

# MAKING SENSE OF THE 2004 ELECTION

BY DAVID A. HOROWITZ

It is possible to play with post-election figures and find degrees of comfort for Democrats. For example, John Kerry won a majority of those whose annual family income was under \$50,000 and George Bush a majority of those with earnings over that. Yet while Democrats might be comforted by the fact that Republicans took nearly two-thirds of those whose family income exceeded \$200,000, Kerry scored only 1% higher in the crucial Democratic \$30,000-\$50,000 working class constituency.

Another cause for potential hope lies in the Electoral College map. If Kerry had taken three western states with rising Latino voting populations — New Mexico (5 electoral votes), Nevada (5 votes), and Colorado (9 votes), he would have won the election with 271 electoral votes. In New Mexico, with a 42% Hispanic population, Bush squeezed out a narrow 51%-49% victory. In Nevada, the President also prevailed by two points. In Colorado, where Latinos comprise nearly one-fifth the state's people, Bush won by a slightly larger 52%-47% margin.

Unfortunately for Democrats, there are two drawbacks to these figures. First, a change of a few percentage points in three modestly populated western states might have given the blues an Electoral College victory but would not have subtracted much from the 3.5 million plurality Bush won in the popular vote, thereby producing a major problem of legitimacy for a Kerry Presidency. (Gore's plurality in 2000 was only a half-million.) Second, and more crucial to this discussion, Kerry lost these states because he failed to score better among Latinos. In New Mexico, the President increased his share of 2000 Hispanic vote by 12%; nationwide, the Republican portion of the Hispanic vote jumped from 35% to 44%.

Democrats conceivably could find reassuring trends among centrists and youth. Fifty-four percent of those calling themselves "moderates" voted for Kerry, who also did well among independents. The senator won 54% of 18-29 year-olds, 6% better than Gore. In addition, 4.5 million young people were new voters. In fact, the percentage of eligible young voters casting ballots jumped 9% from 2000 to 52%, although participation for all age groups surpassed 60% in 2004.

The problem for Kerry supporters was that Republican organizers matched them or better in their own get-out-the-vote efforts. Accordingly, young voters were no greater a percentage of the voting pool — 17% — than they had been in 2000. Democrats must also be disappointed in their failure to take advantage of discontent over the Iraq War. In battleground Ohio, exit polls were split right down the middle on the advisability of going to war. As pundits have suggested, Bush may have won re-election despite the conflict in Iraq, not because of it.

As the White House claims a mandate to make tax cuts permanent, to push domestic energy development and Alaska oil drilling, to cap medical malpractice awards and curb class-action litigation, to privatize portions of Social Security, to tie senior prescription drug benefits to private insurance, and to appoint social and fiscal conservatives to bench, Democrats are on the defensive and are asking how they lost the country amidst a controversial war and a sputtering economy. Was the Bush victory a predictable result of a wartime President who benefited from the lack of a terrorist attack after 9/11? Are Democrats fatally perceived as being weak on national security? Has the Party lost its popular base by conceding the South, rural Midwest, and Southwest? Is the Democratic Party simply on the wrong side of the cultural divide?

A good deal of recent speculation revolves around the electoral significance of moral values — one-fifth of voters told exit-pollsters that social morality was more important to them than the war on terrorism, the Iraq conflict, or the economy, and four-fifths of them went for Bush. Although little changed from 2000, over 60% of weekly churchgoers, 58% of Protestants, and three-quarters of white Christian evangelicals voted red. The press has concluded that many Americans liked the President's statements that his faith impacts public policy and saw his stand on such issues as abortion, stem-cell research, and same-sex marriage as the qualities of a strong leader, the personal quality most often cited by voters in states like Michigan (28%) and Ohio (27%) as the most important basis of their Presidential choice.

Much of the speculation over social morality focuses on the central role of Christian evangelicals, who are estimated to be between 25% and 42% of the national population. Admittedly 10% or more of "born-again" believers may be African-American and Democrats actually win at least a fifth of the vote of white evangelicals. Because leaders of the Christian Right are so well-organized and consistently on message, moreover, it is easy to overestimate their influence. Yet there is no getting beyond the fact that conservative issues of social morality seems to be framing the political debate and drawing in swing voters. Both Republican success with Hispanics and white, middle-class, suburbanites (Bush won a healthy majority of the married vote) point to the importance of these issues. If Democrats hope to recapture the country, they must deal with the foundations of these social attitudes and come up with responses that speak to voters while expanding upon their own values.

