The Election Dilemma:
Counter-Revolution, Cooptation or Rainbows

by Frank Gormlie

The 1984 elections pose an exasperating dilemma for American leftists and progressives: do we or do we not work within the electoral arena to defeat Reagan? And if we do, who or what do we support?

Reagan's defeat is certainly the top priority for the left this year, but just where we place our limited energies, time and resources is up for contention. Most on the left agree that Reagan's got to go, but just how is the question.

Those on the left who think either that a Reagan victory is assured, or that an independent third party is viable this year, or 'bourgeois elections are obsolete,' had better plan ahead and get their passports in order. If Reagan is re-elected, it will be extremely difficult for leftists to survive, for to be a leftist in America under another four years of Reagan will be like being a Jew in Germany under Hitler.

If Reagan and the Counter-revolution he commands are allowed to follow their course, the massive, across-the-board assault on Black people, other oppressed nationalities, women, the working classes and everyone's civil liberties will not only continue but intensify. Reagan will lead in the burial services of the last vestiges of the democratic framework of American capitalism.

Reagan will commandeer the U.S. military into new battles that will make the Grenadian invasion look like a frisbee contest. He will invade Nicaragua and raise the entire Central American conflict to new regional heights. There will be other third world countries where he would be tempted to intervene . . . the Phillipines, Iran, southern Africa . . . In what region of the world would he confront the Soviets? How many more missiles will he send to Europe? Just how much time would the world have after Reagan's re-election?

A Deep Distrust of Elections

If it is simply a matter of kicking Reagan out, what's the dilemma? What's the problem for the left?

Well, we are talking about a multi-factional left that for historic reasons either has alienated itself far from the established political processes out of fear of cooptation, or because of its failures, has wrapped itself too tightly to the more centrist of the established parties.

We're talking about a left that has not built either mass socialist consciousness or massive socialist organization over the last 20 years. Thus it is a left without an organizational or mass social base, an extreme disadvantage when having to confront the deteriorating conditions of the imperial homeland.

The deep distrust of the American electoral system by segments of the left stems from the experiences of the '60's and 70's. During the Vietname war, each "peace candidate" who won the presidency, only expanded U.S. involvement. Lyndon Johnson, the Democratic peace candidate elected in '64, turned around and during the first year of his new administration ordered the massive build-up of American ground troops in Vietnam. In '68, Hubert Humphrey, having out-distanced Eugene McCarthy's peace candidacy, ran against Richard Nixon, who was then stumping as the GOP 'peace candidate.' Actually both Humphrey and Nixon supported the war, reflecting the consensus of both ruling parties on U.S. foreign policy. This was apparent to many of the rebellious youth generation, especially after the bloody Chicago riots during the '68 Democratic convention. Nixon won, of course, and greatly expanded the war as history tragically records.

Again the electoral system seemed to fail during the 1972 Presidential elections, as polls showed the majority of Americans wanted to end the Vietnam war. Yet not only was McGovern, the dove candidate, overwhelmingly defeated, Nixon was re-elected precisely as he was orchestrating the cover-up of the Watergate conspiracy.

The gains the left did witness came not from the ballot box but from the streets. The civil rights and Black power movement made itself felt by boycotts, marches, sit-ins and riots, pushing forward all other progressive social movements. The anti-war movement put the most effective pressure on the government through

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Jackson, the Democratic Party, and the Left

by Robin Greyson

One of the few contributions Ronald Reagan has made to the American Left is to remind us that electoral politics is not irrelevant to our interests. Ask the poor of this country if they feel that the election of Reagan was unimportant to their lives. Ask the Nicaraguan people if they think that Reagan and Carter were merely two sides of the same capitalist coin. Reagan has made electoral politics for the left simple. We are talking survival: survival of the elderly on Social Security, survival of welfare recipients, survival of Third World peasants, and quite possibly, survival of the entire human race. The question is not if we should participate in the '84 campaign, but how we may do so and still serve the interests of the Left.

Stage One: Jesse Jackson and the Civil Rights Movement

There is only one candidate that represents Left issues both in the positions he takes and in the constituencies he mobilizes: Jesse Jackson. If there is any hope of beating Reagan it is only by mobilizing large numbers of minorities, women, and the poor. The strategy of the mainstream Democratic party is a disaster. Waiting for Reagan to shoot himself in the foot has produced nothing more than a Democratic party with nothing to say and no one to say it to.

