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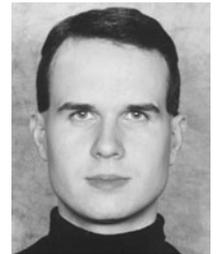
Religious Socialism

THE JOURNAL FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH AND SOCIALISM

No Time for Parties

ANDREW HAMMER

The reference to time in the headline may be misleading; I'm not going to tell you that in this election year there is no time for minor parties due to the dangerous state of the union under the Bush regime. In other words, I'm not going to say that in other years it made sense, but now, in 2004, it just doesn't.



The argument put forth in this article is based on a broader observation — that the creation or support of a minor party is not an intelligent option for those who want their platform to become the law of the land, because the United States not only is not and was never intended to be a multi-party society (the nation's founders loathed the concept of political parties in principle), but is actually a society without any political parties at all, at least for those who take their concept of "party" from historical parliamentary systems.

Further, and this is where the argument is most significant for socialists, political change in this country does not really take place through political parties, as it does in most other nations in the world, where voters in a parliamentary system actually vote for a party instead of a person. That just doesn't happen here, and the fact that a person (Ralph Nader) was needed to get some attention for a party (the Greens) when nothing else would, is testimony to that. Political change in America historically occurs through social movements based around specific issues, and those social movements are what push all "parties" to the places they inhabit on the political spectrum.

We'll come back to that in a moment. For now, let's look at why the rejection of a third party strategy makes sense, by answering the major arguments in favor of that strategy.

1. Third parties are needed to push the political debate to the left

Two words: Howard Dean. Here's someone who not only wasn't starting a new party, but wasn't even a leftist. Based on their respective records, John Kerry is a radical compared to Howard Dean. Yet Dean, a most unlikely choice to pull off such a feat, managed to uproot the stagnation in the Democratic Party to an extent that no one

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co-editor's notes

The topic assigned for this issue was, "Is it time to dump the idea of third-party socialism and concentrate on making the Democratic Party a de facto socialist party?"

Andrew Hammer, Paul Buhle, and David O'Brien are all socialists who have been active in third-party movements. Their testimony is particularly persuasive. I especially commend Andrew for his detailed historical and political analysis.

None of them, however, seems to be as optimistic as this writer about the possibility of making the Democratic Party a de facto socialist party. This optimism is based on the two declarations of the Socialist International: the Frankfurt Declaration of 1951, when the current SI was founded, and the Stockholm Declaration of 1989, one of whose authors was our own Michael Harrington. It developed the pluralist, democratic vision of socialism even further than Frankfurt and was approved appropriately in the same year that Soviet communism disappeared and ceased to confuse — well, less anyway — socialism with that kind of political and economic madness.

Both declarations support the conclusion that there is no good reason why the Democratic Party cannot be brought into line with the basic principles of socialism.

The Frankfurt Declaration, for example, contains this significant sentence: "While the guiding principal of capitalism is private profit, the guiding principal of socialism is the satisfaction of human needs."

Although Frankfurt marked the beginning of socialism's move away from Marx, the quote echoes one of his better aphorisms: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" (*Critique of the Gotha Program*).

As a lifelong anti-Marxist I have no hesitation in applauding this quote because it is a summation of two fundamental commandments in the Bible: one, the commandment in both the Jewish and Christian Bibles to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the shelterless, and tend the sick (Isaiah 58:3, 6-11 and Matthew 25: 31-46, among others), and two, the commandment to pull your own weight if you are able, a commandment too often ignored by the left, expressed repeatedly in Genesis and Proverbs, but even more forcefully in St. Paul's Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (3:11,12) "He who will not work, neither let him eat."

The American people are still a mainly religious people, however wildly their ideas of religion may vary. No one, however, has been able successfully to separate religion from the commandment to satisfy human needs. And we must never let them forget it. This is our peculiar calling.

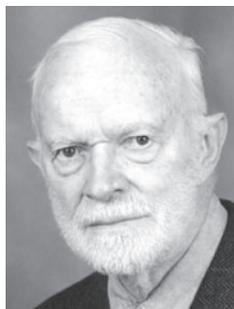
Working from the Other Side

Working from the other side of the question, let me now review the history of the Democratic Party since FDR and the New Deal, with a view to highlighting those incidents and/or elements that would encourage one to believe that the Party can be brought more consistently into line with such socialist principles as "the satisfaction of human needs."

During the Great Depression of the thirties, the Democrats were responsible for spending 10.5 billion dollars, the equivalent of 147 billion today, to put the unemployed to work in WPA projects.

In his last State of the Union Message in 1944 Roosevelt said

We have accepted, so to speak, a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all — regardless of station, race or creed. Among these [is] the right to a useful and remunerative job . . .



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Editorial

1 Maolis Road
Nahant, MA 01908

religiousocialism@socialist.org
www.dsausa.org/rs

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Editors

John C. Cort
Andrew Hammer
Maxine Phillips

The Religion & Socialism Commission

Co-Chairs: Rod Ryon, Juanita Webster
Secretary: Maxine Phillips
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Rev. Judith Deutsch
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Member, International League of Religious Socialists — ILRS (Socialist International)

RS Contributing Editors:

Jack Clark, Rev. Judith Deutsch, Harvey Cox, Michael Eric Dyson, Rev. Marcia L. Dyson, Norm Faramelli, David O'Brien, Cornel West

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UNION MADE
PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER

Unfortunately, the “we” with which FDR started that fine statement did not include all the Democrats, then or later. Strangely enough, it did include Thomas E. Dewey, the Republican candidate for president, who in that same year said this:

If at any time there are not sufficient jobs in private enterprise to go around, the government can and must create job opportunities, because there must be jobs for all in this country of ours.

Go With It, John!

[Memo to myself: Find some way to call this Dewey quote to the attention of John Kerry. It could help him beef up his anemic job proposals. “If Dewey was for a job guarantee, John, why aren’t you and other Democrats insistent about it? It’s a can’t-lose issue: ‘JOBS FOR ALL!’ Go with it, John!”]

Full employment and the right to work were ideas that were much in the post-war air. In 1945 our Democratic Congress and President Truman ratified the Charter of the United Nations, which in Article 55 commits this country to “promote full employment.” This has the force of law, but it is a neglected and violated law.

In 1946 the Democratic Congress passed the Employment Act, which recognized for the first time the responsibility of the federal government to do something about unemployment. But the federal government, then led by Harry Truman, did nothing.

In 1978, 32 years later, Congress added the word “Full” to “Employment Act” and provided that within three years unemployment would be reduced to 3 percent for those 20 years old and older, and 4 percent for those between 16 and 20.

