

# Down with the plutocrats

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I come to you as one of America's rarest species:

A progressive optimist in the age of Bush II.

Some would say that this makes me either dumber than a dust bunny or someone who's simply not paying attention. After all, the messianic Bushites have launched an executive war, deleted entire paragraphs from the Bill of Rights, shoved trillions from our public treasury into the pockets of their wealthiest backers, and generally romped gaily over labor unions, the environment, the courts, and everything else that progressives value.

Worse, they're doing it with impunity, for the Democrats in Congress have metamorphosed into meek Wobblycrats, the media have mostly been cheerleaders, and the polls have shown Bush to be likeable and popular. How can you watch this mess and feel optimistic? You can, because I'm here to tell you that the Democratic Party and the media establishment have been watching the wrong mousehole. The hope is not in Washington, but at America's grassroots, where the workaday majority is way ahead of the politicians and pundits.

Any poll that probes an inch beneath the surface shows that while the affable Bush is personally popular, his policies decidedly are not. Endless war, executive secrecy, Patriot Acts I and II, the Homeland Security bully, Ashcroft's constitutional nuttiness, Bush's tax giveaways, shameless corporate welfare, the gutting of environmental laws, the goosed-up drug war, the FCC's shilling for media giants, the expansion of NAFTA and the World Trade Organization, the ideological assault on Social Security and Medicare— a growing majority of people are opposed to this extremist agenda.

Even more significant, there's an increasing awareness that the Bushites' agenda adds up to something worse for America than the sum of its outrageous parts. In my town of Austin, I recently saw a bumper sticker on a pickup truck that asks; "Where are we going? And what am I doing in this handbasket?"

People are recognizing that our founding, fundamental values of fairness, justice, and opportunity for all—the very values that define our America—are being shoved aside to create an un-America of plutocracy and autocracy. In my travels, I find widespread dismay, frustration, resentment, and outright anger that no one in power is standing with them against this. The question I hear everywhere, is: “Where the hell are the Democrats?” Well, ask the pundits, if so many people oppose the Bush agenda, why did they vote to give Republicans a sweeping victory—indeed, a “mandate”—in last year’s congressional elections?

They didn’t. The majority of voters gagged on their choices and didn’t vote all—only 33 percent of those eligible cast a ballot in races for the House. The bottom line is that Bush’s GOP got only 17 percent of eligible voters. Some “mandate.”

More pathetic is that the Democrats drew only 15 percent. They did so poorly because their consultants and money baggers convinced them not to run against Bush’s extremist agenda. Instead, Democrats offered this bumper sticker to the electorate: “Hey, we supported those tax breaks for the rich too. And we also backed Bush’s war. Plus we voted for that big honking Homeland Security department. Only we’re not quite as enthusiastic about it all as the Republicans are. So vote for us.”

It’s hard for the donkeys to win the race if they’re going to carry the elephants on their backs.

Yet party chairman Terry McAuliffe, the corporatist Democratic Leadership Council, Senate minority leader Tom Daschle, and the other strategic geniuses in charge plan to stay this disastrous course. They believe their corporate-friendly, Republican-lite, socially liberal agenda will siphon off just enough wishy-washy soccer moms to eke out a Democratic “win.” If the meek ever inherit the earth, these guys will be land barons. Here’s my wacky idea: What if the Democrats were to reach out to—dare we dream—Democrats, specifically wading into that deep pool of 67 percent who are mostly working-class and who feel politically homeless? That’s 121 million people. Get even 10 percent of them, and Democrats start winning every race.

The conventional wisdom is that being overtly and aggressively progressive is passe. But look again. A broad progressive movement not only exists, it’s moving. Beneath the national media radar, grassroots groups have been organizing and winning all across the country on such

issues as living wages, public financing of elections, stopping Wal-Mart, banning sweatshop-produced goods, and providing universal health care.

Meanwhile, Bush's chickens are coming home to roost—stunning deficits, angry families of troops mired in Iraq, missing WMDs, a newly skeptical media, state budget crises, the exportation of high tech's middle class jobs, the naked rightwing loopiness of TomDeLay, and more. Far from being politically invincible, Bush now has only 47 percent of Americans saying they want him reelected, with 46 percent opposing him.

And note that the Democratic presidential contenders who are out ahead are not retread Republicans, but upstarts who want to put a little kick back in the Democratic donkey. Professional politicians have been stunned by the "Howard Dean phenomenon." But they're missing the significance of his surge. They're focusing on Dean rather than on the phenomenon, which is that there's a roiled group of unaligned voters looking for someone who thinks like them. Dean didn't create this phenomenon; it created him.

And the next election may well be won by a progressive candidate who can harness their anger.

**Jim Hightower** is author of *"Thieves In High Places: They've Stolen Our Country and It's Time to Take It Back!"*