popular support? And, to repeat, McKennedy was in no position to deliver to its supporters.

The NLF Tet offensive and then the gold crisis brought home the gravity of the situation to the ruling class. On the one hand, ideas were erased that a quick military victory might be won while Johnson pacified the electorate with peace offensives. On the other hand, hopes were smashed that the war could be won without imposing a politically dangerous austerity program at home - without ending for good the talk about both guns and butter. The withdrawal of Johnson from the campaign was the logical outcome.

The hoped result of the withdrawal of Johnson is the depoliticization of the election campaign, which, in turn, provides some additional time for the system to handle its immediate problems. With Johnson in the campaign, every primary became a referendum on basic priorities for U.S. capitalism - with every indication that the result would be adverse. With him out, all of the traditional limitations of the U.S. electoral process are magnified. People will remain confused about who to hold responsible for their problems and how to mobilize for real change. It is more than a possibility, it is a probability that, with the exception of Wallace, all of the presidential candidates of both parties will be picturing themselves as the man who can end the war, but not through immediate withdrawal of the troops - as the man who can solve the problems of the city and the ghetto, but one who will not tolerate lawlessness - as the man who can cut taxes, reduce inflation, reduce interest rates, end poverty, increase government programs for health, education and welfare, but not right now, not until he is in office.

With Johnson in the race there would have been great pressure for McKennedy to campaign in a way that would fracture the base of the Democratic Party. People then would have flooded into a number of forms of political activity that might undermine the system. It was this potential that forced McKennedy into the race in the first place, not any sense of moral mission, and, as he clearly stated, it was this potential which forced the withdrawal of Johnson. Now a convenient division of labor has been created between Johnson and McKennedy. Johnson has more latitude to pursue policies designed to come out ahead in Vietnam - escalation clothed in "peace" propaganda - and the complementary domestic policies - austerity and containment of the ghetto.

McKennedy will campaign on the basis of visions of what it will do if elected, in an attempt to hold the mass base of the Democratic Party. The tensions between McCarthy and Kennedy will be increasingly subordinated to their common function. War and racism will no longer be political issues in the way that they were with Johnson a candidate for re-election. In short, if we forget the personal fortunes of capitalist politicians, what is essentially happening is an attempt of U.S. capitalism to come out of Vietnam ahead before the war has done irreparable damage in order to be in a position to handle urgent internal problems.

#### THE ISSUES

From what has been said, some conclusions about the outstanding issues follow. It would be a mistake to assume that the war is as good as ended. The de-escalation has been in the popular consciousness, not in the scale of military operations. The Korean war precedent of an attempt to gain a military victory after the initiation of peace negotiations should not be forgotten, particularly since the negotiating position of the U.S. is very weak. Only the terms of its withdrawal are really open for discussion.

Domestically, there is no real possibility for a major attack on the crisis in the ghettos. Removal of the economic and social sources of black demands is not within the capacity of the system at this time, if it has ever been. The likely response to this issue was probably set by the 60,000 troops and 20,000 arrests which marked the assassination of Martin Luther King. Token concessions to the black movement at this time are likely to be counterproductive due to the depth of the alienation, and there is no evidence that even palliatives are being seriously considered by the ruling class.

The situation is the same in terms of general economic issues. The objective potential for making real concession does not exist even if the motivations were present. It is virtually certain that we will experience the opposite of the economic policies of the early Johnson administration. Instead of a tax cut we will have a tax increase. Instead of an increase in government spending we will have substantial cuts in all areas except that of Vietnam. It is inevitable that such measures will cut into real income, and there is a possibility that such fiscal and monetary maneuvers will precipitate a general recession by triggering a snowballing liquidation of consumer debt and business inventory and thus reducing the level of aggregate demand.

Finally, the tightness of the political situation is likely to lead to repression as a pre-emptive response to the possibility of mass movements around all of the issues previously mentioned. The immediacy of problems to which there are no easy solutions will create a situation where it is more necessary to isolate and repress those elements of the movement which threaten to gain a mass following for a "revolutionary way out of the crisis". There is no contradiction in Johnson - or even McKennedy - making moves to extricate the country from Vietnam and making concessions to black power, while taking harsh measures against the left in the anti-war and black movements. If reliance on repression is an index of the weakness of the system, then the likelihood is for an increase in repression.

#### TEMPORARY CRISIS

U.S. capitalism is extremely durable and is nowhere near collapse. We must remember that capitalism was able to remain viable throughout the world after the cataclysmic world economic crisis of 1929-1931. The system will always be able to scrape up the resources to continue to rule unless masses of people are unwilling to let it do so. One must be precise about the character of the crisis which confronts U.S. capitalism. It is a crisis that curtails the immediate - the short-run - resiliency of the system.

