

## Toward a New "New Left"

Seeing you all at the Boulder reunion, and appreciating the fact that almost everyone there has kept and is still keeping the old spirit alive, each in our different ways, made me take a longer look at the downward spiral that the country and the world are caught in now, and how we and others of like mind might come together to climb out of the multidimensional disaster that threatens us all.

The old SDS analysis of corporate America was not wrong; but as Marx once famously put it, "Philosophers have always *understood* history: the problem, however, is to *change* it!" Many of the same issues that bothered us four decades ago are even more relevant today, on an ever more globalized scale. The implosion of the USSR and the Soviet bloc gave Reagan and his followers the chance to claim credit for it, proclaiming the US as the lone superpower, "the bully on the block," as Colin Powell liked to say, free to strut, swagger, and throw our weight around on the world stage, like a modern Mussolini, and culminating in a penchant for starting wars of aggression unilaterally, like the proverbial loose cannon, a blatantly rogue and indeed terrorist state. In the elder Bush's "New World Order," geopolitics simply became polarized in a new way, into allies, beneficiaries, and dependents of US hegemony, on the one hand, and rebels against it on the other, as well as everyone else in between, not wholly committed to either side, and obliged to walk the tightrope to salvage the few scraps left over.

The 9/11 attacks thus merely intensified and accelerated a process already well under way. The markedly proto-fascist drift of American society has become increasingly evident in all three branches of government, as well as in the media, in

education, and many other fields. In not only the Reagan and two Bush Presidencies, but also the brief interregnums of Clinton and Obama, the following trends have continued to worsen, notwithstanding major ups and downs in GDP and the business cycle:

- 1) the weakening of environmental and anti-trust regulations in favor of big business;
- 2) "globalization" and the outsourcing of non-defense manufacturing;
- 3) the weakening of labor unions;
- 4) the abolishing or circumventing of safe working conditions and health and retirement benefits, resulting in
- 5) stagnation or actual decline in real wages, employment, and net income for the bulk of the population, with huge and ever-growing disparities in wealth between the top 1-2 percent. and everyone else, especially the increasing proportion of the population at or near or below the poverty line.

Politically, the Republican Party has moved further and further to the right, having been effectively captured by the Tea Party, their evangelical, fundamentalist Christian, and ultra-conservative pro-business and allegedly "small-government" allies, all highly disciplined, well-funded by wealthy industrialists, PAC's, and foundations, vociferously supported by ultra-right think tanks and racist, fire-eating media personalities, and legitimized by a dedicated cadre of loyal voters, voting-machine hackers, and a consistent majority of reactionary Supreme Court Justices, who have rolled back progressive laws and regulations, and even turned a blind eye to hacking into or otherwise stealing state and national elections on several occasions. Abetted by the apathy and/or disenfranchisement of progressive voters, and the collusion, indecision, and hypocrisy of their supposed leaders and elected officials, even the rare Democratic majorities have been squandered and lost, while the electoral process itself has degenerated into periodic auctions won by the

recipients of the most *largesse* from the highest corporate bidder.

In foreign affairs, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the US seemed unchallenged both militarily and economically, and could easily have slashed its vast military and "defense" budget and achieved an unprecedented level of prosperity through the often-mentioned and widely popular "Peace Dividend," which could have ended hunger and poverty; established health care and quality education for all; promoted workers' rights, pensions, and benefits, including union membership; closed down prisons and military bases; repaired and modernized roads, bridges, and infrastructure; and stimulated non-defense manufacturing, with an emphasis on new, green technology, environmental safety, and sustainability.

But there was no Peace Dividend; quite the opposite happened. In the '90's a group of right-wingers and Neo-Cons calling themselves the Project for a New American Century, and comprising young careerists like Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz, openly espoused "global domination" as the logical heir of Manifest Destiny in the continent and the hemisphere. At the time, few took them seriously; but when the younger Bush seized the Presidency, capitalized on 9/11 to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, demonized Saddam Hussein, and expanded domestic surveillance and even the hated government bureaucracy in the name of National Security, he famously declared that "Our nation is the greatest force for good in history."

