

Welcome to the one-party state

By Sheldon Rampton & John Stauber
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One of the biggest mistakes made by the Democratic Party during the recent election is that, once again, it “misunderestimated” George W. Bush.

Rather than focusing on the big picture – the growing power of the conservative movement in the United States – much of the liberal rhetoric during the campaign focused on Bush’s incompetence, his character flaws and the failings of his administration. These themes found expression in books with titles such as “The Lies of George W. Bush,” the “I Hate Bush Reader” and the “Bush Hater’s Handbook.” In “Fahrenheit: 9/11,” Michael Moore dwelt on Bush’s rich-kid background, his frequent vacations, his Saudi connections and the frozen, deer-in-the-headlights way he continued reading “My Pet Goat” to schoolchildren after he first heard about the attacks on the World Trade Center towers.

The implicit message was that Bush was a uniquely flawed individual and that literally “anybody but Bush” would be an improvement. The flaw in this argument is that it really isn’t true. The problem with George W. Bush is that he isn’t unique. He sits atop a political movement that has been building for 30 years. In 2002, the Republican Party won majority control of every branch of the federal government for the first time since 1932: both houses of Congress, the U.S. Supreme Court, the Presidency – not to mention most state legislatures and governor’s offices. The 2004 elections didn’t just give Bush four more years. It also consolidated Republican majorities in every other branch of government.

Our own contribution to the sea of election-year books was titled “Banana Republicans: How the Right Wing is Turning America into a One Party State.” Rather than Bush-bashing, we looked at how conservatives have succeeded in building a dominant political juggernaut. The reality, which progressives need to face if they wish to turn the tide, is that the right wing has simply done a better

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job than anyone else of organizing from the grassroots up. This isn't because their ideas are more popular or palatable – they aren't – but because the right has been serious and strategic in its commitment to winning and wielding power.

Republican successes have not come quickly or easily. For more than four decades, conservatives have worked to build a network of grassroots organizations and think tanks that formulate and promote their ideas. They are now enjoying the fruits of this long-term investment. Unhappy with what they regard as the “liberal bias” of the news media, they have attacked from both the outside and the inside, building their own, unabashedly conservative media such as Fox News and talk radio at the same time that they have systematically set about promoting the careers of conservatives within the mainstream media. They have built ideological alliances between industry, government and regulatory agencies. And although entertainers like Barbra Streisand or Martin Sheen may be more liberal than the leading figures in, say, the tobacco or construction industries, Republicans have been more effective than Democrats at capitalizing on the ways entertainment has transformed politics – last year's election of Arnold Schwarzenegger being a case in point.

Conservatives have also understood that politics involves more than dominating the news cycle or influencing public opinion, and they have not hesitated to use hardball tactics in pursuit of power. Blacks and other minorities consistently vote Democratic, so conservatives have developed techniques for suppressing voter turnout or have used old-fashioned gerrymandering to effectively marginalize minority votes. What progressives are facing, in short, is a sophisticated, many-faceted strategy.

The good news for progressives during the 2004 election is that they showed more vigor than we have seen in a long time. During the Democratic primary, the Howard Dean campaign pioneered successful new methods of grassroots fundraising. Air America proved that liberal talk radio could compete with conservative talk radio, while the MoveOn.org Voter Education Fund and other 527 organizations showed that Democrats could use the internet successfully to raise funds, disseminate their message, and mobilize grassroots activism.

The outstanding question, however, is whether this flurry of election-year activism will translate into a longer-term commitment to building institutions and movements that can successfully challenge the right's dominance. Conservatives understand very well that elections are only one aspect of a successful organizing strategy. They are already hard at work planning campaigns for the 2006 elections

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and beyond. Before progressives can seriously hope to turn the tide, they will need to show similar foresight and discipline.

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