

# The Nation.

January 22, 2001

## Bush's Phony 'Bipartisanship'

by JOHN NICHOLS

When it finally became clear that George W. Bush would be the 43rd President of the United States, a worried US Representative **Bernie Sanders** asked the Congressional Research Service for a list of all the legislation that outgoing President Bill Clinton had vetoed in his second term. Sanders theorized that the list, which ran from a sweeping cut in estate taxes to legislation banning late-term abortions, would form the basis of the new President's legislative agenda in 2001.

"It's logical; these are bills that passed the last Congress with solid majorities of Republicans and conservative Democrats, and that were only stopped with a veto," says Sanders, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats but does not cloak his frustration with the party's failure to champion a progressive agenda. "If the Republicans are smart, they'll start moving a lot of these bills through quickly, get Bush to sign them and spin the story that the new President has broken the gridlock."

Even as many Bush critics continue to focus on reviewing county-by-county returns from Florida, Sanders is moving fast in hopes of thwarting the GOP plan. "By knowing the issues that the Bush people are likely to move on, by getting the word out, I'm hoping that we can rally grassroots opposition--turn some of the anger at how Bush got elected into issue-based activism," he says. Without such pressure, Sanders fears, the Republicans "will pass a lot of legislation, and they will begin to construct the fantasy that Bush, against all expectations, is a successful President."

The biggest concern of Sanders and other progressives is that the fantasy will be aided, not hindered, by Democrats who think they can play nice with Bush early on and then channel fury over the 2000 election into a Congressional sweep in 2002 and a reclaiming of the White House in 2004. "Either we break up this congenial, very nice, big-smile lie of bipartisanship or we will see our message corrupted by the suggestion that Democrats and Republicans really aren't all that different," says Democratic Representative **Jesse Jackson Jr.** "If that happens, we will make it look like Ralph Nader was right when he said there were no differences between the parties, and we will lose any advantage coming out of the 2000 election."

It is not difficult to imagine how House and Senate Democrats might hand Bush the tools he needs. The Bush-as-uniter spin is already being sold--tune in to most mainstream political punditry and you'll hear the theory that the 107th Congress will spend two years straddling the political fifty-yard line as power rests in the hands of "moderate" blueblood Republicans like Senator Lincoln Chafee and Representative Amo Houghton, along with conservative Blue Dog Democrats like Representative Charles Stenholm and Senator John Breaux. To hear the pundits tell it, Stenholm, Breaux and their Blue Dog and slightly more moderate New Dog colleagues are

the new kings of the hill--compromise-prone Democrats whom their own party leaders cannot afford to lose and whom the Bush Administration will not be able to ignore.

With Congress more closely divided than at any point in recent American history--the GOP controls the House by only ten seats and the Senate is evenly divided, with Vice President Dick Cheney the tiebreaking vote--and with a President "swept" into office by a disputed 5-to-4 Supreme Court decision, the theory goes that legislation passing this Congress will have to be vetted by a coterie of centrist Democrats and Republicans.

Even for some progressives, that's an appealing prospect. Better a Bush tied to the center than the right wing untethered, according to this view. After all, while Bush's contested selection may have made him a weakened President, he arrives in Washington with an advantage no Republican President has enjoyed since Eisenhower in 1953: a Republican-controlled House and an effectively Republican Senate. With the party's Taliban wing counseling a "go for it" strategy, this trifecta could pay out for the GOP social and economic agenda.

Realistically, however, Bush and his aides know they lack a mandate for an elbows-flying charge--hence the appeal to "bipartisanship." Their model is Ronald Reagan, who arrived in Washington in 1981 with a bold agenda and a Republican Senate but a distinct GOP deficit in the House. Reagan's team quickly identified thirty to forty "Boll Weevil" Democrats--Southern conservatives who for reasons of region or personal history had not made a party switch--and a handful of Northern white ethnic "Reagan Democrats." So ardently did the Reaganites pursue the renegade Democrats that some veteran Republicans complained they could get better treatment by switching parties. But no one questioned the necessity of the Reagan strategy, and it paid off handsomely with the passage of key components of the new President's trickle-down economic agenda and Cold Warrior foreign policy.

It will be harder for Bush than it was for Reagan, who won the 1980 election with a clear majority. But those who imagine Bush as a bumbling incompetent would be wise to recall his able forays into "bipartisanship" as governor of Texas. And they would be wiser still to ponder the politics of the Blue Dog Southern Democrats and at least some of the Democratic Leadership Council-linked New Dogs--who are ideologically and politically inclined to become the Boll Weevils of the new Congress. "The Democrats that George W. Bush is preparing to work with in a 'bipartisan' fashion would, objectively, be Republicans if they lived north of the Mason-Dixon line," says Jackson. "So there is no bipartisanship here; there is no reaching out to people who have honest differences and forging unexpected coalitions. There is just conservatives getting together. But, I tell you, if we allow the press to suggest that this is a bipartisan coalition, we will play into the hands of Bush, the Republicans and the Greens, who say there is no hope for the Democratic Party."