Jimmy Carter, a very nice man, did nothing to enforce that bill. It remains a dead letter. I once heard Carter say, “There’s nothing wrong with our economic system. It’s just that somehow we’ve forgotten how to work with each other. Somehow we’ve forgotten how to trust each other.” No kidding.

Get everybody working at decent pay, and you’re more than halfway home. Add health, housing, education, environment; heat slowly over a low flame; and you’ve got “the satisfaction of human needs.” You’ve got socialism. (Caveat: We’ve got to

come to a reasonable compromise on abortion. We’re losing too many votes to people who can’t stomach the abortion-on-demand mentality. Fortunately, I have a strong stomach.)

Just Consider

Meanwhile, just consider how the Democratic Party might be different today if (a) Bobby Kennedy had not been assassinated and (b) Ted Kennedy had not been so morally deficient. Consider further: in 1978, at the mid-term Democratic convention, Mike Harrington, aided by Doug Fraser of the Auto Workers, Bill Winpisinger of the Machinists, and Jerry Wurf of AFSCME, was able to mobilize 40 percent of that convention to oppose the kindly malaise of an incumbent president, Jimmy Carter. It could happen again, and this time at 60 percent.

Why is our small movement of religious socialists important in keeping alive this hope that the Democratic Party can redeem the wasted hopes of yesteryear? Answer: The larger movement of American socialists and democratic Democrats needs our faith, our common sense based on some more ancient knowledge of the human mind and heart, our sense of limits, our fussy concern with means and ends, our passionate intensity.

Question: Do we actually have passionate intensity? Bethink you of Yeats’s “The Second Coming” once again: The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity.

The Nazis and the Communists were full of it. Are we even confident that we’re the best? At least we have the beset sources of wisdom and inspiration. But we need work on conviction and passionate intensity.

J.C.C.

CORRECTIONS

1. John Cort demands that the record show that he was not responsible for running his photo twice (three times if you count the book ad) in the last issue.
2. The book ad stripped 100 pages from the book. It actually runs to 356 pages not 256. You can still get it for the author’s 40 percent discount, plus postage, by sending \$20 to John at 1 Maolis Road, Nahant, MA 01908.
3. Our attempt at classical learning backfired when we headed a box “Noster Culpa.” *Culpa*, Latin for “fault,” is feminine, for some weird reason, so the proper possessive is *Nostra*.

ABOUT RONALD REAGAN

In 1951 or 1952 I was a delegate from the Boston Local of the American Newspaper Guild, CIO, to our national convention in Portland, Oregon. Ronald Reagan was then president of the Screen Actors Guild.

We invited him to speak at the Saturday night dinner, which he did for fifty minutes, going right down the new Deal, pro-labor line. We gave him a standing ovation. Shortly thereafter he went to work for General Electric, touring the country, devoting his eloquence to paeans of praise for the capitalist system.

In short, he abandoned the cause of the workers, the poor, and the powerless in favor of the cause of the rich and the powerful. It won him the governorship of California, similar to a current B movie actor, and then the presidency of the United States.

I have more respect for George W. Bush than I had for Reagan. At least Bush has never pretended to be anything but a champion of the rich and the powerful. But of course, R.I.P.

—J.C.C.

Where Is Mike?

DAVID O'BRIEN

Where is Michael Harrington when we need him? All those years ago, when he persuaded democratic socialists to abandon their own political campaigns to work as a self-conscious caucus within the Democratic Party, I had my doubts.



Part of my resistance was romantic yearning for Eugene Debs, part my sense that the future of democratic socialism rested not only on the labor movement, Harrington's desired partners, but on our ability to persuade young activists in social movements, NGOs, hospitals, classrooms and government agencies that socialism made sense for the United States.

To do that, I thought we needed to articulate sensible policy options in domestic and foreign policy and show that those options could in fact work.

Step one was to get people's attention, and we would be better able to do that if we could present smart, attractive candidates. We would be less likely to be taken seriously if we answered the question "What are we to do?" by pointing to meetings with labor leaders and backstairs dialogues amid an increasingly media and money driven party, in partnership not only with honorable labor and civil rights groups but also with passionate practitioners of identity politics. I was and remain skeptical about this approach.

Appalled by Pandering

In 2000, appalled by the pandering and shameless abandonment of any understanding of the public interest by Vice President Al Gore and Senator Bill Bradley, I supported Ralph Nader. I hoped his campaign would attract the thousands of young professionals and activists working at the grass roots across the country, not just in protests but in workplaces, social service agencies, government offices and grass roots politics, and demonstrate to the wider public that responsible political options are available. Unfortunately, I failed to persuade others that this strategy was a good idea.

Nader kept the spotlight too much on himself, he failed to widen the political conversation, and he all but disappeared after the election. In retrospect I believe that if he had run in the Democratic primaries in 2000, his impact would have been greater.

So now what we need are ideas, organization, and strategy, and only then candidates. The ideas have to do not with Iraq, economics, and social justice, but with citizen participation

and a renewed sense of the public interest. We must persuade people that we share responsibility for our country and its future. Ideas, shared responsibility, and the public interest have been abandoned by our political leaders and most political intellectuals and their absence has now deeply damaged the very foundations of domestic and foreign policy. Money, media, widespread irresponsibility, even in the mainline churches, and lack of citizen organization have eroded the fabric of trust indispensable to democracy.

Allies Available

But ours is a vast, complex, diverse, and remarkably resilient country. Shared responsibility and the public interest are not dead. Potential allies can be found in the student community service networks around Campus Compact ("From Service to Citizenship"), among younger teachers and public employees, and across a broad middle class frightened by President Bush and his team. The prospect of a second Bush term with firm GOP control of both houses has a lot of people very worried.

The answer is partly John Kerry, partly a select group of House and Senate campaigns, but mostly ourselves. Progressives have to abandon identity politics, get angry about the theft of our resources and our heritage, get modest about highly divisive moral issues like abortion and gay marriage, and get together across the country to renew the Democratic Party where possible, to challenge its prevailing powers where necessary.

Most of all we need a long-term strategy and a credible group who will put that together. Who will that be? If the answer is continued silence, we are in even bigger trouble than we thought.

David O'Brien is Loyola Professor of Roman Catholic Studies at Holy Cross and a contributing editor of Religious Socialism.

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Democrats or Not Spanish Hopes, American Realities

PAUL BUHLE

American socialists are stuck with the Democrats, or at least some Democrats, and that is certain to be true for some time to come.

Especially, but not only at the local level, mobilizations for labor, the environment, minority rights, women's rights and, most of all, against the war, must rely upon liberal coalitions. More than a few activists will also become Democrats in order to gain elected office.



