

Tecumseh's Fist

Towards a politics of transformation in the US: the 2008 elections and beyond



A discussion of tactical and strategic options for US movement building, including Progressives for Obama, the McKinney/Clemente campaign and non-profit activism.

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Introduction: Tecumseh's fist

The visionary Shawnee leader Tecumseh crisscrossed the North American woods and plains in the first decade of the nineteenth century, attempting to build a united front of tribes to contain the encroaching white settler state aggressively expanding from the east. In some of his speeches Tecumseh likened the tribes to the fingers of a hand, weak individually but powerful if united into a fist. This was not just a truism. The United States was achieving success by striking deals with individual nations, sometimes negotiating with individuals not authorized to represent their people. Tecumseh based his appeal on two strategic premises. The first was a concept of pan-Indianism: that the interests of the Native nations fundamentally contradicted those of the US. To many native leaders the White nation was a powerful player with whom temporary alliance could be made to bolster their positions against other tribes. Tecumseh argued that the nature of US expansionism called for a solidarity among native nations that would be strategic, that must supersede any conflicts among themselves and must not be compromised for any temporary advantage. His vision called for a unified native nation stretching from north to south across the continent, blocking the western flank of the settler state. Within those lands the tribes would retain their autonomy, adjusting their fluid relationship to the land as they always had, according to their changing needs. His second premise was that the strategic terrain as a whole was shifting as the new nation grew in appetite and capacity and that unity would have to develop quickly before the opportunity be lost forever. Making accommodations with the US Americans would not provide real security; it would only enable their divide and conquer strategy.

Tecumseh's task remains unfinished. It would be seven generations before his vision of inter-tribal pan-Indian unity would materialize with the founding of the American Indian Movement, the International Indian Treaty Council and related entities. The new pan-Indianism that emerged then was closely linked to other people's struggles both internal and external to what by then had become a global empire: struggles for racial justice, political independence and national liberation, and their multiplying ripples, calling for an end to the many and varied forms of oppression and exploitation.

We live in the aftermath of that upsurge of struggle in the respect that both imperial strategy and movement possibility are still shaped with reference to that conflict and the methods that were used to repress and contain it. At the same time, although no one saw it then, the cresting of those movements coincided with the beginning of the historical decline of US power, another factor playing significantly in today's calculus.

The strategic paradigm of Tecumseh's day is pertinent today. The US political system offers shrinking but nonetheless tempting opportunities for constituencies to strike illusory individual bargains with the empire in exchange for not challenging its essential legitimacy or its international agenda. At the same time, changes in the larger environment, particularly global warming and financial instability, threaten the wellbeing and survival of the human family and many of its relatives and shortens the necessary

timeframe for making fundamental societal changes.

The 2008 election brings these dilemmas into play. Unfortunately the debates surrounding Left options in the elections fall far short of what the times call for. Strategic thinking requires that our choices be framed in light of the largest possible landscape and our deepest and most powerful vision for our peoples future. It must encompass an assessment of our strengths and weaknesses and those of the forces we confront.

People on the Left¹ participate in elections for one reason; to further our efforts to pose a viable challenge to the present system of power. This is achieved by one of three courses of action, which are debated in different terms at each election cycle. They are 1) to buy time by tipping the election in favor of the least destructive sector of the elite so that we have the space within which to organize for deeper change or 2) to directly build an independent political force able to explicitly articulate and construct an alternative vision for the future or 3) to boycott the elections to either argue that they are not a legitimately democratic venue or that they do not offer opportunities for movement advancement under the specific circumstances of a particular election.

We will engage with the first two options since boycott is not being advocated as an organizing strategy at present. Both of these offer compelling advantages and both have measurable downsides. The answer to the dilemma they represent is neither self-evident (as too many current activists seem to think) nor eternally applicable. Each must be measured in the context of the configuration of forces that we face and in terms of our long term strategy for change. Put in that way it should not take the reader many moments to realize that we in fact have no such strategy. Addressing that failing must therefore be the first order of business for any serious discussion of election options. That is the core agenda of this paper.

Arabica coffee ripens unevenly on the tree. You must therefore pick selectively, choosing the ripe, red berries and leaving the green ones to ripen. If you know there is a hurricane coming, however, your strategy must change. You pick all the coffee at once, green and red, even though it will bring a lower price. The alternative would be to lose the entire crop in the storm. The point here is that what determines the farmer's strategy is not a close examination of the berries on the branch -- they look identical under either scenario -- but an understanding of larger forces at work, the laws of motion of weather and markets.

This document will assess the election season in the context of these larger weather patterns. This means surveying processes at work in the global environmental and economic systems as they impact on the policy choices facing humanity. We will check on how the US political system fits into these larger systems and how Barak Obama has positioned himself within it. We will develop a framework for thinking about transformative political change and long-term movement building as a backdrop for assessing how our election choices might complement or distract from such a strategy. The central motivation for this analysis is to promote a higher standard for strategic debate in the service of social change. Our inability to collectively chart a course -- or

even envision one -- that will really change the direction of political history is our great weakness. Overcoming that weakness will require a level of creative, collective analysis that has for the most part eluded us.

I believe that there is more--and in many ways smarter-- organizing taking place today than at the height of the mass movements of the 1960s and 70s. It has not made us more powerful. We suffer from tactical brilliance and strategic paralysis. It's as though our response to Tecumseh's challenge was to continually grow more fingers until our hands resemble a writhing sea anemone but we are no closer to knowing how to close our fist. I contend that our inability to close our hand into a unified force for meaningful change is not accidental. It is the product of our history, specifically the way in which repression and cooptation were wielded to disable the mass social movements that shook the land between thirty and forty years ago. It has left us with movement structures and practices guaranteed to permit us to ask only small questions which can lead to only limited victories.

An implication of this is that the key to building a powerful opposition movement in the US does not revolve around us "working harder," "redoubling our efforts" or any other forlorn clichés of despair. We need, rather, to understand our sources of power and direct them at the system's points of vulnerability. It is a question of having the capacity, as a movement, to think and act strategically.

The US Social Forum proposed that "Another World is Possible: Another US is necessary." We are here to discuss how to make it practical.

Interviewing a captain

In the 1970s, as US urban centers crumbled in the face of federal de-funding of services and white flight, Black politicians were given the green light to walk into mayoral offices and take over management of the wreckage. Like a car stripped of all its accessories before the new owners get the keys, wielding urban executive power amounted to less than had been hoped for by those who had struggled hard to make such an achievement possible. The mayors discovered that the job had been downsized to one of administering neo-liberal policies handed down from above. The new managers had to enforce these policies and take the heat for the declining quality of life and unfulfilled promises.

Today we are witnessing the dramatic collapse of US economic power and military credibility in the world. It is the acceleration of a process begun more than thirty five years ago when Viet Nam was in the headlines. It is not the product of one rogue administration. The brutal recklessness of the Bush presidency has just been one desperate strategy to reverse this slide.

The response on the part of the corporate elite (yes, Virginia, there *is* a ruling class!) has been to unite around a regressive program that seeks to slow or reverse that decline. The 2008 elections, from their viewpoint, are to select a CEO who is 1) capable of carrying out this elite agenda in a competent manner while 2) legitimizing it in the eyes of the domestic and international constituencies who will pay the price. These two requirements for the job are of equal importance: whoever is selected must be able to sell a restricted,

predetermined program to the public and the world and must unfailingly be willing to carry it out.

On the global stage the next president will direct the state's power and influence to shore up a fragile economic position. Of particular importance is securing geopolitical control over the flow of oil and gas that the entire world depends on and re-enforcing the place of the US dollar as the currency in which it is traded. The president must also use whatever diplomacy, manipulation or force is necessary to prevent governments in the formerly colonized world from getting confused enough to think that their abundant natural resources were put there for their own benefit. In elite foreign policy circles, securing control over foreign resources and labor is considered to be a legitimate -- and essential -- component of national self defense.

Domestic policy is constrained by the short-sighted gluttony of the corporate class which demands accelerated plunder of the public sector, massive shifts of investment into the military and elimination of its own tax burden. The resulting demolition of public investment necessitates expanded police powers and capacity, to deal with both the political and the criminal fallout of such policies. Of particular concern is the demographic time bomb: the growth in the combined numbers of peoples of color to the point of being a majority of the population within a few decades. The potential instability of a white elite governing an increasingly dark and impoverished people has brought about a dual strategy of population management: the exponential expansion of a color-coded penal system to bring the African American population substantially under the control of the criminal justice system (the current incarnation of yesterday's Jim Crow system and the Black Laws); and the restructuring of immigration policy to replace the vast undocumented workforce with a documented but tightly monitored labor pool with limited legal rights, subject to unchallengeable employer control. In other words, a New Domestic Order is under construction that straps the two populations who for historical and demographic reasons are most capable of mounting a major political challenge, into a straightjacket of legal vulnerability.

I suggest that the above summary represents non-negotiable elements of the elite agenda. Any campaign rhetoric that challenges that agenda is only that: campaign rhetoric. From that perspective no one should have been surprised that Obama's passionate calls to renegotiate Free Trade treaties would be jettisoned as soon as he had bested Hilary Clinton for the Democratic nomination. A US president does not tinker with elite consensus.

This harsh assessment sheds light on why Barak Obama and Hilary Clinton were anointed by the media as the first "serious" or "viable" Black and female candidates respectively for the presidency. They are the first deemed acceptable to Wall Street and their policy think tanks. This opens the floodgates of financial contributions and green-lights sympathetic media coverage. That such candidates as Shirley Chisolm or Jesse Jackson are judged to have been not "serious" reflects that their programs were in conflict rather than in harmony with the requirements of corporatist policy. They also based their campaigning on appeals to activist social bases that were viewed with alarm by the

guardians of power.

