

Democratic Betrayal: A Standard Form

By [Edward S. Herman](#)

Global Research, January 01, 2007

Z Magazine, January 2007 20 December
2006

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

It has become absolutely standard practice for parties of the left, or that at least claim to represent mass constituencies, to make populist and peace-stressing promises and gestures that are betrayed instantly on the assumption of power. Sometimes, as with Tony Blair in 1997, a close reading of the pre-election political statements would make one aware that neither service to ordinary citizens nor peace are likely to be high on the leader's agenda. Also, a study of the funding and economic and political connections of the incoming leadership is often a giveaway as to likely political direction. But occasionally the leaders seem genuinely surprised that meeting their constituency's demands will not be practicable, and that the political costs will be more than they care to accept.

Bill Clinton affords a classic case of standard-form betrayal. He was going to "put people first," but very quickly abandoned even his initial modest expansionist program, partly on competing triangulation principles, partly upon his discovery that the bond market disapproved, which led to his rapid adjustment to that disapproval—he acknowledged that "Roosevelt was trying to help people. Here we help the bond market, and we hurt the people who voted us in." Clinton compromised his health care reform into unworkability and failed to press for it very hard, and famously put deficit reduction ahead of people or programs (see Robert Pollin, *Contours of Descent*, chapter 2, "Clintonomics: The Hollow Boom"). He spent much of his political capital getting passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which his voting constituency was strongly against, but which was favored by the business community and major election funders. His Crime, Terrorism and Personal Responsibility bills were strongly anti-people; there was a gigantic leap in black imprisonment in the Clinton years. He kept the military budget very high despite the death of the Soviet Union, precluding any peace dividend, sponsored two nice wars in the Balkans, and was responsible for the "sanctions of mass destruction" against Iraq which cost possibly a million civilian lives. His triangulation was an important reason for the Republican triumph in 1994, and his overall policy thrust paved the way to the continuing Republican success in 2000.

The Clinton experience suggests some painful questions about the probable outcome of the recent Democratic election triumph. Some liberal-left commentators are claiming that the swing to the right is over and the left is now on the march (e.g., Paul Waldman, "A Big Step in Nation's March to Left," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 12, 2006). But Clinton's years of office turned out to be only a brief slowup in the longer-term move to the right, and in some ways he accelerated the move, as in his support of the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996 that ended federal responsibility for poor people. It has been argued that it would have been hard for conservatives to get this responsibility ended so quickly; it required "bipartisan" support, provided by the leadership of a Democratic President. Most important, by pushing for NAFTA and fiscal austerity, and failing to carry out any program that actually served the

mass constituency of the Democratic Party, Clinton set the stage for a return of Republicans able to implement an even more rightwing agenda.

The lesson was that unless the Democratic Party can actually come through and meet the demands and needs of its mass constituency, its triumph can be short-lived. There are ample grounds for thinking that this problem is as acute now as it was 14 years ago, and that the existing Democratic Party is likely to fall short of meeting constituency demands. The Democratic Party has benefited from a widespread disaffection and distrust of the Bush administration—its wars, corruption, mismanagement and lies—with votes falling into Democratic hands not because of what the Democrats have done or even promised but simply because they are not Bush and company. Bill Fletcher and others have called this the “I am fed up” vote. Beyond this, if we examine what the Democratic Party stands for, who leads it, who it represents, and what it is likely to do, it is hard to be optimistic.

Frank Rich, John Nichols and others contest this, arguing that the newly elected Democrats are almost across the board to the left of the displaced Republicans. Rich acknowledges that “disengaging America from that war is what the country voted for overwhelmingly on November 7, and that’s what the Democrats almost uniformly promised to speed up, whatever their vague, often inchoate notions about how to do it.” (Rich, “It’s Not the Democrats Who Are Divided,” *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2006). Nichols points out that the “Progressive Caucus” of the Democrats in the House (about 64 but growing) is substantially larger than the collections of “Blue Dogs” (perhaps 40) or “New Democrats” (possibly 50), and that virtually all of the newly elected Democrats were to the left of the displaced Republicans (Nichols, “The Crowded Progressive Caucus,” *The Nation online*, Nov. 12, 2006).

