

# Progressive Politics in the U.S.A.

Gene Marshall, January 2004

A deep cultural and economic gulf has developed in the United States, and it affects every political campaign, every election, every decision made in the halls of government. The two sides of this gulf are as diametrically opposed to one another as the two sides that waged the horrific Civil War of the nineteenth century. As was true then, most people today have a foggy picture of what this overall conflict is about. Many people have some clarity about one or two pieces of this vast divide, but most remain unclear about the whole picture.

## Describing the Great Divide

This vast gulf has come about because massive shifts are taking place in U.S. and planetary society. Here is a list of some of the shifts that characterize the overall departure of U.S. society from its well-established but now passing patterns:

1. The Shift from Racism and Culturism to Honoring Human Diversity  
(from "I am my Group" to "I am my Planet")
2. The Shift from Patriarchal Gender Patterns to Feminine/Masculine Balance  
(from Assumed Male Prerogatives to Creativity Released and Valued)
3. The Shift from Doctrinaire Religion to Open Interreligious Dialogue  
(from "My Religion is Right" to "Spirit Experience is the Authority")
4. The Shift from seeing humans as Ghosts in Earth-suits to Full Members of Nature  
(from being isolated entities to being the self-awareness of the cosmos)
5. The Shift from Material Success to Voluntary Simplicity  
(from endless accumulation to defining "enough")
6. The Shift from Individualistic Overemphasis to Communal/Personal Balance  
(from being apart to being a part)
7. The Shift from Traditional Norms to Creative Authenticity  
(from honoring the past to honoring the present and future)
8. The Shift from Authoritarian Pedagogy to Guided Creativity  
(from job training to inclusive discovery)

If we call these eight shifts "cultural shifts," there are also economic shifts:

1. The Shift from All-out Use of the Earth to Human/Earth Balance  
(from Human-centered Exploitation to Mutually Enhancing Support)
2. The Shift from Perpetual Economic Growth to a Steady-State Economy  
(from Youthful Industrialism to a Mature Planetary Practice)
3. The Shift from a Carbon-Fuel-Driven Economy to a Renewable-Energy-Driven Economy  
(from Spending our Savings Account to Living within Our Means)
4. The Shift from a Profit-Driven Economy to a Contribution-Driven Economy  
(from the Value is Making Money to the Value is Human Service)
5. The Shift from Autocratic Businesses to Worker Cooperatives  
(from Boss-Employee Hierarchies to Democratic Workplaces)

And in order to deal with these vast cultural and economic shifts, we also face the necessity of vast political shifts such as:

1. The Shift from Aristocratic Rulership to Democratic Responsibility  
(from The Empowerment of Wealth to The Empowerment of People)

2. The Shift from Imperial Unilateralism to Interregional Multilateralism  
(from Globalization from Above to Globalization from Below)
3. The Shift from National Micromanagement to Bioregional Empowerment  
(from Excessive Centralization to Appropriate Decentralization)
4. The Shift from Ideological Rightness to Contextual Ethics  
(from Knowing the Answers to Estimating the Appropriate)
5. The Shift from Combative Decision Making to Consensus Decision Making  
(from Adversarial Win-Lose Arrangements to All-Win Discovery Arrangements)

These eighteen shifts are basic ones, but others might also be stated. And each of these shifts contains further subparts, each of great importance. For full understanding, each of these shifts needs to be spelled out. Nevertheless, this list can be a symbol for what we mean by “progressive” and “reactionary.” Those who support many or most of these shifts can be called “progressives.” Those who resist many or most of these shifts can be called “reactionaries.”

“Reactionary” may seem a harsh term, for there is such a thing as conserving important values established in the past. But such genuine conservatism is called “centrist” in our current political spectrum. A centrist conservatism includes conserving the natural environment; conserving the victories won by labor unions, women, and racial minorities; conserving the protections articulated in the bill of rights, and conserving meaningful participation of all citizens in the decision-making process. But our current day “neoconservatives” or “right wingers” conserve none of these basic treasures. They are willing to risk all these values to “conserve” the power of an economic elite. And they seek support among those who want to turn back the clock on all or most of the eighteen shifts listed above. “Reactionary” is the correct term for this attitude. One of the characteristics of “reactionaries” is that they do not think of themselves as “reactionaries.” They see themselves as “reformers” bringing the society back from whatever movement the society has already made toward embodying the above shifts.