As Tom Frank and other political commentators have suggested, conservatives have fashioned an American culture war that pictures a liberal overclass ignoring mainstream values and traditions and imposing its own agenda on an amoral education system, permissive courts, condescending media, and debased public culture. Part of the problem, insists Frank, is that the modern Democratic Party has tied its fate to the cosmopolitan professional classes whose cultural influence often seems elitist. In my view, the salience of the wedge issues of abortion and same-sex marriage lies in the perceived threats to the besieged family represented by modern mass culture. Frank has argued that conservative backlash morality is essentially rhetorical in that it offers little possibility of enacting actual policy on issues such as abortion, prayer in the schools, or licentious entertainment. What seems evident, however, is that George W. Bush's symbolic defense of "family values" was extremely reassuring to many middle-class parents concerned about the upbringing of their children in an aggressive consumer culture. Rather than concerns over the economy, health care, Social Security, or foreign policy, these Americans seem to be thinking of social morality when they tell pollsters that the country is going in the "wrong" direction.

Tom Frank has insisted that Democrats must confront the contradictions of a conservative populism that refuses to see popular culture as a creature of corporate America and that portrays business as separate from politics. Republicans can use culture war to frame the issues of social class, says Frank, because globalizing, free-market, culturally progressive Democrats have stripped class of its economic content. Accordingly,



he calls for a reassertion of economic populism in which the party returns to its former base by addressing consequences of economic conservatism such as lower wages, more dangerous jobs, outsourcing, new overtime rules, poor health insurance, coercive management, and environmental and workplace pollution.

At the same time, critics like former Kerry speechwriter Andrei Cherny have pointed out that Democrats must go beyond policies and programs and attacks on Republican personalities and failures and must articulate their own vision and view of the world. What is the progressive approach globalization? What long-range plan for national security can Democrats articulate that deals realistically and effectively with the threat of terrorism? How can the Party respond to the moral and spiritual yearnings and desires for decision-making power among large numbers of Americans?

Political consultant and linguist George Lakoff believes that Democrats must frame their values into an appropriate political message. In contrast to the "strict-father" metaphor of conservatism, suggests Lakoff, the progressive frame is based on a nurturing family of empathy and responsibility that shares unconditional love. These preferences, he insists, coincide with mainstream American values such as freedom, fairness, human dignity, and equality under the law. Lakoff suggests that Demo-

crats learn to articulate their vision of the country as a caring, responsible family whose common inheritance must be used for the public good.

Observers like Cherny, Lakoff, Frank, and Paul Krugman insist that Democrats can keep their core values but learn to articulate them within the national discourse. What of the sensitive wedge issues? Hefty majorities actually support *Roe v. Wade*, stem-cell research, and civil unions for same-sex couples. But Democrats can legitimize their position on these matters by more clearly defining the "health of the mother" limitation on partial-birth procedures, being more sensitive to the demand for parental consent for juvenile abortions, acknowledging the need for strict regulation of stem-cell use, and demonstrating that the recognition of full legal equality for gays and lesbians is not meant to ridicule the religious views and traditions of a majority of the population.

Whether in politics or academia, I suggest that people of reason learn to reach beyond themselves and come to terms with an America that certainly needs their input.

David Horowitz teaches U.S. history at Portland State University. He is the author of numerous books, which includes *America's Political Class: The 20th Century's Great Culture War*.

## UNFIT FOR COMMAND

BY E. ROBERT NASSIKAS

The smoke has finally cleared and the dust has settled from the *sturm and drang* of the elections. Some call the results a mandate for the re-elected President Bush — a claim made by at least many of the Republicans. On the other hand, the Democrats and Kerry supporters scoff at that idea and point to the fact that the vote percentage difference was just 51-49, representing a mere three-and-a-half million votes. Democrats also point out that a few thousand votes in certain key states, including the main battleground of Ohio, could have made the difference and put Kerry in the White House. Whatever, it's all over and President Bush stays put and the nation wonders what will happen now.

A blanket of gloom and doom lies heavily on the Democrats. Many psychiatrists have reported that they have been contacted to form support groups to combat stress syndrome. A tragic story comes from 9/11 Ground Zero where one depressed Kerry voter committed suicide. As far as I can perceive, the anti-Bush forces — Kerry supporters, Democrats and the legion of Bush-haters — are fervently hoping for a complete national disaster notwithstanding that would mean disaster for the nation as a whole. Then they would be able to stand back and smugly say: "Well, don't blame it on me — I voted for Kerry."