One difficulty with the Nichols argument is that the Progressive Caucus is still a minority bloc, and on his own count it is smaller than the Blue Dog *plus* New Democrat total even within the Democratic Party. The problem of the Democrats for years has been that with substantial numbers of Blue Dogs and New Democrats ready to abandon the progressive ship on the basis of non-progressive principle, or at the drop of a lobbyist’s check, progressive actions are easily stymied. Thus, in earlier years, under Carter and Clinton, progressive legislation and actions were regularly blocked in congress despite Democratic majorities *and* Democratic presidents. There have been no comparable dissident “liberal” blocs of Republican legislators, so that George W. Bush has had an easy ride with Republican legislative majorities.

With a splintered and not very well disciplined Democratic majority in the House, a majority in the Senate with Bush ally Joseph Lieberman as the balancing voter, and with George W. Bush still President and in possession of a veto power, the possibilities for progressive Democratic action are sharply limited. It is hoped that the Democrats will at least launch some serious investigations of Bush administration corruption, law violations, and mismanagement, but while this may transpire there are questions about how many and how aggressively and effectively they will function. The Democratic leaders will have to work with the executive to get many things done, and they have already indicated that they are keen to avoid “partisanship.” But non-partisanship will discourage or compromise the needed investigations and legal actions within congressional power.

Impeachment is ruled out in advance—“off the table” for both Nancy Pelosi and John Conyers, although Conyers himself sponsored an impeachment hearing for Bush in the basement of

the Capitol building on June 19, 2005, and although in terms of impeachable behavior “Bush is the most impeachable president in American history” (Paul Craig Roberts). Furthermore, experts like Elizabeth Holtzman, Dave Lindorff and Barbara Olshansky, and Elizabeth de la Vega contend that impeachment for impeachable offenses is legally obligatory on Pelosi and company. (For former federal prosecutor Elizabeth de la Vega’s very plausible hypothetical indictment of George W. Bush, see “Tomgram: United States v. George W. Bush et al.,” *Working for Change.com*, Dec. 1, 2006.) The Democrats seem graciously willing and even eager to forget that the Bush administration’s effectiveness was based on partisanship without limit, and that in the Clinton years the Republicans were prepared to sabotage government functions in order to weaken and discredit Clinton.

One reason beyond their disunity that causes the Democrats to fight so weakly is their treatment by the media. We now have a very powerful rightwing media that runs interference for the Republican Party in a hugely unfair and unbalanced way, which has cowed the “liberal media,” causing them to work hard to disprove their alleged liberal bias by assailing the Democrats and showing their patriotic ardor. Thus the liberal media cooperated fully in the campaigns of denigration that sought Clinton’s impeachment for a lie without political significance, but none of them have called for Bush’s impeachment for serial lies of huge political importance. This contrast in itself is strong evidence of severe institutionalized media bias.

The media have also regularly peddled and failed to confront the charge that the Democrats are weak on “national security,” and Democratic deficits and spending have aroused them much more than Republican “borrow and spend” excesses. The Democrats are under constant pressure to counter their alleged spending excesses and “national security” caution, whereas the Republicans have been able to get away with larger and more corruption-ridden spending excesses and foreign policy actions that have been immensely costly while actually diminishing national security.

Nichols, FAIR, and others have pointed out how quickly the mainstream media have rushed to claim that the new Democratic legislators are conservatives and not likely to rock the political boat toward populism and cutting-and-running, and the media have also been very sensitive to aggressive Democratic statements that show “partisanship.” As Molly Ivins says, “So after 12 years of tolerating lying, cheating and corruption, the press is prepared to lecture Democrats on how to behave with bipartisan manners.” However, one thing the media (and John Nichols as well) fail to point out is that if many of the newly elected Democrats are pretty conservative, and I believe they are—several dozen of them were carefully selected by New Democrat (and former Israeli warrior) Illinois congressman Rahm Emanuel, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee—they will not be truly representing the constituency that put them into office, a constituency once again likely to be denied a really progressive option. The Democratic Party is capitalizing on a rejection of Bush and policies that Blue Dogs and New Democrats have tended to support, and their success in keeping out real progressives will help prevent any major attacks on Bush, his constitution-busting, his foreign policies, and neoliberalism.

These political constraints on the Democrats flow in large measure from the fact that the Republicans serve the business community more undeviatingly than the Democrats, are more trusted by business, and therefore get more financial support from them and, as noted, kinder treatment by the corporate media. The Democrats have to struggle harder to prove their business-supportive credentials, including their support for “defense” and “national security.” This, and the related media bias, weakens the Democrats’ capacity for

service in the general public interest and even for rational behavior. As regards Iraq, the Democrats are now ham-strung by the threat of political costs in failure to “support our boys” or responsibility for “losing.” Extrication has political risks in both Iraq and the United States, and the Democrats don’t like risk-taking, especially in a media environment in which a Democratic war hero can be trashed while Republican war evaders (“I had other priorities”) and deserters can be essentially free of criticism.