That's exactly what GOP strategists are counting on. Already, William F. Buckley's *National Review* is promoting what it calls "conservative bipartisanship" along Reagan/Boll Weevil lines. And while Democrats chuckle over the damage done to Bush's presidency by the Florida fiasco, *National Review* tells its audience--correctly--that "close elections, even those tainted by allegations of illegitimacy, need not spell doom for the winner. John F. Kennedy became president by a slim popular-vote margin, but his administration reassured a nervous public. The

Democrats had a very good election in 1962, losing only four seats in the House and gaining three in the Senate, and won a landslide in 1964.”

Faced with the prospect of another "weakened presidency" turning out to be stronger than anyone expected, the question is: Who will fight the Bush agenda? Senate minority leader Tom Daschle will have his hands full with a caucus that includes Bush's buddy Breaux and several other right-leaning Southerners. Indeed, it appears that Bush's biggest Senate "crisis" may be the determination of Republican John McCain, Bush's primary opponent, and Democrat Russ Feingold to attach their campaign finance reform bill to key pieces of legislation. Republicans are furious at McCain for his genuine acts of bipartisanship--both on the campaign finance issue and with his tacit endorsement of Daschle's appeals for power-sharing in the Senate. Yet McCain continues to reject urging from Lott and others to smooth the way for Bush.

The first real test for Senate Democrats will involve their handling of Bush's appointments; GOP senators in 1993 showed with their aggressive, issue-oriented questioning of Clinton's Cabinet picks that the approval process is ripe with opportunities for embarrassing a new administration. There will definitely be a fight over Bush's selection of archconservative John Ashcroft as Attorney General, but Bush has made equally troubling appointments at second-tier positions--like that of Ann Veneman as Agriculture Secretary and Spencer Abraham as Energy Secretary. Watch for Democratic Senators **Paul Wellstone** and Tom Harkin to use key committee perches to open the debate about the Bush Administration's direction. But don't expect many Bush picks to be rejected or even held up for long.

In the House, where the partisan divide runs deeper, minority leader Dick Gephardt knows the importance of developing a coherent plan of attack. Yet he is hamstrung by threats from potential party-switchers and the natural inclination of many DLC members to sympathize with Bush policies on education, health reform and military spending. Additionally, Gephardt and other Democratic leaders worry about pushing so hard they're labeled as "too partisan" Democratic versions of House GOP whip Tom DeLay and his minions. Gephardt must also devote energy to redistricting fights that, if they go awry, could cost Democrats a dozen or more seats. This year, state legislatures and governors will be using the 2000 census to draw district lines for the next Congress, a process that could have as much impact on partisan divisions in the next House as anything Bush does. On top of all these other demands, Al Gore's fallen star has turned at least some of Gephardt's attention to the prospect of mounting a presidential run in 2004.

Well aware of these facts, progressive Democrats are not waiting for the generals to sound the charge. "Florida is over. That fight is done. We can and we should continue the struggle for voting reforms that expand our democracy, but we have to recognize that this is just one of the issues we have to focus on in what is going to be a very dangerous period of great struggle," argues Jackson. He'll work with both the Congressional Progressive Caucus and the Congressional Black Caucus--where fury at the way in which Bush was elected bubbled over in late December with threats by veteran members to boycott the Bush inaugural. Jackson can muster equal fury, and he'll be at January demonstrations led by his father, the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., and NAACP president Kweisi Mfume, but he says the primary focus must be on the legislative battles that could begin even before Bush is sworn in. "I share the frustration over what happened in Florida, but I'm telling you that we simply cannot let ourselves get

sidetracked," he says. "We need to stay off George W. Bush's message. We need to offer an alternative on every issue."

One area where the alternative may become clear quickly is in the fight over whether the Florida debacle will lead to genuine electoral reform. Republican Senator Mitch McConnell has moved to head off serious review of the Florida election mess by proposing hearings on what went wrong in 2000 and by offering tepid reforms. Democratic Senator Charles Schumer, in contrast, is seeking to require the Federal Election Commission to produce a plan for avoiding future Floridas; he wants to allocate \$250 million to help state and local election officials improve voting procedures. Democratic Representative **Peter DeFazio**, outgoing chairman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, is advancing a bill to establish a federal election-review commission. And members of the Congressional Black Caucus can be expected to push for review of policies that depress participation by African-Americans and other minority groups.

But the real fights are likely to be over economic issues--particularly taxation. Progressives say they see genuine opportunities to identify differences between the aspirations of conservatives and those of the great mass of Americans. "Progressive populist politics is a majority politics, and we cannot forget that, especially on these tax issues," says Wellstone. "Most Americans don't think billionaires should get a tax cut." Sanders wants progressives--and, ideally, the Democratic caucus--to offer an alternative budget proposal. "We need to say what could be done with those billions to provide young people with college education, to provide children with basic healthcare, to create a safety net for family farmers in a rapidly altering global marketplace," he says.