In this first decade of the twenty-first century, the United States is almost equally divided between those who see some or all of the above shifts as needed and those who don’t. This is reflected in our political contests. The Republican Party counts as its loyalists the most reactionary elements of this society. Centrist Republicans may support some of these progressive trends, but the Republican Party base is composed of strong resistance to most or all of these progressive trends. From my election watching and reading, I estimate that at least 40% of the U.S. voting population is solidly committed to this reactionary mode.

I estimate that another 40% of the U.S. voting population gives strong support to some of these progressive trends and supports most of them with growing interest. Progressives can appear fewer than they actually are because they are fragmented into many different groups, emphasizing different aspects of this overall shift. The reactionaries, on the other hand, tend to be more united. The past almost always seems more orderly than the future; so reactionaries can sound more sure and aggressive. It is this moralistic and ideological sureness that most offends many progressives. Progressives are those who know that reactionary sureness is a delusion. Reactionaries commonly accuse progressives of being people who don’t know where they are going. But from the progressive perspective, “not knowing where we are going” is a wholesome quality. Progressives know that the future must be different, so they are always experimenting with provisional innovations. Progressives, therefore, often struggle to match the enthusiasm and unity of the reactionaries. Progressives commonly fight among themselves about what the next right directions need to be. Reactionaries are also divided, but their divisions have to do with the degree to which they reject most or all of the above shifts. Some reactionaries adapt reluctantly to some of these shifts in order to be stronger in their opposition to the shifts that offend them most. The most clever reactionary politicians are able to cloak

themselves as moderates in order to widen their support for the reactionary actions they are dedicated to bringing about.

George W. Bush is one of these false moderates. He has held together and fanned enthusiasm among the reactionary forty percent of this nation while fooling another ten or eleven percent of the muddled middle of the political spectrum. This fooled group may be shrinking, for his reactionary actions with regard to the U.S. economy, foreign trade, and preemptive warfare have exposed him to increasing criticism. He is vulnerable to losing some of the votes he won in 2000 from the muddled middle. His reactionary extremism has also served to unify the scattered progressives. While progressives may fight with each other on almost every issue, they are coming together in their common opposition of George W. Bush. Neoconservative or "right wing" Republicans attempt to dismiss Democratic criticism by claiming that Democrats only bash Bush but have no positive program. This, however, is not true. Even though Bush-bashing has picked up steam, constructive proposals are also flourishing.

And it may be true that Bush himself is the most important issue in the 2004 general election. A thoroughgoing rejection of reactionary politics is a step that many voters and current nonvoters are interested in taking. I myself consider George W. Bush to be the most dangerous political figure in the history of this nation. Ronald Reagan has dropped into second place. Bush is dangerous because his policies are 180 degrees out of sync with the necessary social shifts. These wrong directions taken by a powerful superpower lead to extremely tragic consequences for the entire planet. Thus, a smiling or frowning, semi-popular, U.S. neoconservative can be viewed as more dangerous than even the blatantly "evil" dictators and desperate terrorists who are demonized in our popular media.

The majority of the U.S. population are still foggy about how dangerous Bush is. The 2004 election may still be a very close one, close enough to be stolen again with rigged voting machines or with misinformation passed off as truth by a bought media.

Though Democratic candidates disagree on significant issues, they also agree that putting money in the hands of laboring Americans will enhance the economy far more than tax cuts for the wealthy. They are clear that a skilled multilateralism in foreign affairs is the only way out of the Iraqi quagmire. They are clear that environmental laws must be improved not reversed. They are clear that steps must be taken to limit the power of drug companies, oil companies, and corporations generally. They are clear that civil rights have to be better protected – that social security and medicare have to be augmented not rolled back – that extreme neoconservative judges must not be allowed in the top echelons of the legal system – that racism and sexism in all its subtle forms must be rooted out – that governmental decisions must be made through practical contextual ethics rather than from ideological certitudes.

There are also deep rifts among the Democratic candidates. They are spread out over a wide spectrum extending from the outspoken progressive Dennis Kucinich to the dedicated centrist Joe Lieberman. Those who attempt to "govern from the center," are being ridiculed by the more progressive candidates as "Republican Lite." And Kucinich is dismissed as too far out of the mainstream to be "electable."

### **The Confusion of the Two Party System**

Our two-party system tends to blur the intensity of the vast divide that characterizes U.S. political life. In most European nations, many different parties share political power. But in the United States, third parties are not serious contenders for national power until they become one of the two major parties. If the U.S. had a parliamentary system or instant run-off voting laws, we would see that we actually have about four major parties, each supported by less than a majority of the voting public.

