Election Dilemma

its non-electoral tactics. Massive demonstrations, for example, in the fall of 1969 blocked the President's plan to nuke the north of Vietnam.

Thus by the early 1970's America had a youthful left more experienced in street fighting and grass-roots organizing than in building organizations—electoral or otherwise—and in national strategy. It was a left that had helped pull back the Imperial war machine from Southeast Asia in solidarity with those fighting it, but then could not agree on what to do next.

The Failure of the Left During the 1970's

The renewed left was unable to consolidate and expand during those post-Watergate years. There was a rush into building "the new communist party," as thousands of former student radicals read a few classic texts and religiously applied the techniques of past revolutions to the American scene. With disastrous results, we have to add.

The idealism and energy of youthful protest was channeled into the quagmire of sectarian and dogmatic polemics, with each new grouplet battling each other for first the Chinese franchise, then the Albanian, then (back) to the USSR. Electoral politics and reform movements were dismissed as 'bourgeois.' After nearly a decade of internecine battles, the landscape of the American left was littered with the burnt-out hulks of the party-building efforts. Exhausted, demoralized, cynical, the ranks of the left thinned as activists rediscovered their former (for many, middle class) lives or returned to schools, families, careers or moved out to the country.

This historic failure of the American left during the seventies to build, develop and consolidate the gains of the past two decades helped pave the way for Reagan and the successful resurgence of the Right. And it forces us today to turn toward the electoral arena out of necessity.

The point isn't to condemn the left for its inadequacies but to learn from its failures. Actually the left that faced off with both Johnson and Nixon made history. Youthful and inexperienced, without the expertise of organizations hardened by decades-long struggles (the old left groups were divisive and ineffectual) it raised internationalism to new standards with its solidarity with the Vietnamese people.

The left fell apart for many reasons, the burn-outs from too many sectarian battles being prime among them. But the left in America—and here I mean explicitly, the white left, has always had a weakness in its relationships with the movements for self-determination of the peoples the U.S. has internally colonized, especially the Black movement but including those of Mexicanos, Native Americans and Puerto Ricans, the "minorities." And even though today's leftists had their politics formed from the conditions resulting from the Black struggle for self-determination, often the programs and strategies of these same leftists fail to take into account the concerns and issues of the Black community.

This, then is the key to what happened to the American left, why it failed to consolidate. The "racial gap" of stratified America found its reflection within the left. Because of the privileges and biases of white America, white leftists could not come to terms with the needs and aspirations of "minority" leftists.

A similar pattern developed between the more organized left and the women's movement. The real mass movements of these decades, the Black and women's forces for change, were relegated to lesser importance under what was considered the more central "class question." The result was that the left had nothing to offer these mass movements, leaving an ideological vacuum that was eventually filled by the Democratic Party.

Overly compensating for the failure of the left to build a third party or for its sectarian isolationism, many progressives and independent leftists have opted for a strategy that totally immerses them in the Democratic Party. To simply work for Mondale or Hart at this point—now that the peace candidates McGovern and Cranston have dropped out—not only narrows the possibilities of action but does not necessarily ensure a Reagan defeat.

Jackson is different. But first let's draw out several significant points.

The Rise of the Right

Somewhere during the years of transition, during the height of the Vietnam syndrome, while the left was either building alternative institutions or new parties, it gave up the struggle for the state. During those seemingly benign Ford-Carter years, when there was no war to focus on and little agreement, while disbelievingly watching its mass base evaporate, the left marched off to the drums of distant revolutions and away from its responsibility of delegitimizing the government. And in the intervening years, the Right, having grown restless by the gains of minorities and women, unleashed its struggle for domination, relegitimizing the electoral process in its climb from the fringes of society to the White House.

Two forces were at work: the reactionary mass movements, from the Moral Majority to the Klan, and the right-wing faction of the Ruling Class. The social movements of reactionary ideologies had their bases in the traditional conservatism of sectors of the white working class and in the middle class, all experiencing constraints on their lifestyles and the ever increasing price of maintaining an empire no longer solvent.

The right-wing ruling faction, incensed by the U.S. defeat in Vietnam and the U.S. "lossess' in Iran and Nicaragua, was compelled to reassert American dominance of the global capitalist system in the face of its most severe structural crisis in 40 years. Their strategy then was to regenerate the Cold War in order to curb America's allies into a confrontationist front against the Soviet Union with America leading the "Free World" alliance. This enables U.S. administrations to coerce and intimidate national liberation movements and socialist third world countries declaring them puppets of the USSR. Domestically the rulers' strategy including a forcing of austerity measures on the poor, working and middle classes, the dramatic and dizzying military build-up, and the survival of the political leadership it chose.

Usually our ruling factions agree. But these are not normal times and there has been a serious break-down in the traditional consensus that guides American policies. Reagan represents an alliance of these two forces—the right-wing of the ruling class and the reactionary social movements accompanied by their ideologues.