Even more improbably, in spite of the debacle of Bush's unnecessary, expensive, and avowedly permanent wars; his drastic tax cuts for the wealthiest individuals and generous subsidies, tax breaks, and no-bid contracts for the largest

corporations, especially in defense and aerospace; his glib trashing of civil liberties; and the inevitable economic and financial meltdown, all of which gave Obama a huge victory, large majorities in both houses of Congress, and a once-in-a-lifetime mandate for fundamental change, the new Administration became essentially a continuation and further extension of the old one it had discredited so persuasively in the campaign, leaving its former activists and core supporters ignored, marginalized, and taken for granted, with seemingly nowhere else to go. Obama and the Democrats thus might well lose and even deserve to lose the Presidency, in favor of more of the same disastrous policies that got us into the mess to begin with.

As the country and the world thus continue to plunge headlong into an ongoing, multi-dimensional disaster on a truly global and planetary scale, the Reunion actually helped me to see a small ray of hope, in that sizable gathering of people I knew long ago who have not renounced their core values or sold them out. Even making all due allowance for the naive idealism of my nature, whereby I've been repeatedly suckered into voting, hoping, and even praying for the likes of Johnson, Carter, Clinton, and Obama, and been sadly let down each time, I still cling to the example of our little cadre of old friends, running the same old gamut from politicals to hippies and just plain folks, as somehow representative of vast numbers of ordinary people, far more than the Tea Party and its allies could ever possibly muster, who have been either victimized by these processes, by being

- 1) underemployed, foreclosed upon, or fired;
- 2) living at, near, or below the poverty line;
- 3) flooded out or made homeless by earthquake or tornado;
- 4) poisoned, injured, or disabled by unsafe working conditions; or
- 5) simply uneducated and/or illegal immigrants, discriminated against, and

held in permanent subjection;

- 6) members of a minority race, religion, nationality, or ethnic group that feels isolated from and/or persecuted by others in the general population (Muslims, Bahais, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, American Indians, etc.);

or forgotten, ignored, or left behind by society at large, either because they feel more or less disenfranchised and espouse views that they feel are unacceptable to others with more power or influence, e.g.,

- 7) feminists, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and the transgendered;
- 8) atheists, agnostics non-believers, and people who consider themselves "spiritual" without any specific religious or doctrinal affiliation;
- 8) liberals, radicals, environmentalists, and intellectuals;
- 9) aesthetes, hippies, and misfits;

or because they are committed to one or more particular causes or issues that have special resonance for them, such as activists, advocates, and supporters of

- 10) climate change;
- 11) women's and children's rights,
- 12) GLBT rights;
- 13) civil rights;
- 14) the peace movement;
- 15) the anti-nuclear movement;

and the like, but are searching for a coherent set of values that includes them, and/or a political grouping that merits their support.

In any case, that's why I'm writing this: to try to identify and articulate a political vision and a set of values that all of these groups exemplify, that more or less everyone belonging to them can whole-heartedly endorse, identify with, and therefore continue to work for after the elections are over, no matter who wins them. It also follows, I think, that such a statement must include and highlight what we're *for*, as well as so much that we're *against*.

So, pardon my chutzpah, here goes. Some of this came to me when reading *The Sorrows of Empire* (2005), by Chalmers Johnson, a former hawk and decorated military officer whose world view, like mine, was turned upside-down by Vietnam. In the final chapter, he presciently outlined the systemic and long-term consequences of imperialism on our culture, concentrating on four interrelated aspects:

