

The Lizard Strategy

July 4, 2004

Or how to defeat Bush without losing our souls

by Ricardo Levins Morales

"Now we get to go out and lie to our members once again," a union staffer recently complained to me. She was referring to the 2004 presidential election, and her frustration is understandable. Like most of organized labor she, and her union, are convinced that the Bush administration must go, and that the only way to make that happen is to persuade their members, and millions of traditional non-voters, that Senator John Kerry represents their interests. This is a thankless and difficult task since, like the sister says, it's a lie.

It's also not very effective. What follows is a proposal for how radicals and progressives can have an impact on the 2004 elections in the short run, while keeping our eyes on long-term goals.

To take advantage of the opportunities offered by the presidential race we will have to view the political landscape with fresh eyes and overcome ingrained habits. We will need to intervene in the mainstream of U.S. politics, without lying to our members.

To put this proposal in context I should state that my own political history lies firmly in the camp of independent politics. On the one hand this means believing that grassroots power is built in the streets, in communities, and in workplaces. The importance of elections is most often determined by what happens in those arenas. Elections can reflect, and in turn can impact, the course of social change, but do not determine its course. (In my occupied homeland of Puerto Rico, the struggle to evict the U.S. Navy from Vieques was carried out by people who are barred from voting in presidential elections, but the persistence and organizing reach of the movement forced the powers in Washington into retreat.)

It has also meant using my vote to encourage long term movement building by supporting third party candidacies whenever possible. In the seven presidential races that have transpired since I came of voting age, I have never voted for a Republican or a Democrat. This is not from any "vote your heart" sentimentality (a prerogative of the overly comfortable). I make political choices to have an impact in the world, not to make myself feel good. At one time I was prepared to vote for a "lesser evil" out of concern about Supreme Court appointments, but gave my vote to a third party when it became clear that my state would overwhelmingly vote for the "lesser." At each juncture we need to weigh present risks against future possibilities and make the choice that will put us in the best position possible ten miles down the road.

Every strategic choice contains within itself a tension between the future and the present. This can be illustrated in the comparison of two electoral strategies. A third party strategy calls for investing in the future, in long-term base building and accumulation of power, even though it will likely result in victories along the way for the more reactionary mainstream candidates. The objective here is to develop the organization and support base that can ultimately pose a genuinely pro-people alternative to the corporate parties. The lesser-of-two-evils approach seeks to stem the erosion of people's rights, resources, and the environment by supporting the candidate likely to cause the least damage. It also hopes that we can pressure a leader whom we helped elect to at least respond to our concerns in a way that a more openly hostile politician would not. Each of these strategies emphasizes one side of the present/future equation, often at the expense of the other.

Who Wins? Do We Care?

Let's start by looking at the short-term side of the equation. Is it important that Bush be defeated? This is by no means an obvious question. President Bush has managed to shatter the credibility of the U.S. Empire. Along with it has gone the illusion of U.S. military superiority equals invincibility (and that in a uni-polar world!) This has had repercussions on many fronts, including a growing resistance on the part of small nations to the free-trade globalization juggernaut. His aggressiveness has unleashed an unprecedented global anti-war movement and undermined the recruitment ability of the U.S. military. For those of us who do not share the vision of a triumphal United States Empire, these are not negative achievements. On the other hand the Bush crowd is convinced that its mandate comes from God, and would take an election victory (however slim) as a green light to pursue its reckless ambitions. This has the potential to cause tremendous human and ecological devastation.

The Democrat, John Kerry, is a reactionary career politician with a history of accepting labor support while undermining our interests. He supported Clinton's draconian "Welfare Reform", has been a champion of corporate "Free Trade" treaties; and is committed to escalating the illegal war in Iraq (and dragging the United Nations deeper into it). He supported the repressive Patriot Act and the march to war. A Kerry presidency would work to rebuild the unity of the "international community" (a euphemism for an ugly consortium of neo-colonial nations). Multi-lateral co-ordination with European and other industrial powers on the international stage would not be good news for the weaker, resource-rich countries caught in their crosshairs. Kerry is vying to become the richest president yet. The Heinz family fortune (which he married into) extends throughout the economy and is heavily invested in sectors that benefit from corporate free trade, weaker unions, and less regulation of capitalism.