But things are never simple. In Eugene Debs's day a bloc of American Federation of Labor socialists urged abandonment of the Socialist Party electoral effort for an imagined labor party. Those same (soon mostly ex-) socialists lined up behind Sam Gompers, supporting Woodrow Wilson's crusade for empire—and the savage repression of Wobblies and socialists, including Debs himself. This tragedy is ever likely to repeat itself when a grand imperial quest is underway and liberalism shows its sour side.

The FDR Exception

One great and near-complete exception to the rules of warning abides; his initials are FDR. By 1936 the fledgling Congress of Industrial Organizations had built a political machine behind Franklin Roosevelt so powerful that nearly all radicals, from communists to socialists, gave up the ghost of independence, or resolved themselves to work for Roosevelt through independently organized state parties.

Save for a few local settings, the electoral operation of the Socialist Party disappeared, and the party became a virtual booster group for a moral leader, a status from which it and its successors have never quite re-emerged.

Here was a triumph and a tragedy in store. With the Cold War, the most talented and enthusiastic New Dealers in political life, the labor movement, and popular culture, were quickly purged, and the long decline in the grassroots base of the Democrats ensued. George Meany's machine, as I document in my volume *Taking Care of Business*, pulled steadily rightward on every agenda that would occupy the 1960s, in tow if not exactly lock step with the "Senator from Boeing," Henry Jackson. Peace, ecology, women's and gay rights, affirmative action—each one, potentially making its way within the Democrats, was blocked by thuggish labor leaders implicated in human rights violations and worse, across the third world.

Revival During Seventies

The revival of Democratic prospects during the 1970s owed everything to George McGovern's campaign and assorted 1960s radical movements. New idealists swept into action bringing a rainbow of hopes.

Resistance to the revival and remaking of the Democrats, a return instead to global adventurism and bloated military budgets, was supported avidly by the bumbling Lane Kirkland, keen strategist of organized labor's near-disappearance. The Democratic Party, sliding downward toward the monied minority symbolized in the Democratic Leadership Council, spurned its would-be saviors.

And here we approach the present day, because from Walter Mondale's and Michael Dukakis's campaigns onward, Democrats have run leftward for the nomination and stumbled rightward toward an electoral defeat that candidate Clinton avoided largely due to the candidacy of Ross Perot (President Clinton had incumbency).

Kerry Backtracking

At this writing, John Kerry has already begun backtracking on social welfare issues, avoiding the drastic cuts in the military budget needed for any possible war on poverty. Running away from the idealists of the Dean campaign—the biggest potential boost to a grassroots Democratic party in two generations—Kerry may yet be forced to reverse course and come out for imperial retraction.

Or he will likely follow erstwhile Democratic Leadership Council pet Al Gore (and the repugnant hawk Joseph Lieberman) in defeating himself with vote-costing mistakes that no Ralph Nader could provide. At the local level and in congressional campaigns, peaceniks will nevertheless continue fighting for the endangered soul of the party.

We will be among the Democrats. We have no choice. But we will also inevitably find ourselves beyond them as well, recalling the great spiritual messages of William Blake against empire and doing what radicals alone are likely to do. Unlike our Spanish comrades, we are not soon destined to lead a peace party to historic victory. Our fellow radicals, brave young Israelis adamantly refusing service in the West Bank and Gaza and organizing against the Occupation, calling upon their fellow citizens to follow their lead, have reminded us of the other way forward.

Labor Liaison for the Mondale campaign in Rhode Island, Paul Buhle joined DSA during the same 1984 campaign and is "proud of being attacked by every major neo-conservative publication in the United States."

One-Party Government, Anyone?

DONALD SWIFT

The Republican Party took control of the House of Representatives in 1995 amid promises that it would end the high-handed tactics of the Democrats and re-establish fair and just procedures. By 2004, it had greatly expanded upon the precedents set by Democratic shenanigans, and had so abused its power that historian Lewis L. Gould noted that its authoritarian practices and arrogance raised serious doubts about whether the GOP “really believe[s] in the two-party system as a core principle of politics.”



Republicans moved decisively toward stripping the Democrats of anything more than formal participation in the legislative process and enforced unprecedented discipline among themselves, thus amplifying the power of the hard right that controls the party in that chamber. It is as though their determination to strip the minority of a serious legislative role were justified by the long discredited philosophy that error has no rights.

A small illustration of these tendencies occurred in 2001. Republicans had lost a number of House seats in the 2000 election and compensated for this by further slashing Democratic representation on committees. Fairness would dictate that Democratic representation be increased slightly.

To the Basement

After Republicans had increased their margin in the House in 2002, they enacted procedural restrictions that make it even more difficult for the Democratic minority to get legislative proposals to the floor. By 2002 House Democrats had been driven out of the caucus room they had used for seven years and sent to a place in the basement. Sometimes the Democratic Caucus was forbidden to meet anywhere in the Capitol, which made it difficult for them to discuss and plan strategy. Democrats on committees were often not permitted to caucus in committee rooms, and it was not unusual for them not to be invited to committee meetings. When they were permitted to attend committee meetings, they sometimes were not permitted to offer amendments to legislation that was being marked up. House Democrats were excluded from the process of drafting the Medicare “Reform” Act and were kept off the conference committee that reconciled House and Senate versions. When Democrats appeared at the room where a committee was writing the act, Capitol police were called to evict them, but the police, fearing litigation, did not use force.

Medicare reform passed the House by two votes because Republicans held open the voting for nearly three hours, while

people were pressed to change their votes. In 1987 Republicans had denounced Speaker Jim Wright for once keeping the voting open ten minutes more than the normal fifteen minutes.

While the Medicare vote was held open, Nick Smith, a retiring Republican member from Michigan, was told that \$100,000 would be invested in his son’s campaign to succeed him if Smith voted for the bill. If he failed to support the leadership, the money would be invested to defeat Smith’s son in the primary. He did not budge, and the attempted bribe has not been investigated.

House Democrats were also barred from the drafting of the energy bill. The high-handed procedures employed in fashioning this bill were lamely justified by reference to the days when Wilbur Mills, supported by huge Democratic majorities, worked out the main outlines of tax policy by himself and then had his Ways and Means Committee dutifully pass it with little debate.

Frequently Democrats were not permitted to see key legislation until just before it was voted on, and more than 70 percent of the significant legislation that reached the House floor was handled under rules that prohibited amendments. On November 12, 2003, House Republican leaders ordered staffers to remove an amendment from the Transportation Bill that was going to a conference committee. Had this been done by a duly constituted conference committee, this would have been legal, but they did not constitute a conference committee. They wanted to spare Bush from vetoing the measure because it contained an amendment forbidding the expenditure of funds to prevent people from traveling to Cuba. Before the 2004 omnibus appropriations bill was passed, House Democrats were forbidden to speak in the debate on the rules under which the spending legislation would be handled. A Brookings Institution expert noted that the House restrictions on the minority had been taken to a new extreme.