- 1) *Militarism*, with the enormous growth of the military-industrial complex, resulting in a vast global culture of military bases, subcontractors, and mercenaries all over the world, largely independent of effective jurisdiction of their host countries, and indeed of the US government itself, accompanied by a glorification of war and combat as no longer a response to an emergency, but rather a permanent way of life;
- 2) *The inexorable erosion of democratic values and constitutional rights*, always in the name of national security, and to protect against enemies, both real and imagined, from the Patriot Act to domestic wiretapping, electronic surveillance, data mining, rendition, detention of suspects without trial, and torture;
- 3) *The Orwellian substitution of secrecy, propaganda, and disinformation for allegiance and dedication to the truth as an absolute value*, abetted by the rise of tabloid yellow journalism and extreme partisanship, wherein all points of view come to seem equally valid, and objective newsgathering gives way to entertainment; and
- 4) *Bankruptcy*, as the US economy is geared up for defense, national security, prisons, etc., or what Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism," while peacetime domestic manufacturing is "hollowed out," outsourced, and allowed to crumble, along with the jobs, labor unions, infrastructure, and the basic social values that nourish them, i. e., health, education, public safety, environmental standards, aid to the needy and handicapped, etc.

To that list might well be added

- 4b) *Financial collapse*, beginning with deregulation of the financial industry in the Reagan and Clinton years, and continued under Obama, with huge bank bailouts and Wall Street appointees, allowing risky loans, financial instruments, and massive foreclosures, thus forcing lower wages and job

losses, and adding to the already extreme wealth of the super-rich at the expense of everyone else; and

- 4c) *Environmental degradation*, the abject failure of Congress and several Presidents to take global warming, climate change, and other major threats to environmental safety seriously enough to enact meaningful legislation to restrict industrial pollution and indeed to discourage unrestricted economic growth itself, in favor of a more selective, home-grown, eco-friendly, human-scale development strategy for the future.

In any case, it seems to me that what all of the constituencies I've mentioned have in common, and what clearly distinguishes them from those who are running the show now, is a different and generally more positive conception of the proper role of government at every level -- national, state, and local -- in everyday life, one that emphasizes the obligation of society as a whole to care for those most in need -- the poor, the uneducated, the sick, the elderly, the disabled, and the victims of class and race hatred, prejudice, and discrimination -- and to give all citizens a reasonable opportunity for personal fulfillment. To me that adds up to a "mixed economy" of the kind that has been developed successfully in the more advanced industrialized societies of Europe, and includes both socialist components -- public utilities, energy, rail and air transportation, health care, welfare services, and so forth -- and a competitive private sector, comprising a variety of consumer products and industries, but carefully regulated for public and environmental safety, and to promote competition and resist monopolistic concentration.

The Republicans and those independents and religious fundamentalists who espouse "small government," oppose any government regulation of business, industry, health care, or the "free market" itself, let alone any kind of socialism, conceptualize the role of government as limited to police and fire departments,

prisons, and the military, diplomatic, and national security apparatus, including Homeland Security, which has ironically expanded the size and role of hated government bureaucracy to record levels.

As for "socialized medicine," we already have it, in the form of MEDICARE. Clumsy and expensive as it is, it works well enough that it remains one of the most popular government programs in history; and even its many avowed enemies and detractors never hesitate to make use of it, or something even cushier that state and Federal employees benefit from, when they themselves get sick. The health care boondoggle could be ended quite easily by simply recognizing good health as a right rather than a privilege, and offering a basic MEDICARE-like plan to all, as a majority of Americans have long supported and a growing number of physicians and nurses now advocate. It would be far cheaper and more comprehensive than anything now available, and its main opponents are simply the large health-insurance consortiums that politicians of both parties are equally afraid to challenge. Nor would it prevent individuals from purchasing additional insurance privately as they wish.

In any case, I believe that the foundation of a new progressive movement must be to dismantle the empire, by ending our wars of aggression; scaling back the military to a small, highly mobile force (as Rumsfeld actually proposed!); shutting down our global system of foreign military bases; and phasing out the military-industrial complex, with its no-bid contracts, absurd cost overruns, and rampant corruption, in favor of non-military domestic manufacturing for peaceful purposes, like health, education, public safety, and infrastructure, and in the service of sustainable, eco-friendly, and local, small-scale needs. What we should offer foreign

governments that want it is likewise the "soft power" of a genuinely democratic culture, rather than military and police hardware, which is almost always used by right-wing governments to suppress democratic opposition in their own countries, in the name of counter-terrorism, or simply to invade their neighbors.