In this context, to speak in terms of lesser or greater evils is not clarifying. What we have are different mixes of dangers and opportunities. Bush could cause greater short-term damage and Kerry could engineer a more stable long-term system of plunder. This holds true across a whole range of issues from civil liberties to affirmative action to war to the environment. The Republicans drive an SUV and the Democrats drive a compact but they're going the same way. Clinton and Gore were able to stymie or roll back environmental protections (suffice to mention PCBs, toxic dumping in the oceans, pesticides in baby foods, dioxins in paper processing, oil rights in nature preserves, climate change and logging federal lands) because they were assumed to be environmentalists.

The most important reason for making the removal of Bush a priority has to do with our relationship to our sisters and brothers in struggle around the world. Public opinion polls across the planet show deep opposition to the direction of international developments, and identify U.S. policies as the driving force behind them. Many are watching our elections for a sign as to whether we support Bush's agenda. Why does this matter?

A Global Precinct

Residents of the global south are, as Arundhati Roy says, citizens of the empire. The decisions made in the board rooms and bureaucracies of the U.S., impact and sometimes determine the life choices of millions, but they have no opportunity to vote for the decision makers. Whether you are struggling to protect access to water, protect land from confiscation, defend education, promote public health, achieve a livable income, or resist brutal repression, you will sooner or later run up against the power and agenda of the United States.

The people of the periphery respond by organizing, by individual struggles to survive, by becoming refugees or immigrants, by lashing out at our tormentors. Our options for struggle are shaped by our

recent histories. Poor peoples' movements have been systematically crushed by local and international systems of repression. Police and military terror, bribery, covert action, and religious extremist groups have all been used to prevent mass secular democratic movements from threatening corporate investments. Will the angry activists in these countries see themselves as part of a worldwide struggle of the have-nots against the greed of the haves, or as bin Laden and Bush would have it, as participants in a global confrontation between religions and cultures? This will in part be determined by whether we who live in the heart of the regime are seen as backers of our Emperor, or as allies in the fight against him. If we appear to give our endorsement to the regime, we will seem to confirm the second world view and encourage the advocates of "holy war". The implications of this view can be seen in the rubble of the World Trade Center.

The election is a crude method that can only carry a simple message. This is not because poor people of color are not capable of subtle analysis. It is because the medium of transmission, the global news media, will not carry subtle communications on our behalf. If Bush wins, the fact that Kerry is cut from similar cloth is not likely to survive the translation. If the Democrats and third parties together outpoll Bush and yet he wins by plurality, it will be the simple fact of his win that will be talked of in the markets of Karachi and the taxis of Cairo. The political choices we make (including, but not limited to voting) must always take into account our fellow subjects outside the walls.

Internees in Nazi concentration camps utilized the symbolic potential of the vote in 1933, when faced with a referendum on support for Hitler's foreign policy. Wanting the largest possible vote, the regime distributed ballots even to camp prisoners. After much debate, progressive inmates in many camps decided on the tactic of a unanimous vote for Hitler as a way to signal the world that the process was a sham. Our situation is considerably different but our message is no less important, and we must be just as innovative in getting it out to the world.