Bring in the Lobbyists

Since 1995 Republican lobbyists have been permitted openly to participate in the drafting of legislation, and it is likely that they often had more influence in the House legislative process than elected Democratic representatives. Led by Senator Rick Santorum and Representative Tom DeLay, Republicans have also pressed firms and organizations to replace Democratic lobbyists with Republicans. Members are urged not to deal with lobbyists who happen to be Democrats. At one level this was an attempt to assure that corporate contributions will go to one party only. It was also a blatant effort to strip people of employment because of their political affiliations.

Senate rules offer the minority greater protection than House rules, but as radical conservatives move from the House to

the Senate, it is likely that these protections will be attacked. In the Senate, Democrats have not yet been stripped of their right to speak, and they usually are permitted to participate in the drafting of legislation in committees and on conference committees. But only two Democratic senators were permitted any role in the writing of the final Medicare Reform Act.

In 2003 the Republican Senate leadership threatened to stop Democratic filibusters against court nominees by having Vice President Richard Cheney exercise the "nuclear option" of stating that he interpreted the rules to forbid the use of the filibuster for this purpose. Earlier, when the Senate parliamentarian offered a ruling that would give the minority the ability to delay passage of some legislation, then Majority Leader Trent Lott simply fired him.

Cracking the Whip

Within Republican ranks in both houses there have been increasing efforts to enforce an unprecedented measure of party discipline. Senate Republicans elect committee chairs, who are then instructed by the Party caucus. There remains a handful of moderate Republican Senators, but they dare not vote against their party on major matters if they wish to retain good committee positions.

In the House Newt Gingrich ended the selection of chairs on the basis of seniority. In 2003 Speaker Dennis Hastert ruled that committee chairs would be selected by a panel dominated by the leadership, and he ignored seniority in selecting chairs, who were then instructed to report directly to Majority Leader DeLay. It was made clear that they were expected to be good team players. Richard W. Pombo, an opponent of environmental legislation, was elevated over several senior members to head the Resources Committee, and moderate Christopher Shays, despite his seniority, was denied the chair of the Government Reform Committee because he backed campaign finance reform.

The nation's founders feared one-party rule, and experience has proven that our legislative process is healthiest when compromise, civility, and transparency prevail. Republican legislative tactics represent much more than hardball politics. They drastically modify our legislative system by stripping the minority party of traditional rights to participate in the drafting of legislation. By using reckless and ruthless tactics to pass the Bush White House's program, the Republican leaders on the hill are placing in great jeopardy the traditional independence of Congress. Once the most independent branch of government, it is being transformed into a reliable instrument of one-party rule.

Donald Swift is author of *Religion and the American Experience: A social and Cultural History, 1765-1997* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998) and professor of history emeritus at Edinboro University, Erie, Pennsylvania.



Keeping the Beat

Hurry Home

Lyrics and music by Bernice Diskin

CD (\$10), tape (\$7), includes shipping and handling.
Order from Bernice Diskin, 23 51st St., Weehawken, NJ
07087-7242

JOHN C. CORT

It's only right that our first music review should be of a jazzy CD and tape by the widow of an old lefty subscriber, Louis Diskin. Bernice Diskin has written both words and music for *Hurry Home*, a collection of left-leaning songs nicely sung by Carla Cook and Cynthia Scott, backed up by a three-piece combo. And Bernice has even designed the tasteful cover.

Despite a fondness for Oscar Peterson, the Swingle Singers, and Jacque Loussier singing Bach, and Don Angle playing pop on the harpsichord, I'm not into the distinctions between basic jazz, swing, rock-and-roll, bebop, R-and-B, reggae, and hard metal. I confess to being turned off by the sound of a man or woman who thinks that whacking a guitar, looking very angry, and screaming at the top of his or her frazzled voice qualifies as music.

But that's not *Hurry Home*, which features some good tunes, radical lyrics, and even a rap entitled "Do You Love Children?" My wife, Helen, and I once joined a street heat picket line for some hospital workers, so I was taken with Bernice's "Street Heat," a portion of which follows:

Nothin' comes from nothin'
Zilch is gonna get you zilch.
Sitten' at home and cussin'
Never moved a politician, no sirree.
They got to see you standin' up
And speaking out, so I repeat
Keepin' mum and playin' dumb
Won't do it, chum,
But you can overcome with

Street heat, jack up your clarity,
Street heat, build solidarity,
Street heat, enhance your personality,
Street heat, yeah

John Cort is a co-editor of Religious Socialism.

No Time for Parties/*continued from page 1*

expected, and forced all the viable candidates (except the terminally misguided Lieberman) to move left in their rhetoric. In a mere six months, despite his own record as a moderate, Dean's radical tone got Dick Gephardt to come closer to calling for single-payer health care than he ever had in his previous 27 years in Congress. It's clearly not necessary to have a third party to move issues one way or another, and it never has been.

At the same time, however, it's understood that a minor party effort can do something similar. Many on the left like to point out that in the 1930s the perceived threat of a successful Socialist Party in the midst of the Depression was at least part of what forced Franklin Roosevelt to move so far to the left that he initiated the New Deal. Many of us have also pointed out

Minor parties, although sometimes able to push the lines of the debate their way, are in the end only doubly frustrated: not only are the popular points of such parties co-opted to whatever extent necessary to achieve victory by the major party — just enough of the point is taken to deflect the appeal of the competing party — but because these voices of change are not inside the major party, the minor party gets nothing for its efforts.

that famous quote by perennial SP presidential candidate Norman Thomas, when he conceded that Roosevelt had carried out parts of his 1932 program, albeit on a stretcher. But then we completely ignore the political reality behind Thomas's complaint, which after six attempts at the presidency made him concede something else as early as 1948: continuing the effort to build a socialist party in the United States was an exercise in futility. Why?

Minor parties, although sometimes able to push the lines of the debate their way, are in the end only doubly frustrated: not only are the popular points of such parties co-opted to whatever extent necessary to achieve victory by the major party — just enough of the point is taken to deflect the appeal of the competing party — but because these voices of change are not inside the major party, the minor party gets nothing for its efforts. It ends up with neither power nor a role in government, but with a miserable vote total that underscores its inability to deliver its ideas.

Co-optation is less ideologically motivated than it is a basic aspect of any human competition, no different from the popular person in the room being given credit for the idea you just came up with after that person has repeated it. Of course that's annoying, and completely unfair, but as far as everyone else is concerned, it's that person's idea now, and that is where the question of who is pushing whom really enters the debate. Minor parties get one chance to push; then they get pushed back, usually into oblivion.