If we can free ourselves from militarism, and the triumphalist, jingoistic glorification that it leads to, we can reinstate civil liberties that have been infringed, dispense with such secrecy, propaganda, and disinformation as our government increasingly resorts to, and restore the standards of objective truth and balanced news reporting in the media, without which common civility and a practical sense of social unity are dangerous and impossible.

Finally, if we can end our wars, reduce military spending to peacetime levels, and revive non-military manufacturing, we will again generate large surpluses available as the "peace dividend" we should have had long ago, not only for research to develop green technologies in private industry, but also for government aid to secure quality education and health care for all citizens, as well as clean air, safe drinking water, and adequate public health and environmental standards. This would of course also stimulate the economy, provide full employment, and even allow ample space for new immigration, while enabling government to regulate the pace of growth, keep small businesses vibrant and competitive, revive a strong labor movement, and support the local economy as well.

The two-party system and indeed the electoral system itself are broken. The increasing militarization of society has played into the hands of Republicans, the Party of No, whose across-the-board stalling of every half-hearted initiative for

change is clearly designed mainly to discredit the President, even as Obama has caved into them in the name of a bipartisanship that doesn't exist, and has failed to achieve any of the promises he campaigned on, while the Democrats in Congress have likewise become the Party of Maybe, by dithering and trying to placate them.

Squandering their huge victory in the 2008 election has left the starved and tattered remnants of the Left that worked so hard to elect Obama and the Democrats out in the cold, outmaneuvered, despised, ignored, taken for granted, and all but disenfranchised, much as in 1968, knowing they can't vote for any Republican, yet having little stomach to renew their strong support to the great orator who promised so much and then delivered nothing, or worse, most of what the opposition wanted.

As in '68 and '72, the electoral system itself is only the frosting on the cake; it can serve a progressive agenda only if a lot of organizing work is done beforehand to change the nature and form of the debate. Even before Citizens United, it was obvious that elections are an exercise in multi-billion-dollar fundraising, run largely by and for the big corporations, foundations, and the power-brokers who serve them, and that the only way for progressives to compete at that level is to play that game, which in turn requires a lot of the same kind of grassroots-organizing and getting out the vote that we did in 2008, but that made so little difference in the end.

Now that Republicans have actually stolen elections by hacking into the paperless voting machines, many states are passing laws to make more people ineligible to vote, and a highly partisan Supreme Court has been willing to manipulate close or contested votes, the threat to a genuine democratic process has

never been greater or more blatant than it is now, and the electorate as a whole has never seemed more disinterested or turned off. That's why the electoral process cannot be more than a midpoint of any progressive agenda: the beginning has to be a correct understanding of the situation and an ongoing organizing effort around it that goes on well before the vote and continues long after.

As I look over the points on Chalmers Johnson's list and the footnotes I added to it, it's clear that a considerable infrastructure, both actual and potential, already exists around fixing each one of these problems. The Peace Movement, those who oppose rendition, torture, and the Patriot Act, and favor Wikileaks and the release of Bradley Manning; the left-wing media and blogosphere; 350.org and the Green movement; and now all the people who have been let go and can't find work, whose wages are being cut, whose unions are corrupt or ineffective, whose homes have been foreclosed; the Women's and GLBT movements; the poor and disenfranchised minorities, blacks, Hispanics, and immigrants in general, both legal and otherwise, whose votes are being threatened and taken away, comprise a vast constituency, much larger than the small minority of folks who actively support the Tea Party, or the Koch Brothers, or Rick Perry's Christian Dominionists, or Rush Limbaugh and Fox News, or John Boehner, Eric Cantor, Paul Ryan, and the Republican Party as a whole. And there are plenty of corporations, foundations, unions, NGO's, and non-profits who have money and influence to support peace, environmental, and other progressive causes. The problem is to identify and articulate what could unite these disparate groups: the injustices and abuses that they're *against*, but also the *values* that they're fighting and working for, each in their own way.

This is a brief, preliminary stab at it; let the conversation continue.