**Party 1** is the **neoconservative** wing of the Republican Party now represented by George W. Bush and his administration. There is some variety within this wing of political opinion. George W. is more reactionary than his father or even Ronald Reagan. In actual practice he seems to have more in common with Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and DeLay than his more moderate cabinet members such as Colin Powell.

**Party 2** is the **centrists** including the Clinton wing of the Democratic party, the centrist “independents,” and Republican centrists like John McCain. Among the 2004 Democratic candidates, Joe Lieberman is a clear example of this wing of political opinion. Bob Graham and Wesley Clark, though they opposed the Iraqi war, are still centrists in the bulk of their policies.

**Party 3** is the **populist progressives** of the Democratic Party. This group is defined by such candidates as Howard Dean, John Edwards, Dick Gephardt, John Kerry. “Populist” in this context means identifying with the needs of the vast majority and willing to fight the forces of corporate wealth for tangible victories on behalf of wider justice and ecological well-being.

**Party 4** is the **visionary progressives**, including approximately a quarter of the Democratic Party, independents like Ralph Nader, the Green Party, a few other splinter parties, and organizations like The Alliance for Democracy. The 2004 presidential candidate who most clearly represents this group is Dennis Kucinich. Carol Moseley-Braun and Al Sharpton, in their outspoken style and bold positions, are also members of this group. Other prominent members include Russell Feingold, Barbara Boxer, Jim Hightower, a number of African American women like Maxine Waters, and the tragically killed Paul Wellstone.

“Progressive” can be a misleading term, for even most centrists count themselves as progressives. And centrists are somewhat progressive as well as somewhat tied to the big-money establishment. For example, John McCain supports attention to global warming and joined Russell Feingold in support of campaign finance reform. The Clintons strongly support greater equity and respect for women and African Americans. They have been competent and persistent in making incremental changes in progressive directions. But on issues having to do with global trade, NAFTA, or the WTO, centrist politicians lean very far toward the interests of the captains of industry. The Clintons and others speak of environmental improvements and an economy that brings progress to everyone, rich and poor alike, but this balancing act of supporting both the current corporation establishment and a progressive agenda blurs many issues and results in compromises that are untenable to the members of parties 3 and 4.

Nevertheless, the skillful Bill and Hillary Clinton, together with a strong assembly of centrist Democrats, succeeded in “reforming” the Democratic party toward the center in order to win victories from the neoconservatives. This was a hard battle, but they succeeded. It was assumed that Al Gore would inherit the mantle of this “reform” and continue the Clinton arrangement for another eight years. Although Gore was never entirely comfortable with Clinton centrism, he took the advice of his handlers, chose the centrist Joe Lieberman for his running mate, and campaigned from the center. Bush pretended to be a centrist as well. This set up a boring and confusing debate.

### **The New Gore and the Populist Four**

Following the controversial Supreme Court decision that gave Bush the presidency, Gore seems to have repented of some of his centrism. This is signaled in his speeches against the Iraqi war; his stronger populist statements; and his friendship, admiration, and endorsement of Howard Dean. So what is this “new” Gore perspective all about? It does not embody the visionary progressivism of Kucinich or Nader, but it is a move in the progressive direction. It is clearly an abandonment of Clinton centrism. Clinton and his allies are clear about that. Though the Clintons have skillfully feigned neutrality in the Democratic primary, they clearly prefer

someone more centrist than Dean. Wesley Clark might do. Dean has clearly declared his independence from centrist politics, identifying himself as "the democratic wing of the Democratic Party." Even more threatening to centrists, Dean is creating a grassroots organization that is effective in raising money and mobilizing progressives and nonvoters. If he wins the nomination and the presidency, he is also stubborn enough to make good on his promise of "reforming" the Democratic party. And this time, "reforming" means becoming less centrist, more populist, more grassroots, less Washington-oriented, fewer ties with big-money donors, more liberty to oppose neoconservative positions and make advances in progressive directions.