Now no one is under the illusion that rowdy Deaniacs and their miscellaneous leftist allies are going to get all kinds of thanks and rewards from the Democratic Party for reminding its leaders how unimaginative they were at the start of this campaign. That isn't how the game works. But if your argument is that you want to push the debate to the left, even when you know you will be co-opted, how is the presence of third parties that raise issues and fail any better than movements within the Democratic Party (e.g., McCarthy, McGovern, Jackson, Dean) that push just as hard on the same issues, but with the full attention of the media and the masses? What exactly is Nader able to do that Dean, Dennis Kucinich, and even Al Sharpton aren't already doing?

2. Parties give choices to people and allow them to express their own views

Sorry. Power gives choices to people and allows them to express their own views. That is, remember, the purpose for creating a political party: to achieve political power. It's not to have a social club of others who see the world the way you do, and raise your fist in a room full of 30 people who have the best ideas no one has ever heard. People who are suffering want actions and results, not empty promises. There is no great mystery here, just common sense.

Let's look at it through an analogy: if you have been shot in the leg, and you have a choice between a person who has morphine and another person who tells you that it's a horrible injustice that you were shot, which will you choose? Yes, it's only morphine, and you could die if real help doesn't get there soon, but the other person is no doctor, has no surgical tools, and is content to let you suffer while he makes his point about how wrong it was that you were shot in the first place.

Staying with that analogy, the minor party activist has two questions to answer: would he really be willing to forgo the morphine himself, continuing to writhe in pain, and how can he genuinely claim to care about the people he claims to represent if he is so intent on making them suffer for the purity of his ideas? Whose interests are really being served by the uncompromising attitude of the minor party activist? Whose views are really being expressed? These are serious matters, and therefore there is no room in serious politics for dilettantes who seek to serve only their own utopian visions without regard for what helps people here and now.

Asking people who are suffering daily injustices to give their votes, their hopes, and their confidence to you, when you know that you cannot implement the radical policies you offer to improve their lives, is not only wrong-headed but disingenuous. It's selling political snake oil to the working class.

3. Were it not for the prohibitive election laws passed by both Democrats and Republicans in the 1920s, as a reaction to the success of the Socialist Party, we would already have our left party by now

Not necessarily. Let's look at some bland but convincing facts that have nothing to do with anyone conspiring against us. Space does not permit an examination of these facts in detail, but I'll offer them up briefly.

(1) In most cases, the composition of the electoral systems in Western nations has been consistent with one important factor: the time at which suffrage was extended to working-class males. Simply put, despite the flurry of political ideas available to voters over the past century, people are more or less still voting for the broad political groupings that were dominant or politically significant at the time when the majority of working-class males in their nations got the vote. In most European nations where social democratic parties became the mass parties of the left, suffrage occurred after the rise of socialist movements among the working class. In the United States, however, it occurred before the emergence of socialist organizations. As stated above in regard to co-optation, that's less about ideology than it is about sociology, and that's why American voters have never strayed too far from the party formations they had after the Civil War, no matter who else has come along.

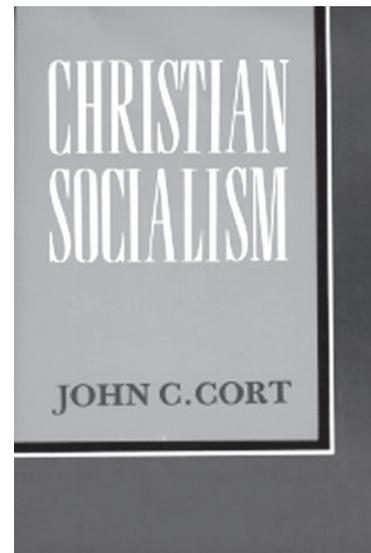
(2) The brief rise and fall of the Socialist Party has taken on mythical proportions for those who go looking for leftist success stories in the United States. Our sense of possibility is piqued anytime the famous story of 1912 is told, when Eugene Debs gained the highest vote total (6 percent) for a socialist party in the United States. Through the blurred lens of nostalgia, some of us get the idea that Debs's accomplishment was the most important political event of that year, and that all we need do is to pick up where he left off, with the same sense of optimism possessed by our ancestral comrades. But the other story of 1912, the one that was the most important political event of the year, and which is never told by the acolytes of Debs, is the story of a former president failing to recapture the White House with his own third party effort. If Teddy Roosevelt, quite possibly the most popular man in the nation in 1912, was unable to succeed in building a third party (his second-place total was 27 percent), what makes those who are all but invisible think they will miraculously achieve success? As for the "success" of the Socialist Party being thwarted by ballot access laws, the use of ballot laws as a political weapon was not new, and ballot laws alone are no impediment to electoral success, as can be seen by the fate of one presidential candidate in particular who was kept

off of a quarter of the state ballots in his election: Abraham Lincoln.

(3) Almost everyone who looks to the history of the Socialist Party for inspiration equally ignores the social history of the United States at that time. The decline of that party has been blamed on all kinds of political events, from the First World War to the Palmer Raids, as well as factional splits and the aforementioned restrictive ballot laws. If only those things had not occurred, we are told, the party would have survived. What people do not seem to notice is that the fate of all socialist movements in the United States can be measured in direct relation to patterns of European immigration. European immigrants may well have come to the United States with nothing more than the shirts on their backs, but in their minds they carried with them the ideas of continental socialism. The rise in support for the socialist political party movements is directly commensurate with the rise of immigration from European nations, which was slowed significantly after 1924 by quotas.

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Once that immigration slowed, so did the vote totals for Socialist candidates. The children of those immigrants, like all children, assimilated to the American worldview and subsequently embraced the dominant political traditions of their new country. Today you will find many people in our large cities who will proudly tell you that their grandparents were socialists. But where are those people politically? If they haven't totally rebelled against their families, they're in the Democratic Party.

The point is that restrictive ballot laws, although used throughout U.S. history as a method of preventing competition, are less significant in explaining why the left has been unable to build a viable social democratic party than the reasons I've mentioned above, not to mention one more: the hostility of American Federation of Labor leader Samuel Gompers to any kind of socialist politics in the labor movement. Even with the doors of ballot access wide open, there is no indication that our side could have overcome all of these social and cultural obstacles to supplant the Democrats in their unintentional ascendancy as the major party of the American working class.

So are you saying that the Democratic Party is our friend?

No. The Democratic Party is not our friend, does not want to be our friend, and actually wants people like us to be as far away from it as possible, forever. A Democratic Party that is already so skittish about using a political term (liberal) that everywhere else in the world does not translate as "left," but as "selfish bastard" is not putting out the welcome mat for socialists. Not a chance. Unfortunately for them, they don't have

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much choice in the matter.