Being president of the United States in the current period is like being captain of a NASA space ship. It requires the ability to make cool decisions under pressure, manage human relations among the crew and have the technical know-how to assure a successful mission. The mission goals, however, are not in question, the navigation coordinates have been pre-programmed, the rations carefully measured and the chain of command firmly established (the captain, by the way, is not at the top of it). Some applicants for the job may be more able than others to carry out these duties, but the goals of the mission are not theirs to mess around with. What's important in an election is for each candidate to convince the voters that choosing him or her will assure that the mission actually serves their interests.

When there is significant discord among factions of the wealthy elite, the political parties square off behind different policies and may engage in real debate. This is not one of those times. Where there is room for difference -- corporations are divided on strategies for health care reform, for example, and they are indifferent on social issues such as Gay marriage or abortion -- the difference between the parties can have real impacts on people's lives. The overall direction of imperial policy, however -- regardless of who is elected -- can be better gleaned from the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal or the reports of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Rand Corporation than from the campaign trail positions of the candidates.

The Dime of Difference: What's it Worth?

Critics of "lesser evil" politics (voting for liberals to forestall conservative victories) often assert that there's no more than "a dime's worth of difference" between the Republican and Democratic parties. This claim has two implications. First, that the difference between the parties is small and not fundamental. Second, that there is, nonetheless, some difference.

This dime's worth of difference has different meanings at different times and at different locations in the economic and racial social structure. If you are part of a vulnerable community, that dime can have a large impact. Minor changes in school, park or library funding, in laws regarding truancy or street lighting, in decisions over zoning proposals or clinic or hospital locations can impact your quality and even length of life. A slight degree of protection is not something you give up lightly in a harsh environment. Independent political parties can speak the community's truth but cannot offer even limited protection. This means that communities of the poor and of color are reluctant to break with the mainstream menu until alternative political organizing looks more like a locus of power, not just a forum for opinion. Supporting a radical party may not result in victory for a Republican but can still alienate you from a Democratic incumbent who has significant influence in your community.

If both parties are tied to the same elite then+ its interests will generally trump grassroots ones when they conflict. The difference between the parties will tend to increase during times of popular upsurge. The liberal establishment moves toward the left to absorb

people's discontent back into safe channels. At a time like the present, when mass movements are not beating on the doors of power, the liberals have little incentive or ability to made substantive promises to their left. The necessary resources are not being put on the table by the ruling elite in any case.

The strategic dilemma is that both parties are moving toward the right in response to larger shifts in the global balance of power. It's as if the Republicans were driving our national vehicle in the wrong direction at 65 miles per hour while the Democrats promise to go at only 55. By the next election the Republicans have brought the speed up to 75mph and the Dems come in at a moderate 65. Pretty soon we're headed for a precipice at 100 mph but have the option of voting for Democratic candidates who promise to slow it to 80.

Bush II demonstrated that even if the parties serve the same masters, their differences in strategy can have a significant impact. The reckless militarism and repressive measures, while implemented with Democratic support, would not likely have been as aggressive under their direction.

Still, the problem remains that if our attention is always riveted on that dime, will it ever be possible to break away and develop a vehicle that can genuinely take us where we want to go? There will always be the fear of nastier Supreme Court nominations and more regressive social policies if we let the wrong party in. On the other hand if we choose to forfeit the dime in hopes of long-term benefits, we must be able to make the case that the short-term price is worth it and that the eventual benefit will be real.

The Obama balancing act

Here we move in close to the branch to examine the Obama phenomenon. The following exposition of Obama's career and politics will disappoint his fans. It will not resolve the strategic question of how to direct our votes and support. That should be decided based on broader strategic considerations. But it should put to rest any lingering fantasies that Obama is a covert revolutionary waiting only to enter the White House to unveil a program of radical change. The hopes and expectations awakened by the campaign are themselves important to assess but they are a separate issue and will be dealt with as such further on.

Objects in mirror are closer than they appear

People make choices based on what story we believe ourselves to be part of. The battle to define that story underpins all organizing, of whatever political stripe. Efforts to control publishing, access to airwaves and education are all point to the importance of controlling perceptions, which in turn rests upon understandings of history.

Simply put, most conflict in the world -- however it is dressed up -- is about people trying to take stuff that other people have. This is the back-story of the modern era. The greatest narrative chasm in today's world has to do with the colonial era which began at the time of Columbus and continues to define global politics. The European nations, bristling with weaponry from their incessant in-fighting, extended their control across the world to

encompass 90% of Africa, 98% of Polynesia, over half of Asia, all of Australia and, ultimately, all of the Americas. Natural resources were loaded onto ships and transferred to the conquering nations to fuel development there, farmers were forced to plant what the masters demanded, racially determined systems of governance were implanted and outright slavery and human trafficking instituted where profitable. Resistance to these measures was met with massive, usually collective (and sometimes genocidal) applications of violence. The memories of that process shape the ideologies and loyalties of people around the world today.

In the colonized nations this history is remembered as one of conquest and resistance. The loss of resources and population, the indignities of foreign occupations and the dictatorships which followed, loom large in national memories. The powerful nations nurture a self-image of paternalistic generosity: their relationship to their dominated territories is told as one of bemused concern and affection. Resistance can be explained by either misguided ingratitude, ingrained hostility to progress or the manipulations of sinister outside forces. The persistence of poverty and hunger are seen as evidence of the inability of the darker nations to show the competence and responsibility modeled by their more mature elder siblings.

In the aftermath of WWII the US emerged as the dominant world power and set about rebuilding the shattered economies of Europe and Japan. The war had also raged across vast regions of Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Leaders of these nations called for an expanded Marshall Plan (the US program that pumped \$13 billion into Europe to rebuild the colonial heartland) to help them consolidate the independence they felt they had earned.² Instead, the US backed a brutal program of re-conquest. US munitions reigned down in Indochina, Mozambique, Indonesia, Yemen, Algeria, and covert operatives fanned out across the globe to undermine any efforts to break the colonial yoke. Although it was always framed in Cold War rhetoric, the largest CIA “regime changes” were directed against liberal -- even anti-communist -- governments (Mossadech in Iran, Sukarno in Indonesia, Arbenz in Guatemala) who had dared to launch programs of national development. Their efforts toward self sufficiency and an increased social wage restricted corporate access to their national wealth and had to be dealt with.

The colonial divide cuts a deep chasm through the human family. It underlies the gap that separates those who see foreign interventions, racism, economic opportunity and policing from above from those who experience them from below.

Imperial foreign policy requires a sanitized history. To achieve viability a candidate must declare loyalty to the colonial narrative in order to prove that he or she will not undermine the empire’s interests on the global or domestic stage. Anyone who articulates the view of the colonized (as the Rev. Jeremiah Wright inconveniently did) must be sidelined as the crazy uncle in the attic or, ultimately, denounced as a purveyor of “hate speech” and a comforter of the nation’s enemies.

These stories underlie opposing agendas. Acceptance of the colonialist account is essential for the justification of interventionist foreign policies and racist domestic ones.

The second narrative underpins efforts throughout the world to weaken the grip of the colonial power centers (now morphed into the “G8” nations).

Policy man

It is no surprise that a US Senator with aspirations for the presidency will champion the colonial worldview. To Obama, the US has always been “a nation that is still the beacon for all that is good and all that is possible for humankind.” The nation’s history was an idyllic one:

“We did not have to go through any of the violent upheavals that Europe was forced to endure as it shed its feudal past. Our passage from an agricultural to an industrial society was eased by the sheer size of the continent, vast tracts of land and abundant resources that allowed new immigrants to continually remake themselves.”³

The civil war, an important historical marker in that transition, the brutal system of slavery which that war formally ended, the centuries of crop burnings, forced marches and village massacres which secured those “vast tracts.” These have no place in the colonialist memory.

Once committed to this perspective, one can criticize the handling of imperial policy but not its rationale. The old speech that is the basis for Obama’s anti-war credentials fits that mold.⁴ He now proposes a withdrawal of “combat troops” from Iraq while leaving sufficient forces to train the Iraqi army, protect the ongoing construction of a massive regional control center (euphemistically called an “embassy”), and engage in “counter-terror” operations. This could leave 60-80,000 military personnel in Iraq after “withdrawal.” This is in addition to powerful private mercenary forces (numbering 180,000) which he now insists must be an instrument at the disposal of the president.

The Senator reserves his right as president to “preemptively” attack other countries and insists that in regard to Iran, “nothing is off the table.” He thus endorses the US disdain for international law which, by definition, is about taking things “off the table.”

The centerpiece of his geo-military vision is to shift the action from Iraq to Afghanistan. The US mission cannot even be dignified as propping up a government since the Afghan state has no power beyond handing out patronage. The importance of Afghanistan is as a pawn in the larger regional chessboard whose stakes are control of oil and natural gas. With US power depending increasingly on its military capacity, control over fossil fuel distribution is seen as key to retaining global dominance. Iraq, Afghanistan, Georgia and (increasingly) Pakistan have fallen victim to this maelstrom, with Iran in the crosshairs. With such high stakes in play the elite would not tolerate a non-interventionist president.

Ali Abunimah traces Obama’s self-adjustment on Middle East policy as his political star rose, from being a liberal supporter of political compromise (even attending Palestinian community events) to an unconditional champion of Israeli state policy.⁵ This has reached the extreme of endorsing the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, (when it destroyed the civilian infrastructure of the nation and scattered 4.6 million cluster bombs on its way out to punish the population for Hezbollah’s capture of two soldiers) as an

instance of Israel's right to reasonable self defense. He is now an unwavering ally of the Israeli state, pledging 30 billion dollars in unconditional military support in the coming years.

His foreign policy design calls for an increase of US troop levels by 90,000 soldiers to permit simultaneous wars and occupations in far flung parts of the world. He has aligned his vision with that of the military elite in his declarations on the Middle East, Africa (supporting a US military command on the continent) and Latin America (faulting the Bush government for tolerating the emergence of disloyal governments).