So the widespread public call for extrication will not see the Democrats calling for speedy withdrawal or even a definite time-table for withdrawal. Pelosi’s attempt to get John Murtha appointed House speaker, if successful, would have placed in a strong power position one of the few Democrats committed to an early and rapid withdrawal. His rejection was a defeat for the possibility of a Bush-contesting Iraq stance on the part of the Democrats. (The winner of that struggle, Rep. Steny Hoyer, ranks number one in Public Citizen’s ratings of representatives “most dependent on special interest money to finance campaigns.” Admittedly, Murtha also ranks high in receipt of special interest money.)

And the Democrats are not likely to use their theoretical control over the military budget to force a rapid withdrawal. Some of them even favor an escalation in one more “last push” to establish military control and “stability,” using this as an alleged response for the demand for change. One of Harry Reid’s earliest post-election statements was a promise to boost the military budget by \$75 billion “to try to get the Army’s diminished units back into combat shape.” (Jonathan Weisman, “Reid Pledges To Press Bush On Iraq Policy,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 15, 2006.) The Pentagon is reportedly preparing a larger emergency budget request of \$127-150 billion that will supposedly put the military establishment into conflict with the Democrats and test the Democrats ability to rein in military spending. (See Julian Barnes and Peter Spiegel, “Controversy Over Pentagon’s War-Spending Plans,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 29, 2006). On the other hand, it may be a deliberately inflated request designed to give the Democrats room to make cuts without impinging on Pentagon plans, a tactic used often in the past.

Another major constraint on the Democrats is their close ties to the pro-Israel lobby and financial dependence on lobby-related campaign contributions, the latter compensating in part for the business community’s pro-Republican bias. We are talking about 40 percent or more of the Democrats campaign budget, large enough, especially when combined with the aggressiveness of the lobby, to make any systematic criticism of Israeli policy, no matter how egregious, out of the question. Hillary Clinton and Pelosi have been notorious for Israel-protective apologetics, and the new chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Tom Lantos, is a virtual agent of the Israeli state. This is likely to constrain Democratic policy not only on doing anything about Israeli ethnic cleansing and semi-genocidal attacks on Gaza, but also in making difficult any constructive actions by the Democrats on Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq itself, where Lantos, Pelosi and company are likely to support or at minimum fail to oppose Israel’s hardline and militaristic policies. (See “AIPAC Eats New Congress Critters for Lunch,” *Signs of the Times*, Nov. 13, 2006. See also Pelosi’s frightening remarks before AIPAC on May 24, 2005, with total apologetics for Israeli ethnic cleansing and a strong indication of support for military action against Iran: Mark Gaffney, “Nancy Pelosi Gives a Pep Talk to AIPAC,” with a copy of her remarks included: *Common Dreams.org*, May 27, 2006).

In short, with the Democratic Party’s electoral triumph we may expect a small increment in the minimum wage, some other modest economic policy actions that serve middle America and the poor, and a brake on the Bush program of service to a tiny elite and regressive

environmental policy. The Bush take-down of the Constitution will probably be halted, but reversals of the serious encroachments via the Patriot and Military Commissions Acts will face the veto plus traditional Blue Dog and New Democrat defections. Impeachment is already off the table, and investigations that will take place may be useful but may be compromised by the Democrats bipartisanship proclivities.

The Democrats may exercise a modest drag on the military budget, but the party has long been supportive of a militarized state, and party funding, pressures to prove their “national security” credentials, and fear of charges of failing to support our boys, are likely to sharply constrain Democratic initiatives here and as regards Iraq. They are likely to follow along with something like the weak, conditional, slow, non-withdrawal withdrawal proposals of the Bush appointed “bipartisan” Iraq Study Group, designed to repel demands for a real withdrawal. As regards Israel and Palestine, the Democrats have been virtually captured by the Lobby and we can expect nothing from them in this crucial area where U.S.-Israeli policy feeds hostility to this country as well as Israel. Given Israel’s eagerness to get the United States to attack Iran, here again the Democrats are likely to offer nothing constructive and will provide little brake if Bush-Cheney decide that another war might serve God’s and the Bush administration’s interests. This country and the world still desperately need a party in the United States that will support non-violent and non-imperialistic alternative policies, something that the victorious Democrats do not provide.

The original source of this article is Z Magazine, January 2007
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Articles by: [Edward S. Herman](#)

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