The hangover of atavistic attitudes in the ruling class, the institutional inertia in the political structure, the immediate lack of government credibility, the politicized alienation of youth and racial minorities; the focus of many popular demands on issues of power each impose real limits on the elasticity of the political structures, but they are not eternal limits - they will not last forever. The cost of losing in Vietnam will be a permanent reduction in the maneuverability of U.S. imperialism, but Vietnam is not the final battle and defeat in that arena is not total defeat. The defeat creates better conditions for the class struggle within the U.S., but to the degree that the left is not able to pull itself together enough to develop a coherent analysis and a relevant program these will remain as abstract potentiality.

As has been outlined, U.S. capitalism is subject to a set of adverse conditions to which it may be able to accommodate itself, more or less imperfectly, but which it may not transcend. This creates dangers as well as opportunities for the left. In fact, it can put the very survival of the left in jeopardy, and, even if the left survives, its ability to organize in the future will be directly proportionate to the kind of a base that it is able to build now.

It should go without saying that the left strategy should be built on the real problems facing capitalism in the country, not on the maneuverings of various sections of the ruling class based on their various perceptions of the crisis. In fact, though, this has not been the approach. For a time the left was relying on the system to do our organizing for us. The key premise was an apocalyptic vision where the system would become illegitimate in the eyes of the overwhelming majority of the people, where there would be only a minimal ability to blunt popular movements with real or rhetorical concessions, and where the dominant response to all popular movements would be their repression by force.

The victory for McCarthy in New Hampshire, the entrance of Kennedy into the campaign and the withdrawal of Johnson brought about an abrupt shift. To many on the left the system to have suddenly gained an almost unlimited capability to absorb the constituencies of the black and the anti-war movements and to appropriate the heart of the left's program. But the facts are, and were, that the system always had both the motives and the possibility of utilizing a combination of selective repression and selective concession to maintain itself. And the facts are that McKennedy operates under very definite limits which prevent it from preempting or co-opting the left's program.

Since the withdrawal of Johnson, McKennedy no longer has to build an organized base among strata disaffected from the regular political channels in order to convince the system that the costs of nominating Johnson are too high. Now, its function will be to maintain the unity of the party, and this will entail maintaining the allegiance of such alienated strata in a diffuse and disorganized form. In other words, its role will be to attempt to rhetorically co-opt the base of potential opposition to the policies and programs which capitalist "realism" will dictate that McKennedy or any other president adopt and implement when they are elected.

#### LEFT PROGRAM

When we talk about a political crisis, what we must mean is a situation where political demands threaten to rupture the political institutional framework. The elements of the present crisis are a structural crisis of urbanization, a crisis based on the national oppression of black and brown minorities, and a crisis growing from the consequences of the Cold-War justified militarization of the society. In each of these areas of crisis sharp demands with popular legitimacy have developed, demands which cannot be absorbed given the limitations in terms of the resources available to, and the motivations operative in, the ruling class.

The task for the left is to take these demands, build organizational momentum behind them, relate them to each other so that they imply a comprehensive alternative direction for the country, and focus them on the weak points of capitalist hegemony - in particular on the Democratic Party. This course develops the maximum pressure for reforms and creates optimal conditions for pointing out the limitations on reform struggles to masses of people by exposing the class essence of the outstanding example of an instrumentality responsive to popular pressure, the Democratic Party. At the same time, the development of demands that don't conform to the logic of profit create the circumstances in which people can begin to grasp the possibility of a society motivated by different principles.

There is a prevalent fear in the left that this cannot be done - that we would only begin and McKennedy would "co-opt" our program. There is a tremendous fuzziness in this concept of co-optation. Does it mean simply that McKennedy could be the agency through which the system makes certain concessions to popular pressure - through which reforms are implemented? If this is true, should the left back off from demands because, as they develop a mass appeal, politicians attempt to get mileage out of them, and, God forbid, because the demands might be won. This is not to deny that every partial victory creates illusions about the system in its beneficiaries, but the real issue is whether the left is going to be in a position to counter these illusions. Or is the meaning of co-optation that McKennedy has the ability to satisfy all real needs and grievances in a manner that will stop people from struggling? If this is the argument, then where will McKennedy get the resources to satisfy the demands which millions of people regard as legitimate? Verbal gestures can be made easily but they don't satisfy real needs. Most people are not like students, they cannot be taken out of the reality of their lives with political rhetoric.

The distinction between the way that the left relates to the critical issues and the way that McKennedy does, is that the left is not bound by capitalist criteria of logic and rationality - by priorities based on maximum profit for capital. Now, when the system is under great stress, this is a critical distinction, not a distinction between plausible and utopian demands, but between a leadership who will fight and a leadership who must sell out. The left has no vested interest in the social structure that would compel it to back off from struggle short of the full satisfaction of real human needs. McKennedy does. Because of this, it is our responsibility to develop our politics in opposition to McKennedy, but to do this in a way that will enable us to compete for the leadership of the masses of the American people, and not keep the left in pure, but impotent isolation.

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