Obama links his foreign policy vision to the mystiques of John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, both of whom mobilized domestic coalitions in support of interventionism. He praises Reagan for sensing that "the country" wanted to cleanse itself of the "excesses of the 1960s." The "excesses" that Reagan set out to correct were gains in the areas of civil rights, feminism, anti-war sentiment, GLBT rights and union power. His tenure represented an all out assault on the public sphere and the social wage.

On the racial front, Obama, the "post-racial" candidate has struck a highly conservative stance, assuring Whites that as an issue race is a thing of the past. To a Selma, Alabama audience in March, 2007 the Senator stated that Blacks were "90% of the way" to equality, needing only to push themselves "that 10% to cross over to the other side." This is a curious assertion. The American Journal of Public Health reports that close to 100,000 African Americans die each year as a direct result of unequal treatment within the health care system (not even addressing the unequal conditions outside that drive them into the system in the first place). Racial disparities in the areas of health, education, incarceration rates, housing and social discrimination have deteriorated substantially over the last decade.⁶ In the face of documented evidence to the contrary, including a report from the International Red Cross, Obama asserts that the government response to Hurricane Katrina had "no racial dimension." Of all the demographic sectors in the country, the Senator singles out Black men for having "abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men." And what are we to make of this prescription for deep Black poverty "...the best we can do would be to convince teenaged girls" to not have babies. This is the "best we can do" only if measures that would really mean something are taken off the table.

While Obama's campaign seeks to highlight parallels with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., their world views are opposite on most particulars. Where King confronted a racial system of oppression, Obama sees racism (and those who obsess about it) as residuals from a past era. Where King called for a "radical restructuring of society" Obama blames the irresponsibility of the system's victims for their hardships and decries the "divisiveness" of those who point to structural causes. Where Obama sees the military fiasco in Iraq as a blundering but well-intentioned mistake, King considered the imperial adventure of his day to be a crime. Obama scorns opponents of the US war in Viet Nam as people who "blamed America for all that was wrong in the world."

In the realm of economic justice, Obama's vision of universal harmony crosses into the farcical. Addressing a Wall Street audience at NASDAQ headquarters in September,

2007, Obama reassured his listeners of his friendly intentions:

*“I believe all of you are as open and willing to listen as anyone else in America. I believe you care about this country and the future we are leaving to the next generation. I believe your work to be part of building a stronger, more vibrant, and more just America. I think the problem is no one has asked you to play a part in the project of American renewal.”*⁷

The corporations who have been shifting production to sweatshops (and supporting the interventionist policies that facilitate it), plundering their employees’ pension plans, aggressively pushing onerous debts of the most vulnerable, demolishing the public tax base while demanding public subsidies, funding junk science to undermine environmental protections, championing one-side trade deals that override local rights and neutralizing advances in transportation and energy that don’t lend themselves to monopoly control, have been doing these things because nobody has thought to ask them to be nice (and why be nice if no one asks?). Dang!

His warm invitation to inclusion in the quest for a better US future does not extend to the immigrants desperate to escape the ravages of the Free Trade policies Obama once again supports. In November, 2006 he voted to build a wall along the US-Mexico border to shield the US from the human costs of its economic power grab. Now he insists to Latino leaders that this was not an anti-immigrant move but was part of a “larger plan.” He just can’t explain what that plan was.⁸

He has surrounded himself with a policy team made up of Free Trade economists, military interventionists and Wal-Mart apologists. He is alone in declaring the Teamsters union to be finally free of corruption and no longer in need of federal oversight (position which coincided with an endorsement from Teamster president James Hoffa Jr.).⁹

The Obama campaign has distinguished itself as “lobbyist-free.” The largest industry backing him is lawyers and law firms, in their overwhelming majority wall street lobbying companies. These firms, some with hundreds of corporate lobbying clients, contribute to Obama through their non-registered partners, making possible this highly dishonest claim. Similar sleight of tongue is applied to the lobbyists on his staff (some are on “leave” from their jobs during the campaign). The financial services market is another pillar of Obama support starting with such names as Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers, JP Morgan Chase and City Group, companies up to their ears in the sub-prime scandal and crisis.¹⁰ In that debacle lenders secured fraudulent AAA ratings for shaky loans and covered their trail through of layers obscure transactions and “financial instruments.” Obama has been firm that the victims of these swindlers should not be rewarded for making “irresponsible decisions” since that would violate “the sanctity of the contract.”

The victims of the sub-prime frenzy are further disadvantaged by the passage -- with Obama’s active support -- of the Class Action Fairness Act of 2005 which removed citizen’s right to sue corporations in state courts for damage they have caused. Ignoring a desperate plea from over 40 civil rights, labor and human rights groups and 14 state attorneys general (including from his home state), Obama pitched it as striking a blow for the little people. As analyst Pam Martins sums up, “Senator Obama graduated Harvard

magna cum laude and was the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*. Given these credentials, one assumes he understood the ramifications to the poor and middle class in this country as he helped to gut one of the few weapons left to seek justice against giant corporations and their legions of giant law firms.”

Obama began his climb with a three-year community organizing stint in Chicago, leaving for law school and finally winning his first legislative campaign knocking out his three opponents (by challenging their filing papers). He served six unremarkable years in the Illinois senate, angering many constituents by his inattention to community issues. In his seventh year he was taken under the wing of Senate Majority Leader Emil Jones Jr. who set out to “make me a US Senator.” During that last year Jones created a legislative track record for Obama by giving him top sponsor billing on a huge raft of legislation that others had already done the heavy lifting on (he “sponsored“ an impressive 26 bills, leaving plenty of resentful colleagues in his wake). His earmark requests submitted last year in the Senate included tens of millions of dollars for Emil Jones’ district.¹¹

He is remembered fondly, however by Chicago real estate developers who built and abandoned thousands of low-income housing units that have become unlivable for his less favored constituents, with sewage backing up into kitchen sinks, collapsed roofs and rodent infestations. Valerie Jarret, a developer whose housing project was seized by the federal government is a top Obama advisor and sits on his finance committee. Developers benefited from his strategy of providing them with public funds to develop properties and have contributed hundreds of thousands to his campaigns. One such contributor had his properties seized by the city after inspectors documented more than 1,800 code violations. Antoin “Tony” Rezko, a key figure in Obama’s rise, is under indictment.

The Senator’s recent positions, supporting telecom immunity for illegal wiretapping, promoting the death penalty for non-lethal crimes, opposing limits on firearm ownership, endorsing Bush’s faith-based initiatives program, endorsing nuclear power as an “ecological” energy solution, escalating the war in Afghanistan are standard expressions of a New Democrat electoral strategy. Assuming that his dark and progressive supporters, who have no independent political vehicle, will not abandon him, he will concentrate on pleasing the ruling elite who, after all, have another place to go. As the candidate himself has stated, those who think that these positions are at odds with his basic philosophy “have not been paying attention.” .

Not everyone has been dazzled by the public image of the candidate (polished by such PR firms as the Parker Group, GMMB and Elevation Ltd., who also represent the Dept. of Homeland Security and Fortune 500 corporations).¹² Many critical voices have tried to be heard above the adulation, some of which have been cited in this section. I would single out for recognition Glen Ford, Paul Street, Margaret Kimberly and others associated with Black Agenda Report, to whom this article -- and the progressive movement in general -- owes a substantial debt of appreciation.

Obama has generated an extensive data base of supporters and a lot of campaign volunteers. To equate the Obama campaign with a community organizing effort, however, is going overboard. Community organizing starts with issues defined at the

community level and proceeds toward uneasy alliances with leaders willing to commit their support. Accountability to the base is paramount and leaders and spokespeople are jettisoned if they fail to deliver support on the core issues. The Obama campaign promotes trust in a charismatic leader who is the one irreplaceable constant of the campaign. The “community organizers” of the campaign are, in fact canvassers whose prescribed script avoids policy issues (referring such questions to Obama’s web site). None of their training has to do with holding leaders accountable, encouraging issue organizing or creating member-run organizations.¹³ After the election there will be no ongoing organization with the capacity, leadership or will to hold Obama accountable to grassroots concerns.

That Obama is a centrist politician in the Bill Clinton mold does not in itself determine the course of action we should follow in the coming elections. Like the coffee farmer we must take into account the larger weather patterns. A Left strategic response needs to be rooted in an understanding of the overall balance of political power, larger trends in global corporate capitalism and the imperatives of movement building. With those under our belt we can assess how best to navigate these turbulent waters.

II) The World as it is.

What follows is a snapshot of several areas of global public policy that will impact the life prospects for humanity. The point of these stories is not to say that things are bad. Everyone knows that. The point is to demonstrate first of all that we are reaching a critical tipping point that will -- one way or another -- result in major social changes in the not distant future; and secondly that the self-corrective mechanisms that should allow a society to avert disaster have been corrupted and disabled to the point that they serve the very interests they were meant to regulate, and are embedded in the structures that block the emergence of real solutions. This is the hurricane that the coffee farmer must know about when deciding her harvest strategy.

The heating planet

Since it was brought to world attention in 1988, the effects of global warming have become undeniable (except, of course, for those who deny them). We are experiencing accelerating changes around the world far in advance of what scientists would have predicted even five years ago. These include the progressive disappearance of the polar ice caps with a resultant rise in the level of the sea leading to greater heat absorption by the oceans, less reflection of heat by the glaciers and looping back to accelerated rises in temperature. The collapse of fisheries and reefs, dropping river levels, catastrophic coastal storms and greater extremes of drought and excessive rainfall are already taking their toll on vulnerable people and a growing number of species are threatened with extinction. Plant and animal diseases once held in check by seasonal weather cycles are increasing in both range and impact. We are moving rapidly toward a systemic tipping point beyond which the cascade of impacts and feedback loops will usher in a period of devastating instability that could easily undermine the survival of a third of the animal and plant species in existence and many millions of humans.¹⁴

To date, the causes of human death attributable to global warming have been from flooding and landslides, hunger and disease. These burdens fall most heavily on populations made vulnerable by poverty. The poor live on exposed hillsides, cannot absorb rises in the cost or accessibility of food and have immune systems compromised by poor nourishment, stress and inadequate living conditions.¹⁵ Further damage to agriculture due to drought and flooding are expected to drive many more people to urban areas where temperatures tend to be higher and where social inequity limits access to air conditioning, health services and nutrition. To simply mitigate the damage already en route will require a significant shift of resources to improve the living conditions of the large numbers of poor people who are in harm's way.

