

Americans want a new direction, but will democrats lead?

Tuesday 21 November 2006, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 21 November 2006).

Contents

- [TWO ROADS](#)
- [IRAQ: ALL OPTIONS BAD](#)
- [THE US MILITARY: WILL IT \(...\)](#)
- [THE CHALLENGE TO THE ANTI-WAR](#)

The recent US election was a redemptive election. At a time that many throughout the world had written off the American electorate as lifeless putty in the hands of Karl Rove, it woke up to deliver the Republican Party its worse blow in the last quarter of a century. Not only independents and centrists voted to repudiate Republican candidates but a third of evangelical — Bush's fundamentalist Christian base — voted for Democrats.

One of those pleasantly surprised was this writer, who in the aftermath of the 2004 presidential elections, predicted that the Republicans would rule for the next quarter century owing to the formidable grassroots machinery that they had forged — a “juggernaut” that was anchored by a fundamentalist base in the so-called “red states.”

TWO ROADS

Of course, many of those who voted Democrat did so because they could no longer take the daily scandals engulfing the Republicans in Congress. But poll after poll showed that the two key reasons animating voters were the Iraq War and the strong feeling that Bush was leading the country down the wrong path.

In terms of the national direction, the choice in the minds of voters on 7 November was presciently articulated by Jonathan Schell in his 2003 book *The Unconquerable World*:

“For Americans, the choice is at once between two Americas, and between two futures for the international order. In an imperial America, power would be concentrated in the hands of the president, and checks and balances would be at an end; civil liberties would be weakened or lost; military spending would crowd out social spending; the gap between rich and poor would be likely to increase; electoral politics, to the extent that they still mattered, would be increasingly dominated by money, above all corporate money, whose influence would trump the people's interest; the social, economic, and ecological agenda of the country and the world would be increasingly rejected.”

In contrast to this path of an “Imperial America” was that of “Republican America”

“...dedicated to the creation of a cooperative world, [where] the immense concentration of power in the executive would be broken up; power would be divided again among the three branches, which would resume their responsibility of checking and balancing one another as the Constitution

provides; civil liberties would remain intact or be strengthened; money would be driven out of politics, and the will of the people would be heard again; politics, and with it the power of the people, would revive; the social, economic, and ecological agendas of the country and the world would become the chief concern of government."

On November 7, the American electorate clearly rejected the imperial path.

But one cannot say with confidence that they were very clear about the signposts of the alternative path that they were choosing. It is the role of leadership to illuminate signposts, and the big question at the moment is whether the exultant Democrats can provide that leadership.

IRAQ: ALL OPTIONS BAD

Iraq is the test case. As many have pointed out, the Democrats have no unified strategy on Iraq. And the reason for this is that developments around Iraq have deteriorated to the point where there are only bad choices available.

The current Bush strategy is to shore up the Shiite-dominated government militarily, and that isn't working.

Bringing in more troops temporarily to stabilize the situation, then leaving — a plan originally endorsed sometime back by John Kerry — won't work since the civil war has progressed to the point where even a million troops won't make a difference.

Partitioning Iraq into three entities — the Sunni center, the Shiite South, and the Kurdish North — will simply be a prelude to even greater conflict tying down more US troops.

Withdrawing to the bases or to the desert to avoid casualties will simply raise the question: Why keep troops there at all?

Getting Iran, Turkey, and Syria to come in to create a diplomatic solution — one that some expect the bipartisan "Iraq Study Group" headed by James Baker and Lee Hamilton to propose — is not going to work because no foreign-imposed settlement can counteract the deadly domestic dynamics of a sectarian conflict that has passed the point of no return.

Bush, of course, remains the boss when it comes to Iraq policy, and it is not likely that this stubborn, stupid man has ceased to believe in victory, which he restated as his goal at the same press conference where he announced Donald Rumsfeld's resignation. The more Machiavellian Republican strategists such as Karl Rove will probably want to enmesh the Democrats in a protracted bipartisan exit strategy that will cost more Iraqi and American lives so that by the time the 2008 presidential elections come around, the mess in Iraq will be as much their mess as the Republicans.

As of now, the Democrats have the moral weight of the country behind them, and they have the opportunity not only to cut off a foreign policy millstone but to open up the road to a new relationship between the United States and the world if they take the least unviable route out of Iraq — that espoused by Rep. John Murtha, who, perhaps among the key Democrats, knows the military realities on the ground: immediate withdrawal. With all their inchoate feelings about wasted American lives, "our responsibility to Iraqis," or being seen as "cutting and running," many of those who voted for the Democrats may have some difficulty accepting the reality that immediate withdrawal is the least unviable of all the options. But then that is what leaders are there for: to articulate the bitter truth when the times demand it.

It is not likely that most Democratic politicians will embrace immediate withdrawal of their own accord. Without more sustained pressure, the likely course they will take is to come with a plan that will compromise with Bush, which means another unworkable patchwork of a plan.

THE US MILITARY: WILL IT GO ON STRIKE?

One source of pressure could be the military. It is well known that the top brass are in a state of extreme disaffection with the civilian leadership because they feel that Iraq is destroying the credibility of US military. When Major General William Caldwell, the senior US military spokesman in Iraq, pronounced on October 19 that the results of the Pentagon's strategy of focusing troops in Baghdad to assist the Iraqi military in containing the runaway violence was "disheartening," he drove the nail in the coffin of the Republicans' electoral chances. Most likely, his words were not cleared by the civilian leadership.

The US military in Iraq may not have yet experienced significant cases of mutiny, but the deterioration of morale is evident in the growing incidents of civilian killings, rape, and prisoner abuse for which an increasing number of marines and soldiers are undergoing trial or have been sent to prison. Unlike during the Vietnam War, the US military is not a conscript military. But the high command knows that even professional militaries have their limits and that at some point the rank and file will balk at being sent to a pointless war. Nobody wants to die for a mistake. Nobody wants to be in the last bodybag sent from Baghdad. This is what Murtha, a decorated Vietnam veteran who has been hawkish on most other military issues, has been telling his Democratic Party colleagues.

Nevertheless, a de facto military mutiny such as that which swept the US Army in the last years of the Vietnam War is not likely. What will probably happen is that Democrats and Republicans bicker over a plan for an "honorable exit," the brass will steadily place US units in a de facto defensive posture in order to cut down on the casualty rate, leaving the mercenary Iraqi security forces to fend for themselves. The troops might even be ordered to hole up in the bases, with increasingly infrequent patrols meant not to ensure security but simply to show the flag. This would be the military equivalent of going on strike.

THE CHALLENGE TO THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT

So it comes down to the anti-war movement.

The movement is to be congratulated for its role in the titanic struggle to turn the tide of American public opinion on Iraq: Cindy Sheehan's campout at Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, the many other acts of protest and civil disobedience engaged in by so many others, the big protest rallies and demonstrations — all this made a difference, a big difference.

But the movement cannot even think about relaxing for a second. The moment is critical. Now — the immediate post-election period — is the time to raise the ante. Now is the time for the US anti-war movement to escalate its efforts — to mount demonstration after demonstration — to effect immediate withdrawal. Electoral choice has created the momentum that can be translated into street action that can in turn translate into strong pressure on the Democrats not to agree to a protracted exit strategy. The movement cannot afford to squander this momentum, for the price of stepping back and letting the Democrats come up with the strategy will be more Iraqis and Americans dead, sacrificed for a meaningless war with no real end in sight.

P.S.

* From FOCUS ON TRADE, NUMBER 125, NOVEMBER 2006.

*Walden Bello is professor of sociology at the University of the Philippines and executive director of the Bangkok-based institute Focus on the Global South.