

03-15-1999 An Opportunity

"Twenty years after the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority propelled religious conservatives into a heavyweight force in U.S. politics, the movement is struggling without a clear strategy, and for the first time a debate has erupted among leading figures over whether they should radically scale back their political efforts. -- NY Times, 3/7/99

Does this sound familiar to anyone? After the political, as well as race and gender, struggles of the late 1960's and 1970's many liberal and left activists went down the same road. It was because of that abdication of political action and therefore the possibility of political power that Reagan was elected and the "Moral Majority" was able to assert itself. Progressive forces left the door open to a reactionary advance.

Political engagement is a difficult and very complicated thing, to be sure. When leftists started making headway in the 1960's the establishment responded with the COINTELPRO program and countless thousands suffered death or incarceration. We are still struggling with the effects of that terrorism -- including some well-known activists languishing in prison. The effects of that suppression were profound.

Many looked at the confrontation that inevitably arises in any serious effort to transform society, and they backed away. It was a difficult time for many, and the lack of electoral success, in the end, brought the curtain down on what could have been a successful people's movement. Many of us were dead or in prison, and with a lack of formal support -- electoral progress -- many activists backed away from power struggles and focused more on changing consciousness and other such notions.

The monstrous failure of that ideology must not be underestimated, and we see its mirror in the current debate amongst the religious right. They also undertook a program of transformation for America, and have suffered an analogous response from the American people. Predictably, people all across the nation have begun to reject the dangerous extremism of the right, both in the form of not voting for Republicans, but also in declining support for right-wing religious organizations. They are having the same sort of debate we had because they are feeling the effects of their failure to transform America -- albeit for radically different reasons.

The right-wing fantasy of transformation was from its outset implausible. One cannot change reality by changing the way we think or feel about it. Consciousness does not change our material being -- material being, reality, changes consciousness. However, the support the right receives from moneyed interests meant that they can and did make some inroads and could roll back some advances. Their ultimate goal was always the protection of class interests, and in that they have certainly succeeded. Ironically, they succeed only to the degree that real intentions are kept hidden. It is the unmasking that came as a result of the Clinton impeachment and the debate about Social Security and budget surpluses that has caused the current backlash and subsequent uncertainty.

In spite of the tactical, financial, and propaganda advantages of the right, the left is perhaps as much to blame for the right's successes as their own strategizing. Our task is, and has always been, the more difficult. There are very few deep pockets to bankroll the political campaigns of trade unionists, let alone AIM activists or Communists. But the responsibility for a just transformation of America, as well as the protection of the incremental advances that are made along the way, are ours.

Progressives must rise to the demands of the current historical period and take back the political role we abdicated three decades ago. The struggles for justice and peace, for women's rights, labor rights and the rights of racially oppressed minorities have always been about power. When progressives gave up the electoral struggle as being too dirty or corrupting we left the door open for the religious right. If they are now to back away we must step into the fray again and take up our rightful role of advocates for the interests of all people -- Black, Brown and white, male and female.

When we stepped away -- and certainly not all did -- it was in response to tremendous and violent repression. And predictably any future successes will meet with a new repression. But the alternative is an America floundering without aim or direction, subject to the machinations of finance capital, defenseless in the face of a mounting tendency towards fascism in ruling circles.

This is our time. As we move into the 21st Century, and especially since the collapse of really existing socialism and the ad nauseum propaganda about the "end of history" or the "victory of capitalism" working people everywhere are facing a near overwhelming onslaught by the finance capital. They will either retreat further into the abyss of apathy while the edifices of fascism are constructed around us. Or the people will rise up and take their rightful place in the halls of power.

This power, and taking power, must be an electoral endeavor. It falls to progressives to fill the growing vacuum left by the retreat of the religious right, quickly and decisively. They have failed, inevitably, but this does not mean the power of all right wing forces will be in retreat. Quite the opposite. Pat Robertson still intends to raise and spend \$21 million getting reactionary votes. Although some reactionary pundits are worried the effort will deepen the divisions.

Therefore, this is the time for all progressive people to take up the challenge, to run for office no matter how big or how small. Power is wielded on many levels and we must occupy them all -- if not for the sake of our generation, then for those to come.