The petro-chemical, agro-chem and pharmaceutical industries have responded in ways consistent with the strategy that was developed in 1962 following the publication of Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" (which warned of the impact of toxic pesticides and made her the object of vicious industry attack). The threat posed by scientific

research led destructive industries to become major funders of research institutes, individual scientists and universities. This has put them in a good position to suppress, sideline or counter any research results that might endanger their profits.

Government subservience to these interests makes a mockery of international climate regulation. National governments attend meetings as spokespeople for their “national” industries and reach diluted “compromises” that are then hailed as breakthroughs. The recent Bali round on climate change is no more likely to be implemented than the previous Kyoto accords and would be insufficient even if it were.

Corporate concern over dwindling supplies of accessible resources has unleashed a feeding frenzy on remaining coal, oil, shale and other raw materials. The emergence of water as a contested resource has brought on a corporate race to wrench it from public guardianship and establish private monopoly control. Indigenous communities are finding themselves targets of terrorist violence in order to make their land available for mineral extraction. A sudden jump in demand for crop-based fuels has been reflected in an increase in the rate of rainforest destruction, as forest lands are cleared for conversion into stock dividends. US international and trade policies lend support to these efforts. Marketers have responded to public concern by trying to promote products and services with “eco-friendly” slogans regardless of their actual impacts.

On the level of the individual enterprise, planners must make their choices with an eye toward the financial markets that supply their economic oxygen. Corporate decisions translate into profitability numbers which are the main determinant of investor interest. If the numbers dip even slightly, capital can immediately be shifted to other investments where the returns are better.

James Gustave Speth, advisor to Presidents Carter and Clinton and former administrator of the UN Development Programme, takes heed of a growing backlash. “the international social movement for change -- which refers to itself as the ‘irresistible rise of global anti-capitalism’ -- is stonger than many imagine and will grow stronger; there is a coalescing of forces: peace, social justice, community, ecology, feminism -- a movement of movements...”

“people and groups are busily planting the seeds of change through a host of alternative arrangements, and still other attractive directions for upgrading to a new operating system have been identified.”¹⁶

Mitigating the impact of changes already set in motion will require massive shifts of resources into the social wage: the constellation of basic services and access to essential resources that determine the health and well-being of populations. This would serve to buffer vulnerable populations and protect ecosystems from being ravaged for firewood, water and animal and plant food sources. This in turn would drastically alter the balance of power that currently allows corporations to dictate the terms of wages, benefits, trade, foreign policy and environmental conditions. It is what dominant political, economic and social policies are designed to prevent. Averting even greater collapse would demand a change of direction for global society that would necessitate removing the management

of the Earth's wealth from corporate hands.

Surveys conducted in countries around the world regarding people's hopes for the future, point to a desire for tight-knit communities, sufficient resources to live on, safety from systemic or endemic violence, a healthy environment and control over the decisions that affect their lives.¹⁷ They were not demanding an equal chance to be a multi-billionaire at the pinnacle of an unequal system or the right to consume and discard vast mountains of plastic junk.

The global casino

The sub-prime mortgage crisis, whose reverberations continue to shake other markets and financial structures, is an indicator of the fragility of the global financial system. The domination of the capitalist economy by a handful of banks and financial services companies has created a financial world characterized by a multilayered shell game devoted to generating, repackaging and reselling debt through "instruments" too complex to understand. Where three decades ago, 60% of US credit was held by banks, it is now down to 30% with most debt now in the form of these "securitized" mystery packages.

The US economy has become dominated by this casino capitalism and by investment in the increasingly powerful military research, production and services. Players at every level of this game seek opportunities that bring the highest return, shifting investments at the drop of a percentage point from one fund to another without thought as to what industry or market these choices correspond to on the ground. In the real economy, where the rubber meets the road, it happens that the investment ends up flowing to places where worker rights are crushed, democratic aspirations thwarted, public services curtailed and environmental safeguards gutted. These places produce the good numbers.

To the world of high finance there is no longer such a thing as a grocery industry, a garment industry or a tobacco industry. From a financial perspective they are all subsidiaries of the profit industry and investment can be quickly redirected to wherever the numbers flash the brightest. This is dramatically illustrated by the overnight transformation of global food production into the energy resources sector. It turns out that agriculture was not about food after all, it was about return on investment.

Scan the newspapers from anywhere on Earth and you will find evidence of a massive and ongoing land grab. Village properties, urban neighborhoods, ocean access and agricultural lands are being seized for large energy projects, upscale housing, resorts, trash burners and golf courses. Many local governments accommodate this process with ordinances enabling the plunder and criminalizing resistance. These processes unfold under the approving supervision of international banks and development agencies.

Neo-liberal economic policies, expressed especially in "Free Trade" treaties, have stripped national finance ministries of power, devastated local economies and released millions of displaced workers and their families into the internal and global migrant stream. Local industries are swept away in the tide of subsidized imports from the rich economies. This is the face of post-colonial colonialism.

The sub-prime mortgage scam was a mechanism for financial institutions to load untenable debt onto people unable to afford homes in the increasingly unequal US economy. Described as “the greatest loss of wealth to people of color in modern U.S. history,”¹⁸ it caused little concern in policy and media circles until the inevitable defaults began to threaten the stability of the predators themselves.¹⁹ The inevitable collapse of the scheme has led to the state stepping in, not to write down homeowners debt to reasonable levels (which would release renewed buying power into their communities, protect local property tax bases, maintain the housing stock and prevent a new wave of homelessness) but to purchase the predator franchise from its wealthy developers with imaginary public funds. It will now proceed to force home owners onto the street and seize their assets to make back its “investment” and stabilize “the economy.”

Empty Plates, Full Portfolios

Just as access to housing is determined by the banking industry, so is food production controlled by the agro-chemical companies and health care by insurance and pharmaceutical interests.

As with the mortgage crisis, widespread endemic hunger was not considered a crisis until riots began to threaten the stability that elite interest rely on. The current food crisis represents the triumph of post-colonial and neo-liberal trade policies. Countries have been effectively prevented from establishing food self-sufficiency and been made dependent on imports from the G8 nations. Attempts to strengthen national economies (known as “import substitution”) were systematically sabotaged and paralyzed by the west (the September 11, 1973 coup in Chile being an example of the extreme methods employed).

The logic of food as commodity has also created a disease-vulnerable system under which vast tracts are devoted to a single crop that is processed and distributed from central mega-factories. That means that outbreaks of disease or contamination, rather than being contained by the natural barriers of small farms, intercropping and local processing, can distribute poisons to school lunches and grocery store shelves all across the US within days. This system, now on a global scale, creates dependence on petroleum-fueled transportation networks that further increases people’s vulnerability.

Once removed from the hands of local farmers, crop development can be bent to the requirements corporate profitability, producing vegetables that have little flavor and dwindling nutritional value but will survive the rigors of transportation and storage.

Health research indicates that the best foods are those subjected to the least processing. Profit considerations, however, dictate that the most lucrative foods are those with the most “value added” through as much processing and packaging as possible. With corporate boardrooms being the real governing powers, “food” policy amounts to a relentless assault on public and environmental health to the benefit of shareholder value and CEO compensation.

Health and Wealth

Corporate health care not only limits access to treatment in ways we are familiar with, it also determines the content of health care itself. The interests of insurance corporations dictate a cookie-cutter approach to medical care directly opposite that suggested by current health research. The insights of functional and integrative medicine reveal the human body to be a complex system in which the same condition can give rise to differing symptoms and differing underlying conditions may be manifested in ways that look similar. Effective treatment requires identifying and treating the specific causes that are expressed in the symptoms. Insurance mandates allow for only a limited range of treatments per cluster of symptoms in order to keep re-imburement costs down.

A recent trend in corporate medicine is the notion of “genetic susceptibility.” Given that in any population some people will be quicker to suffer the symptoms of stress and poisoning, corporations are rushing to develop screening procedures that will allow them to exclude workers likely to succumb sooner. Individual weaknesses, not toxic exposure, are identified as the true cause of illness. Researchers have identified a common gene among smokers likely to be the first to get lung cancer. The tobacco companies can now “demonstrate” that cancer (like mortgage defaults) results from defective individuals acting irresponsibly.

One strategy for dealing with disease in populations involves identifying a pathogen and developing a drug to attack it. This has led to widespread biotic resistance to medicines. An alternative approach is to raise the overall level of health in the population in order to confer the capacity to resist disease in general. This latter approach would entail improving people’s access to safe housing, nutritious food, clean water, non-toxic workplaces and communities and greater decision-making power. Raising the social wage in this way would also lessen the pressures exerted by poor people on vulnerable ecosystems, protected species and forests. However this runs counter to the needs of the colonial-post-colonial system, in which the dependence of vulnerable populations allows corporate interests to dictate labor, economic and environmental policies that maximize profits.

A Harsh Imbalance Sheet

A similar picture holds for the formulation of energy, transportation, urban design, product development, packaging, public safety, elder care, toxic contamination or other aspects of social policy. The problem is not that vested interests slow progress to an unacceptable pace: it’s that they force policy in a direction diametrically opposed to the interests of human wellbeing and long term sustainability. In every arena, advances in knowledge, technology and social organization are aborted, derailed or destroyed if they threaten the flow of corporate profit.