What makes the Jackson candidacy so exciting is not only that it is helping to register large numbers of anti-Reagan voters, nor even that his candidacy is forcing changes in the structure of the Democratic party, but that he is building enthusiasm and hope among the most economically vulnerable in American society. Jackson has put the "boys" in the smoke filled rooms of the Democratic party on notice that they cannot take the vote of America's poor for granted.

Jackson is helping to create that most subversive of quantities: hope. Whatever Jackson may or may not be as an individual, he is clearly a galvanizing force among the poor and minorities. These are the people and the issues that are the bedrock of American progressive politics. When they are active all segments of the Left community benefit. Remember, it was the Civil Rights Movement that was the first and greatest force powering the Sixties, that drew minorities and women into the streets, that pulled students out of the Ivory tower, and that pushed a new crop of politicians into the halls of power. If there is hope of regenerating the kinds of movements, organizations and issues of that period of time, it is dependent on rekindling the fire from which all progressive groups have drawn strength: the movement for equality. Jackson is the only politician who has set himself the task of re-lighting that fire.

Stage Two: Anybody But Reagan?

But what happens after the Jackson campaign? Do we merely turn our energies to defeating Reagan and supporting whoever the Democrats run? Does our Rainbow coalition then merely fade into the pale tones of mainstream campaign?

No. We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of simply identifying with the currently existing Democratic party structure. We must work for the

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Israel, the Elections, and the Peace Movement

by Rick Nadeau

It is a sign of the times, a not very good sign, that today in 1984 it is not only necessary but imperative to reflect upon "the fate of the earth," our own fate. One of the first thoughts that comes to mind is the thought of war, and how nuclear weapons have fundamentally altered the nature and meaning of war. Throughout history wars have always meant bloodshed and hatred and a projection of hostility and blame unto the victims of violence, but never before has there been the objective possibility that a war could lead to the extinction of the human species. The current trend of strident militarism and the recent series of invasions and wars—the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iraqi invasion of Iran, the Falklands War, the two Israeli invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982, the U.S. invasion of Grenada—is an indication that this possibility of a "war without winners" is becoming increasingly probable.

The current nuclear predicament, the unbalanced "balance of terror," or what E.P. Thompson calls "the thrust of Exterminism," is rooted in existing social relations and institutional groupings such as the national security state, the military, the transnational corporations, the arms manufacturers, and in the patriarchal socialization of men with its mobilization of male aggressiveness for war and dominance. This predicament may also be a source of hope in as much as it places the war machine and its accompanying institutional support in a state of crisis and forces us to radically question our ways of thinking and being so that the plague of war can finally be eradicated from human social life.

The 1984 Elections

Given this nuclearized and militarized world-historical context, it is not unreasonable to argue that the 1984 elections in the United States are significantly related to the future course of American and human history. Yet those of us who became politically and socially conscious in the 1960s and hence politically active as protesters against war, cannot be faulted for being skeptical and nodding our heads in agreement with Sartre who claimed that "elections are a trap for fools" which only serve to legitimize an essentially undemocratic and imperialist system.

Since 1968, when they elected Richard Nixon to be president, the American people have demonstrated to the world that they are capable of behaving like "fools"—in just 12 out of the last 16 years they have elected conservative Republican administrations to rule them. This means that if Ronald Reagan gets reelected, the American people will have been ruled from 1968 to 1988 by conservative Republican administrations for 16 out of those 20 years.

The systematic silencing and gagging of those in opposition to the exterminist trend is testimony to the systems corruption. It seems that we are witnessing the same old mistakes and stupidities, the same old methods and habits, the same old "double think" which led 500,000 Americans into the Vietnam inferno. A repetition of such moldy stupidities today promises a period of unprecedented disasters; of unimaginable terrible wars.

Considering this overall regressive trend, it is somewhat depressing to note that the peace movement has not been able to formulate a consistent internationalist alternative to the positions taken by the two dominant political parties. And while it is true that the Democrats may be more likely to provide us with a little more time and space to organize against the arms race, that they are more likely to engage in a dialogue with the Soviets, and that they are less likely to get us involved in a regional conflagration in Central America, (although recent statements by Mondale about the Sandanistas "military build-up" and a need for a strong American "response" makes one wonder) it is quite possible they will exacerbate tensions in the Middle East to the point of no return and bring us all to ruin because of their predominantly uncritical and apologetic stance toward an increasingly

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