The message here is not that the left should enthusiastically support or naïvely believe the notion that the Democratic Party is our own. The message is that most of the people we want to

Politics is rarely about agreeing with people. It's about getting things done.

work with in order to change this nation use the Democratic Party for their electoral work, and are probably not that much happier about it than we are. However, they realize that it is a pragmatic political vehicle that can allow them to come into contact and join forces with other people who share their issues.

What might be useful in helping us adjust the way we look at the Democratic Party is to substitute the word "movement" for "party." Leftists like movements; we talk about the labor movement, the women's movement, the civil rights movement. Movements historically have been more politically effective in the United States than electoral politics; all of the movements just mentioned operated in environments that were totally (sometimes fatally) hostile to their aims, yet succeeded in winning significant gains from both major parties in a way that minor political parties didn't and never could have, at the same time shifting the entire political landscape on issues such as integration, women's rights, and labor. We are proud to be part of these movements, even though not everyone in them is socialist, and we don't expect them to be.

By the same token, if we think of the Democratic Party as the Democratic Movement, we can conceive of working alongside people whom we may not necessarily agree with on anything but some basic common goals to advance society, until we reach the stage where other issues become more relevant to the debate.

For example, both American Federation of Teachers leader Al Shanker and Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X were part of the civil rights movement, and neither would disown his part in that movement just because of the presence of the other. They would never have been members of the same political party, but they could be, in their own diametrically opposed ways, involved in the same informally defined social movement.

Politics is rarely about agreeing with people. It's about getting things done. One only has the illusion that harmony reigns behind a common political label. Think about the visceral factionalizing that members of marginal left groups engage in with each other, the vast amount of time and energy used up debating tactics that will never be implemented anywhere, which could just as well be spent debating them in an arena where it matters. That arena, with its ready-made constituency of working-class voters, militant union people, and right-wing

social democrats, happens to be the blurry amoeba we historically call, for lack of a better term, the Democratic Party, or, as one might suggest, the Democratic Party Movement.

In case you think I'm playing with semantics, let's go back to the statement at the beginning of this article, that the American political system does not really have political parties. Think of your concept of a political party. It probably has something to do with an organization based on a clearly defined ideology that all members must subscribe to, that will organize an electoral campaign in order to implement policies in the direction of that ideology. That makes perfect sense. Now get hold of yourself and realize that you are in the United States.

50 Democratic Parties

In the two major American political movements that sponsor electoral campaigns, there are almost as many ideologies within them as between them. It is also useful to take note of the fact that the official name of the thing we call the Democratic "Party" is the Democratic National Committee. There is no national organization known as the Democratic Party. There are however, fifty Democratic Parties, and the last thing you will find among them is a common ideology. Within each of those fifty parties, there are interests and points of view as diverse as there are between them. Therefore what you have are not parties as defined in the rest of the world, but amalgamations of general interests that may have nothing whatsoever to do with any ideology other than the business interests of the wealthiest man in town. And that was exactly how the founders of the nation, all wealthy men themselves, wanted it.

In the staunchly federalist United States, political parties are organized at the state, not national level. If they are actual "parties" (not, like most minor "parties" in the United States, just affinity organizations calling themselves parties), they require an enormous amount of attention to legal detail that varies in each state. The reality is that if you're serious about making a political party in this country, you will have to have activists in each state, and those activists will spend less time on the issues of your party than they will filing papers with the state elections board and getting signatures on petitions.

Let's go now to the statement about the Democrats not having much choice in whether they love or hate socialists. By law, recognized parties in the United States must be open to the public. Fully. That means that the moment your minor party gains official recognition, it must be opened to all voters who want to join, even if they have no understanding of your politics or your dues, or have every intention of destroying you by manipulating your mandated open primaries, state conventions, or local meetings. Even the most well-organized group of minor party activists can lose control of their organization overnight, to people who have no other goal but subverting it to their own aims.

So not only is the Democratic Party not your friend, your own minor party might not be either. If you still don't understand what a rude wake-up call this is for the idealistic third party

activist, ask any former member of the Reform Party.

The only successful "third party" in U.S. history is the Republican Party, created from the remains of the Whig Party and some other groups, almost completely by people who were already in positions of power or influence.

What's the moral of the story? That if the fight is on, no matter what we do, why should we spend years of our lives fighting to create and then defend infinitesimally small parties, when we could be fighting to influence and use our local Democratic Party committees, which must operate by the same open rules? For generations, American leftists have waged bitterly intense battles within their organizations to gain control of what is, quite honestly, nothing. If you're going to fight so hard for control of something, shouldn't it be something that is of significant political value?

But aren't the Democrats hopelessly controlled by the DLC (Democratic Leadership Council)?

And groups on the left are never controlled by tightly organized cliques who protect their own dogged vision of the organization, right?

Two things are important in looking at the DLC. In all the chaos over who won the popular vote in 2000, a tiny fact got lost: Bill Clinton never won a majority of the popular vote either. Al Gore, after defying the DLC and going for a more populist tone in his campaign, won three million more votes than Clinton at his high point in 1996.

The Clinton Era, the glory days of the DLC, saw the greatest defection of Democratic elected officials in the party since the Dixiecrats. Democratic members of Congress were so impressed by the "New Democrat" strategy of moving to the center that they either joined the Republican Party or left Congress, figuring that if people wanted to vote for conservatives, they would just vote Republican. They did. The Congress has never recovered from the so-called "Republican landslide" of 1994.

Seen in this light, the record of the DLC has been (in the words of one of its founders, Dick Gephardt), a "miserable failure," literally sucking the life out of the Democratic Party. Last year, the Dean movement proved that they are vulnerable. If you're an activist who prides yourself on not sitting back when injustices are being committed; if you are the person in meetings who is always ready to question and debate the leadership of your own organization, the next question is for you: If you

don't like the DLC's control of the Democratic Party, what are you doing to stop it?

So we're supposed to just give up on electoral democracy?

No. The question here is not one of goals but tactics, priorities rather than principles. This country sorely needs drastic reform of its electoral laws, which would naturally include abolition of the Electoral College; proportional representation under a parliamentary system; and campaign finance reform, among

John Keil, 1911-2003, R.I.P.

John August Keil carried on Methodist traditions of singing sacred music, including praises of justice and protests against unfairness of any kind. In his family of origin in the Bronx, with five children, the kitchen was the scene of discussions of every subject, from politics to philosophy to medicine and religion.

John joined the Young People's Socialist League in 1930 and was a member of the Socialist Party for decades, in 1972 helping to form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee led by Michael Harrington. He served on the Executive Board of the Boston Democratic Socialists of America in the 1990s. John was proud to be an associate of "Julie" Bernstein and attended the Socialist Scholars Conference in New York many times. His unfinished work includes research on the origin and usages of the word "socialism."