Corporations have extended their control over economic policy, media, education policy, scientific research, cultural production, public office and regulatory administration to the point that the system comprised of all of these components is incapable of changing direction within the constraints of its own logic. Those of us resisting this dysfunctional racket have mostly engaged in countering the damage in specific policy areas, not

addressing its underlying structure.

In none of these arenas are the solutions mysteriously complex. They depend, however, on a politically unacceptable pre-condition: the massive shift of resources to the social wage and of control of economic and natural resources and decision-making into the hands of “ordinary” people. One could mention in passing that an adequate social wage would also resolve most street crime, prostitution, poaching, and a large portion of chemical abuse. It would undermine the basis of popular support (economic insecurity and fear) for most military conflicts and “ethnic” violence around the world. Powerful vested interests invest heavily in convincing us that such a shift is not practical. It turns out that a world system based on unbridled greed didn’t work out the best for everyone after all. Who knew?

111 The Tecumseh Strategy

Tecumseh's mission did not succeed. He was able to recruit adherents in many tribes and his stature and moral authority impressed even his enemies. His nemesis, the white governor William Henry Harrison considered him a genius who "If it were not for the vicinity of the United States, he would, perhaps be the founder of an empire that would rival in glory Mexico or Peru." But there were also factions who did not sign on and from among these Harrison was able to isolate "treaty Indians" with whom he could sign individual agreements that undermined the geographic integrity of Tecumseh's nation. When US forces destroyed Tecumseh's headquarters at Tippecanoe, it deprived him of an administrative and political center at a difficult time and dealt a blow from which his alliance would be unable to recover.

The idea of a unified strategy to contest the power and legitimacy of the world's largest empire seems so alien to the real politick of today's turf-based movements that it does not even enter into serious discussion of social change. This is no accident.

As long as we fight only limited battles to redress specific grievances we can annoy the powers that be and they will oppose us, but we will not threaten their grip on wealth and they will not seriously seek to destroy us. The current structure of mainstream organizing, fragmented into issues and "advocacy" areas and channeled through "non-profit corporations" is a legacy of the government repression that disarmed the mass movements of forty years ago with brutal repression (against the dark-led movements) and co-optive funding.

The destruction of the radical movement by police repression was accompanied by a major expansion of what is now called the "non-profit sector." Funding was made available to "advocacy" groups who would agitate for changes in narrowly targeted policies: housing, the environment, equal rights for a single constituency, educational reform, etc. No such "non-profit corporation" could -- or can -- move beyond attacking symptoms of society's structural problems and expect to retain its funding. The crushing of militant struggles is a reminder of what can happen to anyone who proposes an alternative moral vision to challenge the dominant one. This is a legacy of the cold war Red Scare. It is compounded by the repressiveness and opportunism of nations that claimed to be the embodiment of socialism and equality. Any suggestion that social relations can be based on the common good rather than on private greed is certain to be tarred as "old style Communism."

The repressive strategies of the state give some indication as to whom it sees as a threat. Struggles that offer an alternative vision or challenge the colonial narrative are considered dangerous in a way that lobbying for job programs or more wilderness protection are not. These may be important issues but it makes a difference whether they are posed as part of something larger. Sitting in to integrate lunch counters electrified

supporters and frightened foes because it was organically linked to a larger vision of equality and justice.

To assess how our involvement in the elections could affect our strategy for change, we need to have some idea of what such a strategy would look like. How do we move beyond sectoral campaigns to a position from which we can hope to implant a democratic and humane system of governance? What sources of leverage and power can we make use of and how can we deploy them to greatest advantage? More pointedly: in what areas do we have advantages that can compensate for those that the empire enjoys in others? Our habit of asking small questions and overlooking or underestimating our potential power is one of our greatest liabilities. Elite strategy, from mass incarceration to war planning, is designed to prevent effective opposition from arising. It seems that they take quite seriously the threat that such an opposition could pose.

I'd like to outline four interrelated areas that our movement must develop in order to comprise a serious opposition force and that I suggest to be the combination necessary to close Tecumseh's fist. They do not resolve all of the complex challenges that arise in the course of political and social struggle, but they give us the tools with which to do so.

1) **A vision.** The magic of mass movements is that they speak to people's deepest aspirations and link daily tactics and challenges to those dreams. Clearly articulating a vision is more important where you are dealing with heterogeneous and diverse constituencies since it serves both to amplify our separate efforts and develop mutual trust. The US and Vietnamese Declarations of Independence, the French Rights of Man, the South African Freedom Charter, the Right wing Contract with America are examples of unifying messages used to consolidate movements. The Black Panther Party orchestrated a Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention process in 1971 to produce such a unified vision for a diverse movement. It involved local conferences and events leading to several national ones. The process never reached fruition for reasons distinct from the bold concept itself. The 1957 creation of the South African Freedom Charter became a milestone in the struggle against apartheid and was seen as the seed of a future constitution. It was a sharp enough challenge to the existing system that it could not at that time be co-opted, but was flexible enough that it could be embraced by diverse sectors who did not necessarily agree on details at the programmatic level.

The creation of such a unifying instrument, which we will here refer to as a Social Charter, presents some intriguing possibilities in the US context. First of all, it would make visible the hidden reality that the values of the social justice struggles are shared more widely by the population than those of the official Consensus.²⁰ This is easily illustrated by the perceived need of the government and corporations to lie about their goals, values and the operational principles of their policies. Their use of the rhetoric of democracy, equality, fairness, etc. represents a tacit admission that their real agenda does not fit well with the self-image of their people, as well as a tip of the hat to the power of Left ideology even when we are organizationally weak (did you notice how the war in Afghanistan became framed as a campaign for women's rights!?). This is a strategic advantage we must take note of.

How can a unified statement threaten a social order? Let's spend some moments on what message it would deliver before turning to how it might become an instrument of strategy. At heart it would represent an ideological challenge. Take the oft-repeated aphorism of the Consensus that we are all striving to achieve a "level playing field." We hear it so often that it becomes a commonplace. The game to be played on that field is never questioned or even alluded to. At its best it suggests a world in which every child would have an equal chance to become a multi-billionaire CEO or a malnourished laborer. Leaving aside the fact even that perverse vision would not really be acceptable to an entrenched elite, let's offer an alternative: "no one gets seconds until everyone has had firsts." This is a revolutionary concept and one which is widely taught at the childhood dinner table. Or what if we were to state that "all people have the right to sufficient water, nutritious food, clean air, and safe housing to live healthy lives." This is a direct affront to the operating principles of the global system yet it would not seem out of line to most people. Essentially, a Social Charter would boldly proclaim the validity of the "common good" and the "public square," the concept that the Earth is the collective heritage and responsibility of all of its children. So fundamental and widely appealing are these concepts that we could justifiably hijack the phrase "we hold these truths to be self evident."

A charter to delineate our differences with our foes also highlights potential relationships. When groups working to defend communities of color from toxic dumping define themselves with the term "environmental justice" it changes the organizing landscape in practical ways. It's as though the map suddenly lights up with organizations fighting asthma in LA, chemical plants in Louisiana and water robbery on reservation land. It provides a basis for strategic alliances and networks and fruitful strategy convergences. A Social Charter does this on a national level. It does not resolve all our differences with each other but it draws a line meant to illuminate the fundamental conflict of interests. In Tecumseh's terms, it identifies a strategic basis for unity that rules out groups making individual accommodations with the system at the expense of their Charter allies. It creates a framework for holding each other accountable to walking our talk. There can only be accountability when there is mutual commitment. A Charter will allow us to challenge movement practices that divide our peoples against each other. It also contests the loyalty to the elite of sectors whose interests would be better served by Social Charter values.

A charter strategy creates a boldly stated alternative vision and throws into relief the reality that most channels for improving people's lives are blocked by a social structure that sanctifies greed and protects the entrenched power of the few.

2) **A mind.** The "mind" of a movement is its capacity for strategic thinking. It is our ability to figure out how to open a path from the reality of the world as it is to the vision we have formulated. In order to accomplish this we need to be able to analyze the conditions around us, including our strengths and weaknesses, those of our opponents, and the alliances -- explicit or de facto -- that prop up the system. We must be able to turn these observations into programs for action that direct our strengths at their weaknesses

and that accumulates movement power and capacity so that we are increasingly effective.

Strategic thinking takes place at all levels of a movement. It is not a matter for elite groups of thinkers or self-appointed leaders. It can take a multiplicity of forms and incorporate broad grassroots participation. To address the challenges of police brutality and street violence, for instance, one could utilize a study circle or popular education model and involve hundreds of people in a given city in a process of engaging their communities, analyzing the underlying causes and developing a program consistent with Social Charter values. It is about creating a broad-based and multi-faceted capacity for engaging with complex challenges and generating creative responses.

I have heard from organizers around the country that they feel they are treading water, as though the work they are doing, organizing, training, developing leaders, etc. is simply a struggle to defend their particular area of public space until the opportunity comes along to join in something larger that can make a real difference. Some are leaving the organizing field in frustration. This reflects the disconnect between tactics ability and strategic vacuum. Tactics are about doing things right. Strategy is about determining the right things to do.

Our movements have no shortage of strategic visioning and capacity-building tools. Mapping power structures and constituencies, training and teaching, creating cultural tools to clarify values and analysis, and so forth, can be applied to the challenges of systemic change as easily as to a school board or counter-recruitment campaign. Our task is to put our collective talents at the service of a vision worth fighting for. Historic change can begin (and often has) around kitchen tables, in high school classrooms, study groups, prison yards and coffee houses as well as conferences, journals and blogs. The collective intelligence of large numbers of people can be mobilized for change when they experience a sense of hope that they might prevail.

If the Social Charter strategy catches the imagination of enough activists, it will take collective strategizing to bring it to life. What constituencies must be involved from the beginning? How do we engage tens of thousands of people in formulating the vision for a new “operating system” for society, so that it will emerge from the process already an historical force?