John Kerry is also a populist progressive. Nevertheless, I believe that Kerry has attempted to keep one toe in the Clinton era and another in the progressive directions he shares with Dean. His campaign may be too nuanced for the average voter to understand. He may even be raising fears that he will be a damper on the Party's progressive enthusiasm. Whatever the reason, his campaign is not yet working. Dean, on the other hand, is articulating the issues more simply and straightforwardly, and he is receiving an enthusiastic response. Dick Gephardt and John Edwards are also outspoken in their populist progressivism, but they have not yet matched Dean's success with grassroots organization and money-raising. Unless something happens soon, these two presidential aspirants will become the most likely choices for Vice President. Nevertheless, the truth is that all four of these candidates are quite similar to one another and quite distinct from the more progressive Kucinich.

### **Kucinich and Dean**

Dean has distanced himself from Dennis Kucinich, and Kucinich has taken on Dean. To me, this is the most interesting debate of the presidential season. Kucinich lays out an ultra-progressive program with little or no moderation. In almost every case, Dean dismisses him as going too far.

For example, Kucinich proposes to reduce the bloated, wasteful, and corrupt Pentagon budget and use that money for free college education for everyone. This may be a sensible thing to do; even moderates may one day do exactly that. But Dean is not supporting that idea. Perhaps he is sensing that reducing the Defense budget in a time of military overcommitment around the world is not a direction that the U.S. citizenry can embrace.

Both Kucinich and Dean have opposed the war on Iraq, but Kucinich is saying that the Iraqi war was not only an exaggerated response but has become a quagmire from which U.S. troops should be withdrawn sooner rather than later. Kucinich is making the point that our overwhelming presence there is more of a problem than a solution. Dean is not asking for a prompt withdrawal. He is willing to stay and stabilize a situation that he feels is now more dangerous than it was before the war. I believe that the U.S. presence in Iraq does raise difficult questions. On the one hand, I believe that the Bush administration's program of staying in Iraq until "we" have fostered a type of "democracy" that is acceptable to U.S. oil interests will only deepen the quagmire and inspire additional support for the radical Islamic theocracies and terrorist organizations. At the same time, I feel that someone must figure out how to put together a viable and non-oppressive international assistance program for a more "democratic" as well as "independent" Iraq.

On health insurance, Kucinich claims, as do Moseley-Braun, Sharpton, and Nader, that a single-payer, governmental program would sufficiently lower drug costs and administrative costs to finance full health insurance for every person. Dean and the other three populist candidates are willing to fight with the drug companies, insurance companies, and the HMOs, but not to the extent Kucinich is proposing. They each propose something more moderate. Dean argues that he supports a program that can be enacted by the congress. But sooner or later it may become clear to any progressive president that it is hopeless to work out a viable

health care design that includes making compromises with a health establishment that is intent on maximizing its profits.

World trade policy is another area where Kucinich is, I believe, basically correct and the other progressive Democratic candidates are promoting solutions that are too moderate. The entire progressive wing of the Democratic party is in general agreement that NAFTA, the WTO, and similar international agencies are currently captive to the transnational corporations and that valid labor interests and environmental interests are being tragically damaged world wide. But most of these politicians stop short of Kucinich's claim that we must simply shut down these organizations and start over. I believe that a program to reform NAFTA and the WTO will end up looking as silly as a program to reform the Ku Klux Klan. Nevertheless, Dean and the other populist progressives may be politically correct in assuming that the U.S. voters are not yet ready to embrace the Kucinich position.

Kucinich is also willing to take on media reforms and criminal justice reforms not emphasized by the other candidates. On ecological issues, Dean and Kerry seem as clear as Kucinich. These three and others can, I believe, be trusted to make improvements in this arena. Yet, in my view, no presidential candidate is giving the impending ecological upheaval the priority it deserves.

### **So What Should Progressive Voters Do?**

What does the above commentary mean for progressive voters? (1) We might simply leave the Democratic Party to its complex infighting and vote in the general election for a Green Party presidential candidate or for Nader if he runs as an independent. (2) Or we might sign on for the Democratic primary and express our visionary progressive conscience in a vote for Dennis Kucinich. (3) Or we might feel that a choice needs to be made among the four populist progressives in the context that they represent the only viable choices for unseating Bush and making a few steps toward reforming the Democratic party.