In the 1950s John and his wife, Elizabeth Morgan Keil, were among the founders of the civil-rights group the Needham Fair Housing Practices Committee, and continued their civil-rights activity in the 1960s and 1970s. John loved to sing and was a member of the choir at the First Parish Church in Needham from the 1950s through the 1990s.

John Keil's special lifelong interests included ethics, nutrition, psychology, humor, sea stories, chess, the novels of Upton Sinclair, and the Spanish and Chinese languages and cultures. He worked as a linotype operator, engine maintainer in the Merchant Marine, infantryman in World War II, recreational therapist at Boston State Hospital and Fernald School, and staff coordinator at the Boston Children's Museum.

ED. NOTE: This little bio was written by John's son David, who is a leader of Boston DSA. John was one of the first and most loyal members of the R&S Commission. May he rest in peace.

other things. But we cannot just close our eyes to more than 200 years of American political precedent and wish ourselves into electoral transformation.

Those who insist that we can will have to provide a precise argument as to how they will succeed, revealing at the same time what new trick they have up their sleeve that has not already been tried by more than 100 minor party organizations in less than 200 years. They are also obliged to convince us why we should put so much of our already scarce resources into working on a strategy with such a poor track record.

At some point an alternate party may well develop. But even that possibility historically brings us to the same conclusion of this article. The only successful "third party" in U.S. history is the Republican Party, created from the remains of the Whig Party and some other groups, almost completely by people who were already in positions of power or influence. That gives weight to the idea that if there ever is to be a decidedly left party in American politics, it will not come from grassroots activists in the streets, but from elected officials in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. And that would make a sustained left presence in that party all the more urgent.

I've not made the argument here that the Democratic Party is a wonderful institution, ready and waiting for us to "realign" it. I have only made the argument that it is a useful one, far more connected to working-class people than any other electoral options we have, which have been proven time and again to be futile and self-marginalizing. And that argument is part of the larger argument that we should see that institution as a broad movement, where we can argue for our positions on issues that take priority over the way in which our government is elected.

I believe in the same things I have always believed in: public ownership of the industries of need (health care, education, energy, etc.) with support for co-operatives, as well as the freedom for individuals to go into business for themselves. But I also believe politics is not a religion, and that just having those beliefs is not enough. Therefore I have chosen to engage other people in promoting those beliefs, in a place where it is likely to have some effect beyond myself or those who agree with me. I am not prepared to wait for the electoral system I want before I endeavor to get those things from the existing system that we have.

Andrew Hammer is an editor of RS. In 1995 he was a leading figure in the trans-party organization Third Parties '96, which eventually helped launch the first Nader campaign. He is also general secretary of the International League of Religious Socialists, an affiliate of the Socialist International. It has over 200,000 members in 21 countries and includes the R&S Commission.



Overlooked and Tireless Efforts

*Divine Agitators:
The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights
in Mississippi*

By Mark Newman
The University of Georgia Press, 2004

A.J. SCOPINO, JR.

In *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi*, Mark Newman has provided a history of the accomplishments and failures of what by 1967 had become the largest civil rights organization in the South. Newman writes that the mission of Delta Ministry, one that was variegated, confrontational, and devoted to helping the most impoverished residents in the Delta region, has been overlooked.



Despite its ambitious record in initiating new ministries, the National Council of Churches (NCC) was a latecomer in the field of civil rights. Nonetheless, in 1964, the NCC created the Commission on Religion and Race, which sponsored the Delta Ministry, a ten-year mission designed to bring relief to the region through education, community organization, voter registration, and other self-help programs.

In the words of Harvey Cox, then a professor of religion at Andover Newton Theological Seminary and early supporter of the Delta Ministry, engagement for justice in this world involved a "commitment to doing." Charged with this pro-active posture, the Delta Ministry survived long past the initial ten-year period and challenged some of the most entrenched elements of racial animosity in the nation.

Founded in October of 1964 with a meager budget of \$73,760, the Ministry poured energy and resources into pre-school education, poor relief, community building, citizenship and voter education. Two years later, the Ministry helped to relocate ninety-four African Americans to 400 acres of land southeast of Greenville, Mississippi. Displaced by agricultural mechanization and herbicide use, their new home, Freedom City, was

modeled after Israel's *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* where people owned the land but farmed collectively. Ministry staff had hoped Freedom City would be a viable alternative for blacks migrating to northern ghettos. Under the guidance of Delta Ministry, residents would receive vocational training, oversee the construction of their own housing, and establish an agricultural and industrial cooperative.

Freedom City was to provide African Americans the opportunity to establish economic independence for the first time in their lives. The Ford Foundation kicked in for the building materials, and further support came from an Office of Economic Opportunity grant of \$199,000. The Episcopal and Methodist churches allocated additional monies, and ground-breaking ceremonies commenced on May 31, 1968.

Preparing Black Leaders

Mounting financial problems between 1968-1971 compelled the Ministry to politicize its issues and groom an indigenous black leadership. This undertaking could not have come at a better time as civil rights groups such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had begun to shift attention away from Mississippi to engage in work elsewhere. Evolving out of the citizenship program and supported by grants from the Highlander Research and Education Center and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the Ministry offered workshops to candidates seeking political office. Further assistance was made to the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Northern Mississippi Rural Legal Services agency.

Yet, despite its numerous relief and educational programs, its efforts to increase voter registration, and its training of blacks for political participation, the Delta Ministry experienced setbacks during the more conservative 1970s. Perhaps the most consistent problem encountered was the hostility of Mississippi whites. From the beginning, contributing white member churches of the NCC attempted to starve the Ministry by cur-tailing or withholding funds.

Some white Mississippians who bravely ventured forth to assist in the Ministry's efforts were often threatened or ostracized from society. Even moderates like Episcopal Bishop John Allin and newspaper editors Hodding Carter II and III, who supported social reform, adamantly rejected the Ministry's direct action techniques, which they felt only worsened race relations. Accordingly, they supported more gradual or evolutionary strategies to cultivate interracial understanding.

Furthermore, many whites expressed little patience with what they perceived to be the Ministry's failure or unwillingness to work with more middle-class organizations, in particular the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Middle-class, gradualist, and non-confrontational, the Mississippi branch of the NAACP contrasted sharply with the Ministry's "priority to the poor," which, in the minds of some, raised the specter of class warfare. Identification with the poor and dispossessed not only polarized blacks and moderate whites, but also brought charges from the latter that the Minis-

try was "separatist" and "self-righteous."

The lack of funding, moreover, shadowed the Ministry from the beginning. In the first years of operation, the Delta Ministry would not have survived had it not been for the timely contributions from the World Council of Churches (WCC). Funding from member denominations of the NCC was often slow in coming or re-channeled. During the 1970s significant federal and other aid also dried up. It is a remarkable achievement that so many Ministry programs were undertaken and existed as long as they did under such financial restraints.