Newspapers and television programs have been flooded with analyses of what happened. It appears that Bush and his campaign strategists have several elements to thank for their victory. A large helping of credit must certainly be awarded to the Swift Boat Vets for Truth, comprised of over 250 military veterans of the Vietnam War, who got together and told some rather incriminating stories about Kerry's four-month tour in Vietnam. Coordinating this movement — actually spearheading it — was a book, *Unfit For Command* authored by John O'Neill and Jerome Cursi, both of whom were Vietnam War veterans and they, as well as the above mentioned 250 vets were in a position to have either seen or heard, firsthand, about Kerry's combat exploits, which apparently were a far cry from how he presented them. Kerry, himself, instigated this movement when he came on to the Democratic National Convention, snapped a military salute and announced: "My name is John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty." In doing so, he alluded, of course, to his Vietnam service.

Kerry and his brain trust apparently thought his combat experiences would carry him to victory. But, as it turned out, he opened a lid that, for his sake, should have been kept closed. It actually backfired on him. There are still questions as to his full military records which, amazingly, he has not yet allowed to be revealed.

Also among the top honors for helping Bush win was Michael Moore's vicious propaganda movie, *Fahrenheit 9/11*. That movie, said many Kerry supporters, was going to devastate the President. But even one of the nation's most ardent Democrats, former New York Mayor Ed Koch, called it a collection of lies and misleading half-truths. It appears as if ordinary, middle-Americans had the good sense to consider the source — a vicious, though admittedly talented, Bush-hatemonger.

The so-called "Mainstream Media," led by formerly respected newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Oregon-*

*ian*, and many others joined in with the heavy hitters among the television networks — CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, National Public Television, to name a few — to unremittingly criticize the President, frequently playing fast and loose with the truth. Which of course brings us to Dan Rather, an avowed Bush-hater, who pushed through a CBS documentary purporting to show that Bush's National Guard career left a lot to be desired. It was quickly revealed by online "bloggers" that Rather's expose was a fraud and evidence shows quite clearly that he and his producer were aware of that fact but, obviously in an effort to slime the President, they aired it regardless. This, neither, was lost on the average American who I'm sure became incensed at this unfair, fraudulent attempt to besmirch Bush.

But the fact of the matter is the number one failing of the Democratic Party Presidential campaign was the candidate himself — John F. Kerry.

Let's face it, Kerry was the worst of a bad lot. Looking at the lineup of Democratic Presidential hopefuls as the primaries began, there was very little to choose from — John Edwards, Howard Dean (he of the primal shriek), Joe Lieberman (arguably the best of a bad lot), Al Sharpton (no explanation needed there), Richard Gephardt (a better choice than Kerry), and a general who came out of nowhere and returned there rather quickly.

Kerry tried to delude the nation that he could do everything better than President Bush. He didn't know what or how, but it was just easy to say that. His best, or most notable statement was: "I voted for it before I voted against it" — referring to funding the military in Iraq. He was quickly labeled *Senator Flip-Flop*. There was the unfortunate (for him and his team) remark he made when he was being feted by many of the Hollywood *glitterati* at a New York City rally, following a string of lewd jabber by Whoopie Goldberg who referred to President Bush with crude and obscene gestures. Kerry stood up and referred to this collection of show biz riffraff as — unbelievably — "*The heart and soul of America*." I strongly believe the real heart and soul of America, the average wage earner — those who work eight hours a day, five days a week — heard this and stored away a strong resentment, keeping it until the moment of truth, November 4. Then they voted as the authentic "heart and soul of America" — more than 60 million of them.

That number of votes were the most ever cast for any President in U.S. history. And I venture to say that most of those who cast their votes for Kerry were actually voting against Bush, disgruntled Democrats who were tired of being on the outside and simply wanted to see a Democrat in the White House. The previous Democrat there proved to be a shameless disgrace who polluted that sacrosanct building and was impeached for his troubles. And the Democrat before him was a complete and comical failure — a national disaster.

Maybe Kerry will try again in 2008. Hopefully, assuming he stays a U.S. Senator, he will accomplish something useful or constructive unlike his first 20 years when he was a "ghost senator," never heard from nor seen. For the good of the nation, however, I hope he chooses to retire, go windsurfing and spend some of his wife's billion dollars.

Robert Nassikas lives in Astoria and writes letters to the *Daily Astorian*. He provides his assessment of the 2004 election to balance the resolutely contrarian views presented in this issue of the NCTE.