It seems to me that many progressives expect too much from their president. Politics is the shrewd "art of the possible." A political position is different from a philosophy of life. A political position is, at best, a compromise of many values, and it is an attempt to represent a majority of the people. In this context we might ask whether a president Kucinich would be too inflexibly dedicated to progressive principles and too inept at fruitful compromises. And we also might ask if there is enough support at this time among the U.S. citizenry to stand by a Kucinich or a Nader presidency in the long hard fight toward the changes they are proposing. Presidents can sometimes lead a majority of the people beyond their current views. But it is also true that presidents and other political figures are usually the trailing edge, not the leading edge, of overall progressive change. A working majority of the people still need to be won to a visionary progressive agenda, and no president or presidential candidate can be counted upon to do the whole job of making this change. I am grateful to Nader and Kucinich for their help in educating the U.S. population on the conservative delusions we could be avoiding and the progressive potentials we could be realizing. But we who count ourselves as visionary progressives have not yet built a popular movement strong enough to support a fully visionary president. And thus, it seems clear to me that Kucinich does not have the grassroots organization he would need to mobilize the Democratic base, the Greens, the visionary independents, and the nonvoters to win an election against the Bush forces.

What distinguishes Dean from all the other Democratic candidates is his grassroots approach to democratic organizing and money raising. He is probably correct in his prediction that this is the key to winning against George W. Bush. Television debates and media spots are not going to do it. Dean is committed to getting thousands of people out on the streets in face-to-face confrontations and thousands more working through e-mail networks. Dean has already begun welding together the grassroots forces that may be able to shift the Democratic party a few steps

toward a more progressive perspective and also defeat the super-financed reactionary establishment of George W. Bush. Unless Dean's grassroots organization could be shifted in full support for Kerry or Gephardt or Edwards, the inherited structures of the Democratic party might not provide enough enthusiasm for these candidates to win in the general election. Dean, whatever his limitations, has done the work of organizing a broad constituency of contributors and workers that goes well beyond those forces in the Democratic Party who depend upon large donors. And for this reason alone it is not unreasonable that many visionary progressives are opting to support his campaign. Molly Ivins, whose intuitions I trust on many issues, has recently announced that she is supporting Dean because he is a vigorous fighter and thus capable of being a winner in a contest with Bush.

For these reasons and others, I am also supporting Dean. I see him as a skilled political strategist and more solidly progressive than some of his moderate positions seem to imply. The full flavor of this man cannot be ascertained from his interviews and media spots. To see his clarity and depth, read his speeches available on his web site: [www.deanforamerica.com](http://www.deanforamerica.com).

Nevertheless, it is still early in the Democratic primaries, and Dean may not sustain our ever more careful scrutiny. My deepest agreements remain with Dennis Kucinich and my admiration for Ralph Nader goes even deeper, but I believe that the key task for progressives in the 2004 presidential election is not building up the visionary progressive political constituency. Rather our task is defeating Bush and moving the Democratic Party a few steps away from its ineffective centrism and toward a more vigorous progressive rejection of the neoconservative travesty.

Centrist politics is not the sure bet its promoters claim. From my perspective, Joe Lieberman is not a viable option for defeating George W. Bush. Lieberman does not possess Clinton's political skills. Wesley Clark, though he has some foreign policy wisdom, is an inexperienced politician and is limited by an unimaginative centrism. The populist four – Dean, Edwards, Gephardt, and Kerry – are all intelligent and experienced politicians with significant popular appeal. It is my view that these four are the only options we have for stopping the neoconservative descent into more and more oligarchical rule and international disasters. I do not view choosing one of these men as opting for the least among evils. I see them as the best among available options in this very complex and dangerous situation.

I see ousting George W. Bush as necessary, but I also see his ouster as no more than one step in the vast challenge to mobilize a greater portion of the U.S. population and the world population in support of a fully progressive agenda. Kucinich's campaign has been fresh air blowing through our political discussion. The correctness of this or that detail of his proposals is not important, but the overall willingness to be boldly visionary and drastic in opposition to the established neoconservatism is laudatory. Nevertheless, among the visionary progressives I most admire, even Kucinich and Nader are rather moderate. Writers like Thomas Berry, Lester Brown, Vandana Shiva, David Korten, Noam Chomsky, and a long list of others are more visionary (especially on ecological matters). In whatever way this U.S. presidential election turns out, progressives will still have an enormous educational task to do among the citizenry of this nation.

We are indeed engaged in a new kind of Civil War, one not fought with muskets on a bloody battlefield but a conflict that can only be won by progressive forces making bold witnesses to the truth and being persistent, confident, and effective opposition to all lies, secretiveness, defensive propaganda, and halfway answers. If progressives succeed in the coming decades in ripping loose the truth from the morass of mass media mendacity, then humanity may avoid some of the impending disasters that loom on the horizon. But as their short-range goal, progressives, I am convinced, need to retire Bush to his Texas ranch.