If white hostility and underfunding were constant sources of difficulty, the lack of support from the state's African American community was a third obstacle to the Ministry's success. While Mississippi blacks supported the principles upon which the Delta Ministry was founded, the state's black churches contributed nothing to the organization during its first two years in operation. In November of 1967 the African Methodist Episcopal Church became the first black denomination to offer significant aid, in the amount of \$5,000, for the distribution of food and food stamps. By and large, however, the fear of white retaliation and unfamiliarity with grassroots organizing prevented many blacks from advancing the Ministry's programs.

Finally, in 1969, the Delta Ministry endorsed the "Black Manifesto," with its demand for 500 million dollars from white churches. The Ministry's part in planning the deliberations of the National Black Economic Development Conference, and its alliance with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, drew the ire of many who concluded that the Delta Ministry had embraced radicalism.

Although the Ministry had implemented so many different programs on behalf of the Delta's black population, Newman concludes that the region continued to suffer enormously. De facto

segregation replaced de jure segregation. Whites continued to control the Delta's economic and political life. Social interaction never went beyond the minimal. Adult illiteracy and unemployment rates for the region's black population remained high. Poverty, infant mortality, and inferior schools continued to characterize the region after thirty-five years of tireless effort on the part of the Delta Ministry.

Yet, the Ministry's accomplishments should not be overlooked. It established a positive voice for the poor in one of the nation's most neglected regions. For the first time a significant number of African Americans participated in the political process through voter registration. A smaller number of blacks assumed leadership roles and served in public office. Improved education and health care were introduced. In its commitment to a "servant ministry," the organization fought battles on many fronts. That it survived for as long as it did is testimony to the determination of the Delta Ministry's staff and volunteers.

Reading Newman's account, one is reminded of a parallel event in American history. During Reconstruction (1865-1877), the federal government founded the Freedmen's Bureau, an agency designed to cushion the transition of former slaves from bondage to freedom. The resources allocated to drive this organization were withdrawn in less than five years. Virtually abandoned, the Freedmen survived through sheer resiliency. One hundred years later, that same resiliency was again demonstrated by members of a similar organization in their struggle to bring relief to the Mississippi Delta. A good read, Mark Newman's *Divine Agitators*, is a spirited account of human resolve.

A. J. Scopino, Jr., is a member of the History Department at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, Connecticut. He is the author of Healing the Brokenness: A Centennial Portrait of the Capitol Region Conference of Churches, 1900-2000, (West Hartford, 2000) and is a frequent contributor to Religious Studies Review.



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LETTERS

JOHN XXIII ANSWERS JOHN CORT

To the Editors:

With John Cort's critique of *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, and Gary Dorrien's response, I found the Winter 2004 issue of *Religious Socialism* to be one of the most interesting I have read in recent times.

I wonder if the reviewer is having an internal discourse so characteristic of believers who time and again try desperately to reinforce their truth. But the pursuit reinforces Dorrien's and liberalism's contention. That is,

In the final analysis the individual must decide. The individual has to live with that, or find another poetic rendition which can offer surcease or a source of inspiration. The individual may be wrong about facts, or incorrect about the meaning of myths, but having turned to other external sources to reinforce his/her truth, one has turned to other external sources to reinforce his/her truth, one has turned to another individual, or to the collective wisdom (sic) of individuals.

Did Angelo Roncali have private conversations with a transcendent source because he occupied a particular position and was raised to the position of pope?

Theodore A. Webb
Sacramento, CA

Rev. Theodore Webb is a Unitarian Universalist minister.

ALASKANS FOR KUCINICH

To the Editors:

Thanks in part to our DSA activity Kucinich got a majority of national convention delegates in both Juneau and Fairbanks and if he had not become ill would probably have gotten a majority for Alaska as a whole.

Listening to Dennis speak made me feel I was hearing Norman Thomas and Mike Harrington again . . . The Kucinich folks want Dennis to address the convention and to have a say about the platform, but will vote for Kerry on election day.

The religious left in Alaska — Quaker, Catholic, Unitarian, Methodist, etc. — turned out in force for the Kucinich and district convention meetings, plus Peace and Justice, No Nukes North, and others. Here in Fairbanks we've had an anti-war rally every Saturday noon since Bush started it.

I worry that the privatization blueprints of Bush and company imply a return to feudalism, with corporations assuming the role of principalities, grand duchies, and the like, with CEO's and other

corporate hierarchies exercising the powers and roles of the petty kings, princes, and grand dukes of the past. Bush himself, of course, will exercise the role and powers of emperor. Doing away with the estate tax speeds up the process and strengthens hereditary dynasties already established. Meanwhile, carefully stacked legislatures and carefully appointed courts distribute grants of power and titles of "Economic Nobility" lavishly to the comfortable and well endowed. The "Good Old Days" indeed. Now we know what they mean by "Conservative"!

Onward!

Niilo Koponen
Fairbanks, AK

ED. NOTE: Niilo served ten years in the Alaska House of Representatives. He is one of the first, oldest, and most generous of RS supporters

IN DEFENSE OF FOSDICK AND TILlich

To the Editors:

Thanks for the give and take between John Cort and Gary Dorrien on American liberal theology. It raises the old question about theology, "But will it preach?" Of course, no one should give theological lectures in the name of preaching, but the theology that informs preaching is always just out of sight of the listeners. About 45 years ago I received a gift of seven volumes of sermons by Harry Emerson Fosdick. They have remained an inspiration, by his use of the Bible, his ability to touch the heart and mind of people in spiritual need, and his challenge to address the social and economic issues of his time, the '30s and '40s. Being an ex-fundamentalist, I found in Fosdick someone who could fill the void left by the departure of that demon, and open for me the way to spiritual, as well as academic, renewal.

A second life-changing experience was the encounter with Paul Tillich's thought that led me to take seriously a theology of culture. But would it preach? In addition to study of his three-volume *Systematic Theology* and numerous other books, I have three volumes of his sermons, all of which address the issues of life with the gospel.

The connection made by these two scholars and preachers between theology and proclaiming the gospel in word and deed has remained for me the theology behind my formal preaching, as well as peace activism since the '60s, and stands for social justice. While we debate theology, let's take a look at how our theology, of whatever kind, informs us, and what it inspires us to be and do.

Recently I was invited to give two lectures on "Fundamentalism" at a Lutheran Church (ELCA). To distinguish fundamentalists from liberals, I said the former claim that whatever God says is true. The latter claim that whatever proves to be true must be what God is saying. That spirit of openness to the truth, wherever it leads, lies at the heart of liberal thought. It is for me a basic statement of faith, that God and Truth are One.

Rev. Gene Birmingham
Retired clergy, United Church of Christ
Secretary, Chicago DSA

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