What do all the cut-backs and attacks on unions, affirmative action programs and social services represent, but in the rulers' view, ways to cut the costs of managing their economic system. Importantly, the austerity measures include the assault on all the material gains made by oppressed nationalities, women and labor over the last 30, 40 to 50 years.

Racism and Counter-revolution

At the forefront of this general assault is the broadside being fired against Black people on all levels. The cutbacks, the layoffs, the overturning of affirmative action programs, the continuation of police violence, the rise in racist physical assaults, the condoning of white-supremacist policies by the White House all are hitting a community already impoverished and oppressed with an unemployment rate twice that of the rest of the nation. White racism is the cutting edge of this reactionary backlash.

Coupled with this white racism is the ideology of forces like the anti-abortionists and male-supremacists who want to turn the clock back of the gains women have achieved. Mix in a virulent anti-communism and you have the ideological foundations of the Counter-revolution, the strategy of the Right to sweep away the democratic gains of the last several decades and to reassert the primacy of the governmental apparatus as an instrument of corporate policy and not one of popular policy.

The forces that captured the White House in 1980 have produced, according to Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff, editors of *Monthly Review*, "the most reactionary, right-wing government in the country's history, and in many ways it is doing the things that in other countries and at other times are done by fascist governments." These internationally respected left intellectuals do not believe the Reagan administration is actually fascist, but ". . . if the bourgeois democratic framework has deep historical roots, as in Britain and the United States, it may be able to accomodate a move to the right resulting in a situation which is the *functional equivalent of fascism.*" (emphasis mine) They conclude, "The 1984 elections present the United States with an opportunity to start (the) return journey from the Reaganite functional equivalent of fascism to normal bourgeois democracy."

Fascism in America, actual or its functional equivalent, friendly or not, does not bode well for a left beset by its own historical limitations. These are indeed dangerous times.

On the optimistic side, the left does have some strength within the broad array of democratic reform and social protest movements; the women's movement, among progressive trade unionists, within the environmental movement, the entire spectrum of peace, disarmament, anti-draft, civil disobedient, anti-nuke and solidarity forces who have re-awakened activism on the left.

This broad network has the potential of being the social base for an independent constellation of forces capable of entering into a progressive bloc that at some point in the future, if we survive, could develop a majoritarian challenge to the capitalist oligarchy. This progressive bloc could only be majoritarian if it allied with the movements of the nationally oppressed groups. And that is why Jesse Jackson's campaign and the Rainbow Coalition are important now.

Jesse's Rainbow

So what about Jesse Jackson?

Jackson, while not of the left, is far closer to the left's positions on the crucial issues of war and peace than the other candidates. His plans for de-militarization and social welfare are consistent with a social democratic transitional program. In fact, Jackson's positions are closer to the left's than any major presidential candidate in three decades—some say since Eugene Debs ran for the presidency from his prison cell. Pushing the presidential debate objectively far to the left of the accepted norms of the American poltiical establishment, Jackson is performing a great function for the left. In these dangerous times it is the left's responsibility to back politicians who side with the people on vital issues, who reject U.S. intervention and the massive military budget.

Obviously Jackson won't be the Democratic nominee for November, but the more support he is shown in the primaries and the more delegates he brings to San Francisco in July, the more his generalized politics will be legitimized both within and without the Democratic Party. With support Jackson can help keep the Vietnam Syndrome alive inside the Party and within the American body politic at large.

The Jackson campaign is the strategy that can defeat Ronald Reagan. By inspiring thousands of Black people, other minorities, women and disaffected progressives to register and vote Democratic, Jackson has come up with a plan to numerically overwhelm the Right. Call it inspiration or hope, whatever it is, Jackson, not Hart or Mondale, generates excitement among the disenfranchised. Jackson can say and do things the other Democrats can't and they can't afford to exclude him. He represents too much.

On the national level, the Jackson campaign represents the electoral front of the Black liberation movement. It is an extension onto the presidential electoral plane of the civil rights and Black power struggles. For a number of reasons, Jesse Jackson has been the Black politician to emerge to consolidate and expand the electoral aspirations and strength of Black people. Despite his personal inadequacies, he is the candidate the Black community nation-wide is mobilizing around.

The Rainbow Coalition offers an historic opportunity for the left to help in the development of an anti-racist front initiated by a racial minority. This coalition could lay the groundwork for an anti-racist progressive movement outside the Democratic Party, that outlives the convention and elections.

By supporting Jackson now and working under the rainbow, progressive whites can confront the racism so embedded in the American system and currently the cutting edge of the Counter-revolution. The more who join this effort, the easier it will be for the coalition to maintain its independence from the Democrats and help prepare for deeper social change down the road.