Battles over economic issues, particularly on trade and globalization, could actually be easier for progressives to wage against a GOP administration than against the Clinton White House. During the brief postelection session of the 106th Congress, Democratic Representative **Sherrod Brown** said he was already witnessing an upside to opposition. "I was talking to this Democratic Congressman who had voted for most of the corporate free-trade agreements--NAFTA, GATT, PNTR for China--and he said, 'Look, I just couldn't vote against these deals when Clinton was pushing them. But now that Bush is in, there's no way I'm voting for them anymore,'" said Brown. "It was hard for a lot of Congressional Democrats to follow their natural populist inclinations when there was a corporatist Democrat in the White House. Now, a lot of the Democrats who were listening to Clinton can start to listen to their constituencies and to their consciences."

Wellstone agrees with the notion that Democrats unbound may be better positioned to fight on a host of economic issues. "The President and his Administration defined a lot of what the Democratic Party stood for," says Wellstone. "In the past, when we had a Democratic President who did not define the party message to involve these global economic issues, and to involve a progressive approach to economics in general, it was very hard to break through. That will not be the case now."

Jon Corzine, a millionaire whose free-spending run for a New Jersey Senate seat turned off many campaign-finance-reform enthusiasts, impressed Wellstone by going out of his way to ask how progressives would be working together in the new Senate. Wellstone says he expects to see

Corzine and as many as ten other Democratic senators at informal meetings of progressives who will seek to advance causes like union-backed healthcare reform that would permit states to experiment with various approaches to guaranteeing coverage for all.

In the House there is broad acknowledgment that the fifty-three-member Progressive Caucus must be radically remade to be a force in the new Congress and beyond. To that end, Sanders, along with Democrats **Maurice Hinchey, Tammy Baldwin, Barbara Lee, Cynthia McKinney, John Conyers** and other key members, met after the election to map a strategy that is expected to include development of a political action committee designed to elect left-leaning candidates. Working with the Institute for Policy Studies, the caucus plans a January "Festival of Ideas" on Capitol Hill to address policy and strategy on the eve of the inauguration.

Key to the caucus's prospects of playing a more dynamic role will be Representative **Dennis Kucinich**, who in December was elected caucus chairman. "I think progressives can offer the Democratic leadership something that is needed: a real vision for where this country should be headed, not some compromise that leaves everyone disappointed," says Kucinich. "With our energy, we can move beyond this whole idea of simply beating up on Bush--which I don't believe will be effective--and put forward an energetic program that asks why this Congress can't enact a real HMO Bill of Rights for all Americans, why this Congress can't expand protections for the environment, why this Congress can't enact labeling for genetically modified foods."

Representative **Jan Schakowsky** argues for a strategy of "planting the flag where Republicans can't go." This includes a passionate defense of reproductive rights, advocacy for pay equity and civil rights measures, and a new focus on the importance of defending the separation of church and state. Frustrated by the success the GOP had in blurring the margins of debate over such issues as Medicare prescription-drug benefits and an HMO Bill of Rights, she says, "As progressives, we need to be truth-tellers--the people who really clarify issues. In this last campaign, we saw issues that Democrats should have owned get lost to the Republicans." (One example: By offering their own watered-down proposal for prescription-drug reform and then savaging the Democratic plan as "big government," Republicans turned a 70-30 polling deficit on the issue into a 50-50 split that did them little harm on Election Day.) By staking out a clear agenda, says Schakowsky, progressives can place the Democratic Party on firmer ground in Congress and at the grassroots. "As a lifelong organizer, I see real opportunities here for progressives," she says. "There is a passion out there. People are furious with the way the 2000 election ended. They are looking for a political home, and progressives are best positioned to offer them that home."

Schakowsky and a number of other newer members see aggressive organizing outside Congress as vital to battling Bush's agenda and making the Democratic Party an attractive alternative in 2002 and 2004. "If conservative Democrats begin working with Bush, as I believe they will, the Republican Party, Bush and his people will claim they have built a bipartisan coalition that represents the great American majority," says Jackson, who wants to see far stronger linkages between the Progressive Caucus and African-American, labor, student and women's groups. "The only way we can counter that is by reaching out to the tens of millions of Americans who think of themselves as progressives--be they Democrats or Greens--and to the tens of millions of Americans who don't even vote at this point. They have to be our answer to the lie of

bipartisanship; they have to say, 'George W. Bush and some conservative Democrats may have agreed on this tax cut for billionaires or that new restriction on a woman's right to choose, but we the people did not agree.'

Jackson says lack of organization is a longstanding weakness of liberals. "Now, in the face of the almost certain abandonment of our struggle by conservative Democrats, we will either organize ourselves in the Congress and at the grassroots or we will fail," he says. "The right wing is extremely well organized. We will either equal that organization or we will be defeated in this session of Congress, in 2002 and beyond."