3) **A voice.** When a dictatorship seizes power its first task is to dismantle the ability of the opposition to respond. This is done by shutting down its mind -- publications, think tanks, political parties, universities -- and its voice, its ability to communicate internally, to its larger public and with international allies. Our ability to communicate with each other and with broader constituencies is of strategic importance. The rise of the US far Right is instructive.

Following the defeat of the conservative Goldwater presidential campaign in 1964, Right wing activists initiated a strategy to build a powerful conservative political force. Key to this process was the establishment of a constellation of institutions -- publications, media networks, think tanks, training programs, support groups and fundraising companies --

that would promote their ideology and build their organizing capacity.

In effect, it's as if they spent years building a concert hall with a killer sound system. In the meantime we on the Left taught ourselves how to write great songs. The material they broadcast over their "amplifiers" wasn't such great stuff: jingles with messages like "taxes are bad" or "dark folk get preferential treatment" or "gay rights threaten your marriage" or "bad guys hate our freedom." After a thousand repetitions, though, these tunes get embedded in your mind -- especially if they're on all the stations. In response to political or social developments, the Left can come up with sharp lyrics, great hooks and in-depth analyses. Too bad hardly anyone hears them. On the Right they can get millions of people humming their little jingles within a week or two because they've got the sound system and the device of constant repetition. The Liberal establishment, for its part, thinks it wisest to hum along with the Right wing jingles (to show they are in tune with the "mainstream") and try to prove that they can hum them even better than the reactionaries that composed them.

The Left, like the Right, has foundations and benefactors and fundraisers. Ours, however, have not provided very much support to institution building. Ours prefer to fund small, local projects and campaigns that have a short duration and measurable results, in line with the fractured non-profit model. More tentacles for our sea anemone hands. This harmonizes with the unwritten agreement to oppose the power structure without challenging it. Left activists who sustain publications, training centers, cultural organizations and media projects must do so on their own, often doing their cultural organizing after their day jobs are done and mortgaging their homes or continually hustling, to keep their projects afloat. The Right gives a renewable check to its cultural warriors, setting them loose and telling them to not worry their little heads about begging for phone money. They're on a long-term plan.

The Right wing sound system, encompassing its think tanks, radio shows, blogs and so forth, sets feet a' tapping throughout the corporate media and political system. This creates a feedback loop that the media then must refer to for legitimacy. The corporate elite has secured an alliance with the religious right which delivers them a mass social base in exchange for regressive social legislation and access to corporate-controlled mass communication. Our voices don't get heard too often in this mix and are rudely out of context when they are.

When faced with a massive imbalance of power, the smaller force must identify the advantages and assets at its disposal. Power only responds to power so we need to do better than appeal to corporate managers for fairness. This was nicely demonstrated by those who mobilized a successful mass response to the corporate/government attempted coup at Pacifica Radio in 2000.

To reach out with our voice under the conditions we currently face, I would recommend that we develop an echo-chamber strategy. An illustration:

Newspaper circulation in the United States has been in precipitous decline due to the

deterioration of content and the growth of digital media. The exception is in what is known as the “ethnic” or nationality press. These papers--more trusted than a dominant media that ignores or misrepresents communities of color-- provide a vital community service and retain a loyal readership. African-American newspapers have a combined circulation of around 15 million. Latino dailies alone reach 16 million. Chinese language papers have a circulation of roughly one million.²¹ The Native American papers, both urban and reservation, though smaller, also provide a service that their readers cannot find in the corporate media. This sector represents a bastion of widely used and relatively independent media. These periodicals suffer from understaffing and small budgets and often rely on wire services for coverage of the world outside of their circulation area. They most often speak from a location reliably to the left of the major media .

Let’s imagine a media strategy that puts this “peoples” media at the center of our efforts. If we take the stories generated by our labor organizing, environmental justice work, urban housing struggles, etc. and prepare them in language that makes them relevant to a Latino, Black, Asian/Pacific, etc. readership, we will be able to offer a far more nutritious mix of material than UPI or AP can provide. This will both support a media that is not editorially controlled by Rupert Murdoch and can amplify our messages far beyond where the Left media (crucial as that is) can hope to reach. Where the Right can afford an amplification system, we can devise an echo chamber, using the natural formations of community discourse to reach the kitchen tables of millions of our people.

When grocery workers or drywallers or chicken processors face a strike or harassment from immigration agents, their story disappears quickly from the news if it appears at all. An echo chamber strategy could keep such battles live, relevant and personalized, served up with the morning coffee to at least a few million readers. The post-Katrina Gulf region is another case in point. It is the scene of a massive and brutal land grab and racial restructuring and constitutes one of the fiercest battle grounds in the United States today. By opting to impose a media black-out rather than constructing their own narrative framework, the neo-cons left an open field which an echo-chamber strategy could have seized.

A systematic echo chamber approach would have provided important support to activists in the Gulf by keeping their struggles visible and presenting them consistently in a greed vs. need frame of reference. An uninterrupted flow of news, human interest stories, cultural expression, cartoons and opinions might have established the drama as an ongoing focus of interest and prevented it sliding off the national radar screen. The stories that people hear are crucial for preparing the soil in which organizing must take root.

Stories kept visible in community media percolate back to the politicians and institutions (including corporate media) in each district. An echo chamber strategy can impact what issues the corporate media addresses but is not dependent on them doing so. Movement communication strategies would seek to utilize, strengthen and defend those sectors of media that are still outside of monopoly control. This approach echoes the organizing experience in southern states during the Civil Rights movement. Hairdressers emerged as

one of the few networks in the Black community that was financially independent of the White power structure and which had access to a wide cross-section of the community. They became an important medium for mass communication and movement building. The Black Panthers summarized this principle in the saying “use what you have to get what you need.” It’s a good formula.

Our presence in the blogosphere, Internet radio, U-tube etc. can benefit (as the Right well knows) from cross promotion: print or online columns, for example, that summarize and link to effective blogs and web sites. What allows this to be effective for the conservative movement is that they understand that all these efforts are connected by virtue of being part of one movement, not a lot of functionally separated interest areas.

This strategy will also provide an important platform for direct assaults on federal communication policy and corporate perception manipulation. We don’t have the mega-speakers that the Right has but shouting down a canyon can make hella-noise.

4) **Hands.** The ability to have vision, strategic thought and voice are relevant insofar as they translate into a capacity for effective action. Power is the ability to make things happen or to prevent things from happening. That requires tactical knowledge and experience as well as the ability and boldness to direct our efforts to where they will have the greatest impact. It should be clear that the four strategic areas described in this section are inseparable.

During planning for the Poor People’s Campaign in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was asked how a coalition of poor people could hope to get the attention of the powerful elites, let force them to accede to their demands. King replied, “When you interfere with the rich man’s capacity to make money, anything is negotiable.”²² This crucial insight is sometimes forgotten. The exercise of power is to determine what happens, not just to symbolically express what we wish might happen. Such expressions may be part of a broader strategy of accumulating power but they are not a substitute for it.

Movement building is an improvisational art form. People awaken to their power at unforeseeable times and in unexpected places. We cannot always see what grievances are important to mobilize around. Nonetheless, the better we understand the terrain within which these struggles will emerge, the better equipped we will be to respond effectively. The American Indian Movement was startled by the vehemence with which the federal government mobilized to suppress the Native occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. The occupation grew out of grievances on the Pine Ridge reservation and they did not initially understand how their action would be perceived in Washington. It turned out that the government had designated the Black Hills area a “National Sacrifice Area” for energy development and the emergence of a reinvigorated Indian resistance was seen as a serious impediment.

A strategic understanding of our situation involves looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the system and those within our communities of resistance. In dispersed manufacturing chains (the auto industry, for example), unions have learned that the

system of just-in-time delivery of parts allows a work stoppage at a single plant to shut down production in an extended production line encompassing many factories, multiple companies and thousands of workers. It also allows most of the idled workers to engage in strike support without the risks involved in being on strike themselves. Similarly the US economy and military, based as they are on long distance delivery of goods, energy and communications is vulnerable to disruption at multiple points throughout the system. These pressure points can be utilized to publicly challenge anti-social practices that violate the people's Social Charter.

The only source of power with which we can realistically hope to effect change is organized people. The criminal justice and immigration systems are directed both at facilitating economic exploitation and limiting the possibilities for resistance by poor and dark people. Think about it. If the poorest people in the US can unravel the global financial system just by missing their mortgage payments, what might be possible with effective strategic planning? The legal and economic vulnerability imposed on these communities makes it risky for people to stick their necks out, thus suggesting that reducing that vulnerability -- and unchaining that political power -- is a strategic concern for the entire movement.

Poor people's movements understand better than others the connection between action and service. As they develop into mass struggles, they find ways to provide health care and food assistance; to block evictions and interfere with arrests; to establish movement schools and share transportation; to occupy and redistribute vacant housing. The strategies needed to protect their mobilized constituencies, in themselves become organizing tools that highlight injustice and build legitimacy. The paradigm of collective punishment structured into the penal, policing and immigration systems is a preemptive strike at the heart of these constituencies. It is a tribute to the power they can wield when they are on their feet.

Political action is both a material force and a form of educational public theater. A unified movement vision can enhance both the significance and mobilizing potential of issue organizing. Suppose that grassroots organizers campaigning around health care access were to select a particularly onerous instance of insurance company denial-of-service to a vulnerable individual. This one, personal case could be made the center of a national campaign to demand that the company provide the coverage that they had denied. In the public square it would play out as a moral issue by personalizing it in a specific person's story. As political action it could entail picketing the homes of corporate executives and their political water-carriers, leafleting their places of worship, boycotting and disrupting the home companies of insurance company board members and their law firms, organizing petition drives, etc., thus turning the issue into one about greed and which can be traced to the responsible parties. This could also attract embarrassing international attention. Given the dependence of insurance companies on their brand image, it is likely that they'd concede on a stark individual case in order to stave off greater damage. The movement could then choose another target, perhaps a farm foreclosure or deportation case that best dramatizes the issue. In each case, sectoral organizers take the lead but with the backing of allies in many other movement currents.

The Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott in 1955 was launched with just such deliberate selection of an appealing and illustrative case.

Napoleon is quoted as advising: “Never interrupt your enemy when he is busy making a mistake.” The types of campaign outlined above go a step further by inviting our enemies to assist us in undermining them. If the targeted company or agency concedes on the movement demand, they have helped demonstrate the power of collective action and the practical difference it can make. They essentially admit that their choices were all about power all along. If they hold out, they subject their closest allies to unwelcome pressures and expose themselves as being incapable of doing the right thing. Either option undermines their legitimacy and improves the movement’s prospects for recruitment.

A movement committed to strategic interference with the affairs of the empire can combine the symbolic and concrete in powerful ways to undermine the legitimacy of the current social model. If we want to educate the public about the linkages between “Free Trade” and immigration, we can deploy ourselves to block the passage of barges and trucks destined for Mexico with cargoes of subsidized US corn. This would draw attention to the underlying causes of Mexico’s agricultural collapse and massive immigration to the US. It would require a police response from the state that would illuminate the connections even more and would play well in the international media.

A most remarkable feature of the political landscape in North America is the continued resistance of Indigenous populations who have been targeted for cultural and political, if not physical, elimination for centuries. Native people across the political spectrum have consistently held to their resistance narrative of the conquest and have never conceded the colonizer’s world view, even during periods of political retreat. They have also managed to retain varying degrees of control over land areas equaling 55 million acres, or 2.3% of the total US land area, and can stand on a solid legal foundation to defend them. Defending and expanding Indigenous sovereignty is a strategic imperative for the resistance movement as a whole. As the empire becomes hungrier for dwindling resources we can expect Native lands to come under increasing pressure. At the same time, Native activists are leading the way in developing locally based agriculture and energy projects at a time when the drawbacks of the global petro-economy are becoming starkly evident and concrete examples of alternatives take on greater resonance. Native sovereignty also constitutes an ideological threat to the colonial myth that underpins imperial legitimacy. We can help amplify this threat by the device of non-Native movements seeking official legitimacy from Native governments and civil society, rather than from the settler government, on matters such as immigration, resource use and public history, and conceding them the political recognition not afforded by the dominant culture. This helps both to counter the invisibility imposed on Native people and establishes the centrality of the anti-colonial narrative in eroding the legitimacy of the corporate government and its allied institutions.

The battle over legitimacy is central to movements for real change. This battle is carried out through public story-telling that takes form both as action and as art (and by blurring the boundary between the two). Cultural expression, particularly among youth, is an

indispensable dimension of transformational movements that can be even more powerful when recognized and supported by the movement as a whole. It should be considered a sacred function of our struggle to support learning opportunities, recording studios, film resources, printing facilities and other infrastructure to allow creative rebellion to flourish. This will also increase the opportunities for cross-fertilization and interaction among generations and between activists from different community, cultural and political roots. Struggles are not won without art, song and laughter.

Our demonstrated capacity for action and for creating viable alternative structures will in the long run suggest to people that they are not crazy to consider switching their allegiance from the power structure to the opposition. From this perspective, all action is a form of theater; all education is a form of action. If we have the capacity as a broad movement to analyze, to choose strategies, to communicate widely and to mobilize, then we are in a better position to take the initiative and shape the terms of debate.

I have suggested so far that we have tremendous potential power and actual operational weakness. Applying our political theater capacity with precision can advertise our moral and political framework and accelerate the de-legitimizing of the Consensus. An example: we get supportive congress people to introduce a bill titled something like “The National Integrity and Security Act.” It would establish that any elected, appointed, hired or contracted employee of the government who lies, falsifies data, plants false rumors or assists others to do so (even if following orders) for the purpose of bringing the United States into military conflict, overt or covert against any foreign state or non-state entity shall be considered guilty of a crime equivalent to treason.

This is what we could call guerrilla legislation: it puts the political establishment in an untenable position. To permit such legislation to pass would jeopardize a bipartisan practice in foreign policy (and force mid-level state department hacks to ponder the death penalty when weighing their assignments) but to oppose it would risk stirring deep reservoirs of popular anger over the human cost of the wars. No matter the outcome we will have secured the assistance of our enemies. Attempts on their part to ridicule or sideline the bill could be countered with an echo-chamber media campaign that would expose their attempts to stifle the debate. This would gain even greater political impact by echoing it through Al-Jazeera, TeleSur, BBC and other international media.

Concerted effort to challenge the structures of wealth and power inevitably (and appropriately) creates polarization. The trick is to direct that polarization such that it isolates those with a real stake in exploitation and environmental destruction and separates them from their supporters who have been fooled, bribed or scared into their camp. At the same time we need to build our capacity, from the grassroots up, to creatively take the political initiative in service to our deepest aspirations. “Redoubling our efforts” won’t make that happen. Applying the Tecumseh principle -- to think like a hand, not like a collection of fingers -- is a more promising alternative.

Ultimately our task is not to “speak truth to power”: it is to *turn* truth *into* power. Then we can speak power to power, the only conversation (as Frederick Douglass would attest)

that makes a difference.

IV) Ballots and Banners

Which political party ends up in control of the executive branch is only one of the aspects of a presidential election which is of interest to the Left. This is where we will start though, because it brings the perennial “dime of difference” debate into the current political moment. This will inevitably segway into a comparison of strategic options since the choices made by the Left -- not just the official election result -- will affect the political landscape within which we will find ourselves after January, 2009.

President Obama

What is the worst and best that can come from an Obama victory? In the field we can expect that the labor federations, mainstream environmental and feminist groups, and liberal advocacy non-profits (and sectors of the anti-war leadership) will tone down their agitation in order to not jeopardize the Democrats in office. Obama will have come into office having made numerous concrete promises to the corporate-military elite. The corporate elite has two parties courting it for support, after all. McCain and Obama must each present themselves as the better one to deliver the goods. There is no power block to Obama’s left that will threaten to withhold its support if he displeases it. In place of radical policy initiatives, leaders of liberal constituencies and communities of color can hope for invitations to dinner parties and left-leaning artists will perform at the White House. For some, tired of being scorned by the mighty, this change of tone will be enough to justify giving him a pass on substantive issues. In addition we will be called upon (justifiably) to defend a President Obama and his wife Michelle (already a target in her own right) from racist and reactionary attacks. If he follows the mold of his New Democrat colleagues and advisors, he will deal with inevitable and relentless conservative attacks by trying to outflank them from the right.

Having a centrist Democrat in office weakens the prospects for a united opposition by impelling large pressure groups to defend the administration against the greater threat from the Right rather than placing their own demands upon it from the left. This allows the administration to make even greater concessions in the face of unrelenting attacks from the reactionary sound system. On the positive side, having a centrist Democrat in office means that because the Left opposition movement will not be as broad as under a Republican, it must therefore offer a more sophisticated critique (we couldn’t be saying “if only a Democrat had been elected...”).

A President Obama will have some room to maneuver for popular support on issues over which ruling class factions are divided or indifferent. Some major corporations are ready to push for national health coverage in order to escape escalating costs. If he follows the pattern established by Bill Clinton, he’ll support some pro-labor legislation but not expend much political capital to push it. Clinton made a great show of such gestures but only pulled out all the stops to pass NAFTA.

The relief that we can expect under Obama, will be a double edged sword. He won’t offer single payer health care reform, won’t stray from free trade orthodoxy, won’t dispute the imperative of US global dominance. In exchange for the attentions of a charismatic leader

we will be asked to sign a death warrant for Iranian children, Pakistani market vendors or Venezuelan garment workers. Obama has made clear that it is not acceptable for other governments to chart courses that do not serve our interests.

During the primaries Alice Walker saw in Obama a “rare opportunity for the country and the world to start over.” She projects on him her hopes for justice for Palestinians, respectful relations with Cuba and an end to the wars. “But Most of all I want someone who has the self-confidence to talk to anyone, ‘enemy’ or ‘friend.’”²³

Compared to President Bush, Obama is a grownup. He has the maturity to listen to opponents and a willingness to recognize positions in between “for us” and “against us.” What would it mean to have a charismatic man of color at the helm of the United States, able to sit down respectfully with leaders around the world and demand their submission to the neo-liberal straightjacket? A president able to skillfully use carrots and sticks to undermine independent economic choices in Latin America? Obama would present a friendlier face to the world but would need to prove that he is a tough “commander-in-chief” willing to flex military muscle in the “national interest.” On the plains of Central Asia, where an Obama administration will be playing its hand, the stakes are clear to all the players and personal charm will have little currency.

President McCain

A McCain administration would come to power with a strained coalition. W. Bush and his neo-con clique have left the uneasy alliance between imperial internationalists, theocratic social reactionaries and fiscal conservatives in tatters. None of them trust McCain and all will be looking for reassuring gestures from him. He appears to be a weak figure like his predecessor and will likely become the tool of one or another of these groups. The social conservatives are not timid about threatening to abandon McCain if he does not please them, thus keeping him looking over his right shoulder.

A Right wing administration would have limited capacity to co-opt progressive popular issues and that opens up the possibility for broader progressive alliances. This would have the positive effect of providing space for disappointed Obama supporters and advocacy liberals to voice their opposition. The downside is that much of the critique would identify the Republicans as the source of the problems. Elite critics, concerned mostly about effective management of the empire, would continue to be the only dissenting voices in the media. Many young people, who have grown up under the Republicans, will believe that if only the Democrats had won, the country would have changed direction. The Democrats, labor and other pillars of Democratic support will allocate more resources and planning to assure future Democratic victories.

There are too many wild cards to make confident predictions. Much depends on whether he is reckless enough to alarm sectors of the ruling class and whether his victory was tainted in the public perception by open racism or fraud.