If our short term goal is to remove Bush through the election then (barring the unforeseen) it will require Kerry's ascension. However this does not require joining the Democratic campaign or endorsing its illusions. Much effort is being put into progressive voter registration campaigns. These target the millions of potential voters who have remained outside of the electoral process until now. Many are young people, people of color, poor folk and recent immigrants. They are the people who have not viewed the ballot as greatly affecting the problems of concern to them. The Democratic Party chose Kerry because he was considered "electable." That is to say, that it would be difficult for the White House to attack him from the right. In selecting a colorless right wing candidate, they have chosen someone not likely to inspire the marginalized populations who could determine the outcome of the election. Even registering large numbers of potential voters is no guarantee that they will turn out on November 2. Kerry is facing a ruthless campaign operation that is capable of damaging his image considerably before the election. His reactionary politics and slippery stands will be particularly damaging with young people. They are the age group with the lowest voter turnout and are particularly sensitive to hypocrisy.

The strategy of mainstream labor and liberal groups consists of promoting the message "Kerry Good, Bush Bad!" This requires papering over how far to the right the Democratic Party has gone. It is also a process of diminishing returns: even if successful, it encourages cynicism and disengagement as we are served a predictable menu of betrayals. The slogan "Let's Take America Back," being pushed by some well-meaning populists should be buried immediately! Unless they mean "back to 1491," it represents nostalgia for a golden era that only makes sense if it is racially coded to exclude vast numbers of our people. Whenever that time was, I, for one, do not want to go back there and am appalled that I'd be invited. The "good old days" don't look so good from the other side of the tracks!

Doing it Our Way

A social change strategy cannot be one that simply lets people be sucked in and spit out. It must contribute to a critical consciousness that will help people determine and act on their own interests in the future. The following proposal is inspired by the Louisiana governor's race of 1991. That year the Republican nomination was won by David Duke, the former "Imperial Wizard" of the racist Ku Klux Klan. Duke's neo-fascist politics galvanized a grassroots opposition. Duke's opponent was the incumbent; a corrupt, scandal-ridden machine politician. Governor Edwin Edwards's standing was so bad that it was not possible to make a positive case for him. The opposition chose instead to organize their campaign behind such slogans as "Vote for the Lizard, Not the Wizard," while bumper stickers reading "Vote for the Crook, It's Important," flew off the shelf. This permitted an ultimately successful campaign that did not stoop to selling a bill of goods to the rank and file voters. The message was that voting for the incumbent was a tactical choice that did not require promoting illusions about Edwards.

Adapting it to the different conditions of the Kerry-Bush race, what would be the implications of a Lizard Strategy?

- It would be a way to engage marginalized and first-time voters without patronizing them. Young people, people of color, poor people, and recent immigrants are intelligent and quite capable of comprehending nuance, complexity, and tactics.
- It would develop a voting block that would be largely immune from dirty tricks against or self-inflicted damage by, the Kerry campaign.
- It would give an activist framework to Bush opponents who are prepared to "hold their noses and vote."
- It would not leave the people we organize vulnerable to disappointment when they are forgotten after the victory party. In fact they would enter the post-election prepared for the need to force any concessions we may hope for.
- It would allow people to effectively oppose Bush while stating clearly their rejection of Kerry's opportunist politics.
- It would present a model for creative intervention on terms not dictated by the major parties.
- It would begin to loosen the ideological ties that bind large sectors of voters to the Democratic Party even as it offers them ever fewer benefits. These are people who have grumbled for years but are not ready to make a clean break in the absence of a "viable" alternative. In a Lizard campaign they could begin to test their muscles.

A slogan such as "Elect the Flake, Evict the Snake" would express openly what many people feel. It also injects an element of humor that can make the mobilization effort fun.

Taking it to the Streets

For this approach to work requires reversing past assumptions. Some Greens, for example, are waiting to see if Kerry will say enough of the right things to justify their voting for him. Ralph Nader is trying to move Kerry's positions toward the left. This is akin to helping the wolf into a sheep costume. To get Kerry to mouth progressive positions does not do any favors to the constituencies who might be fooled by it. There is nothing in Kerry's history, or that of his New Democrats, to suggest that he would feel

committed by any progressive noises he made during a campaign. It would be another case of lying to our members and finding ourselves with fewer of them to lie to the next time around. The enthusiasm of many college students for Bill Clinton's campaign led to widespread disillusionment when he abandoned or gave only token support to all of his pledges except for NAFTA.

A Lizard campaign allows us to disengage completely from Kerry and his politics. Indeed it will elicit the open hostility of the Democratic leadership and its allies. If the emergence of a significant Lizard voting block (in the current juncture any voting block is significant!) causes them to adjust their positions then so be it, but it is not the goal of the strategy.

A Lizard campaign is a coalition effort. It would not present a distinct alternative platform that all its participants would unite around. We should therefore support the participation of Ralph Nader and Green party candidate David Cobb in any public debates. We need to amplify alternative perspectives in order to increase our people's capacity for independent thought and action. In the current context I think that a Lizard vote will do more to build a constituency for future third party efforts than voting for the parties' presidential candidates, but under no circumstances should we tolerate the Democrats' efforts to attack or sideline them or other progressive voices (including insurgent Democrats like Dennis Kucinich).

If it gets off the ground the Lizard campaign will be a grassroots effort. We won't see endorsements or funding from mainstream lobbying groups. Lizard campaigners will not be invited to photo ops with Kerry or given mic time at his rallies. What we *can* do is capture the imagination of young people whose hearts do not skip a beat at the sound of Kerry's voice. People aged 18-30 vote less than any other age group. There is no indication that this pattern will be any different in 2004. Young people opposed to Bush are less enthusiastic about Kerry the more they learn about him. One of the greatest appeals of this strategy to young people will be the lack of pretension. There will be no need to disguise the nature of either candidate. It would be difficult for the Republicans to counter-protest at a Lizard rally since their attacks on Kerry are not relevant to us but we could be a magnet for media attention. We could expect speakers from grassroots movements and communities who would never be (nor wish to be) invited to speak at a Kerry rally to voice the real issues confronting their constituents. A movement rooted in people's real issues and founded on telling the truth in all of its complexity is tailor made for the participation of poets, musicians and all artists. We would need to capture the imagination of enough organizers for the concept to be spread widely through our networks. The support of a handful of community and campus organizations, alternative media outlets and web sites could be enough to get initial traction. If taken up as a strategy it can be fine tuned through planning conferences, e-mail discussions, and all the other mechanisms at our disposal. A network of Lizard committees in cities across the country could decide this election and if there's one thing we know how to do, it's organize!

The stakes in this campaign are high, although they do not fall along the lines we are used to discussing. No matter who is elected in the fall we must be prepared to confront him with relentless organizing. We know that we will be facing a President committed to imposing a puppet government on Iraq which can only be pursued by expanding a brutal and immoral occupation. He will also champion so-called free trade agreements. These are the cornerstone of a strategy to replace national sovereignty with corporate sovereignty as the centerpiece of global governance. To disguise the significance of Kerry's stands on these issues is unconscionable. Supporting free trade along with labor "side agreements" and local union legislation is like supporting slavery, but with a dental plan. It's a nice touch but it misses the point.

Much as we should avoid exaggerating the differences between the major parties, it also does not serve us to pretend that the outcome of the race doesn't matter. The Bush crowd has presented the world with

an unabashed declaration of supremacy and the world will see this election as a referendum on that posture. Lacking a parliamentary system we can only say no by rejecting Bush at the polls.

At the same time we can honor our long term commitment to social change with a campaign of independent mobilization that summons the power of the disenfranchised to defeat Bush without sowing illusions about the current, stacked electoral system; and which opens the agenda to a significant reassessment of that system. We must refuse on principle--now and always—to lie to our people! To build real power in our communities we must face today's dangers with a commitment to honesty and respect for our people's intelligence. We must organize for a future not of more lessers and greater evils but of real hope and meaningful change.

Feel free to circulate this article in any format so long as you do so in its entirety and credit the author. Ricardo Levins Morales is a political artist and long-haul activist who works at the Northland Poster Collective in Minneapolis, Minnesota .