The elections and the unity of fires

At the start of this essay I asked what strategic vision we could measure the various Left electoral proposals against. Finding none, I proceeded to sketch out a movement-building

framework which we have presumed to name after Tecumseh for reasons which will continue to unfold. The complexities of Tecumseh's time offer instructive lessons for our own and his thinking on strategic matters is a challenge to today's radicals.

In a speech to Governor Harrison in August of 1810 Tecumseh protested the manipulations and illegal treaties pursued by US agents with unauthorized native "leaders":

"You do not want unity among tribes, and you destroy it. You try to make differences between them. We, their leaders, wish them to unite and consider their land the common property of all but you try to keep them from this. You separate the tribes and deal with them that way, one by one, and advise them not to come into this union. Your states have set an example of forming a union among all the fires. Why should you censure the Indians for following that example?"

"But, Brother," he added. "I mean to bring all the tribes together in spite of you, and until I have finished I will not go to visit your President. Maybe I will when I have finished, maybe."

For Tecumseh a relationship with the US state had to be based on independent power, that is on a united Native coalition rooted in a common vision. Anything less would entail approaching the White House as a supplicant. When we are in a weak position, we may at times need to buy time or seek less reliable alliances but we only do so in the hopes of reconstituting a genuine power base as rapidly as possible.

Tecumseh would be forced to make such a reduced choice. Following the destruction of his headquarters at Prophetstown he brought his remaining forces into alliance with Britain, as the lesser danger to Native interests, in order to try to reduce US power.

With a backdrop painting of the big picture in place, we can begin to evaluate the prospects of the election strategies. In particular I will compare the positions of Obama's Left supporters as expressed by members of Progressives for Obama and others, with the prospects of 'third party' organizing as represented in the Green Party campaign of Rep. Cynthia McKinney and her running mate Rosa Clemente. I do this because the stated politics and practice of the McKinney campaign are the most compatible with the general strategy advocated in this paper. The Ralph Nader independent campaign is politically weakened in my opinion by the candidate's discomfort with collective accountability (he frames his campaign as an expression of his personal right to run if he wants to) and his disinterest in organization-building. His campaign could be effective as a platform for raising issues and registering dissent but this paper is about building a sustainable grassroots challenge to the existing order, which requires a deliberate strategy in order to accomplish. I encourage partisans of the Nader campaign, an electoral boycott or smaller Left parties to join the discussion as well, as long as it remains rooted in a larger strategy for transformative social change.

The Obama road

The position associated with Progressives for Obama (Pfo) is that strong Left support for Senator Obama's campaign will strengthen our ability to push for more radical change. I have been able to identify four themes in the pronouncements of the pro-Obama Left. One is the hope that Left involvement with the campaign, along with the raised expectations of a young, newly mobilized social base, will pressure him to take more progressive stances; Secondly that by supporting Obama we gain credibility with this new wave of voters; third that as a Democrat he will use his power to appoint more acceptable court justices and administrators; and fourth, that a McCain victory would represent an unacceptable setback. Beyond that, there are some internal differences regarding the extent to which Obama is seen as a progressive force versus one that can be influenced.

Progressives for Obama (Pfos) and their allies sometimes mention the need for radical movement building and a long-term plan for building a Left center of gravity, but do not lay out how supporting Obama would contribute to it. The imperative to elect Obama is taken to be so obvious as to need little elaboration. In the face of what is seen as a huge opportunity to participate in this historic campaign, the suggestion of an alternative approach is not taken seriously. Pfo initiator Bill Fletcher describes opposition electoral efforts outside of the Democratic Party as "symbolic" ways to register dissatisfaction: "While this is noble," he condescends, "It is not about serious political strategy. It is rooted in justifiable anger, but does little to build the sort of social-political bloc that we need to combat the empire and introduce significant structural reforms (not to mention, to open discussions on the possibility of an alternative system)." ²⁴ Theology professor Mark Lewis Taylor tells us it will be sad if movement activists "decide to stand on the sidelines of this electoral process to preserve their principled, more radical purity." ²⁵ Tom Hayden warns of the opportunity missed by "those who sat by dismissing the Obama campaign" as opposed to people like him "who believe it is important to be engaged in mass movements."

In order to make a serious strategic comparison we will have to rescue the third party option from this caricature of it and test both against the challenges of confronting an empire.

One of the recurring themes in Left election debates in the US is the question of presidential nominations. Tom Hayden, a prominent charter member of Progressives for Obama, explains. "We believe that certain presidential appointments matter," he says. "Such as the US Supreme Court, the civil rights division of the Justice Department, labor standards enforcers, appointments to the Federal Communications Commission and the head of the Environmental Protection Agency." He adds "experience teaches us that who is president matters."

Taken alone, Hayden's statement is a mere truism. It's that "dime of difference" issue again. The real question is whether who holds the presidency matters to the same degree under all conditions. Does the nominations issue mean we must always support

whomever the Democrats nominate? The value of the “dime” expands and contracts from one election cycle to another depending on the nature of the candidates and the interplay of national and global forces. We must always try to assess it with some precision as it does us little good to either dismiss its impact or exaggerate its importance. In Obama’s case, the record is not encouraging. As Senator he voted in favor of the worst of the Bush nominations, including Alberto Gonzales (torture and death warrants), Michael Chertoff (proponent of water-boarding and indiscriminate round-ups of people of Middle-eastern descent), John Negroponte (of Central American death squad fame), John Roberts (indefinite detention without trial), Robert Gates (“pre-emptive” invasions), along with a line-up of anti-regulation regulators and anti-civil-liberties judges.²⁶

The most often cited rationale for supporting the Obama candidacy, however, is the large number of enthusiastic young voters inspired by Obama’s progressive campaign rhetoric during the primary campaign. Some advocates are still basking in that hopeful eloquence. Micah Sifry, after viewing an Obama campaign videotape about creating a vast, on-line community for change, concludes, “Personally, I find this vision pretty breathtaking, even if we don’t know all the details yet. It is challenging my hard-earned cynicism about leaders and political movements.”

It is saddening to hear Alice Walker declare of Obama, “He is, in fact, a remarkable human being, not perfect but humanly stunning, like King was and like Mandela is. We look at him, as we looked at them, and are glad to be of our species. He is the change America has been trying desperately and for centuries to hide, ignore, kill.” But King and Mandela stepped onto the road to challenge and dismantle oppressive and destructive social machines. Obama asks only the opportunity to administer one. He does so proclaiming his embrace of its foundational racist and colonialist myths. Walker is not alone in hungering for a meaningful change of direction, or at least of tone. This hunger is what makes the Obama campaign significant, not as the embodiment of popular desires but as a symbolic concession to them and even more important, as a validation of them.

“We believe,” says Hayden. “that Obama’s core constituency is a progressive one, and the new voters he excites will be progressive political activists for years to come.”²⁷ How this enthusiasm (sometimes called “Obamamania”) can be directed into more radical politics by the Pfo strategy is never explicitly laid out.

The essence of that strategy seems to be to direct a stream of open letters to Obama calling on him to take more progressive positions and complaining that “Obama can do better” on one or another issue. When asked with what power we can back up such a wish list, Pfo’s Carl Davidson responds that “we don’t need to make any threats, just fairly accurate and well-grounded predictions.” “We tell what will happen if he ignores our message,” he explains. “He will demobilize his hardest, most committed workers, exactly the ones he needs to expand the electorate and win.”²⁸ Media activist (and DNC delegate) Norman Solomon agrees: “Obama and his top advisors will have to gauge the importance of such deflation and waning enthusiasm.”²⁹

These comments suggest a strategy based on influence rather than power. An influence

paradigm presupposes that we share significant interests with the candidate. Friends can influence friends since they have no basic conflict in their goals. A power perspective is one in which we are prepared to exact a price if he ignores our interests.

A cross-section of Left-progressive intellectuals has aligned with this approach. An open letter from the Nation magazine, initially signed by 49 left and left-liberal luminaries warns,

*retreating from the stands that have been the signature of your campaign will weaken the movement whose vigorous backing you need in order to win and then deliver the change you have promised.*³⁰

A similar approach is reflected in a letter to Obama from 150 clergy calling on him to embrace a series of visionary positions. Horace Campbell suggests that “it is only a bottom up movement that can prevent Obama from becoming a racial decoy for Wall street.”³¹

They each append their own version of a social justice program for Obama to embrace. The most fantastic is from Nation writers Robert Borosage and Katrina vanden Heuvel. They call for a mass mobilization to help Obama and a new “reform majority” in Congress pass the “Obama Agenda.” This purportedly includes “an end to the occupation of Iraq, using money squandered there to rebuild America; affordable healthcare for all, paid for by raising taxes on the wealthy; a concerted drive for energy independence, generating jobs while investing in renewable energy and conservation. He is committed to empowering labor, to holding corporations more accountable and to challenging our trade policies...”³²

Noting the Obama’s increasing open embrace of reactionary policy positions, Tom Hayden is perplexed:

*It is difficult to understand Obama’s motivation. Perhaps it is his lifetime success at straddling positions and disarming potential opponents. Perhaps it is a lawyer’s training. Perhaps being surrounded by national security advisors who oppose what they call ‘precipitous withdrawal,’ and pragmatic Democrats distinctly uncomfortable with their antiwar roots.*³³

Exactly what part of “New Democrat” is so confusing? Did Obama become surrounded by establishment policy advisors simply because he left the window open and they happened to blow in?

Given Obama’s own stated positions it is more likely that the money saved from his limited pull-back from Iraq will support an expanding -- and equally doomed -- central and south Asian war, centered in Afghanistan. A war to further entangle us in a multilateral scramble for control of fossil fuels under a “war on terror” ideological cover that will (along with the mortgage bailout) suck the oxygen out of any dreams of expanded (or even stabilized) social programs.

Hayden pins his hopes for an end to the wars and “deep revisions” in corporate trade agreements on the possibility of a “more progressive Congress.” This is wishful thinking run wild. Power only makes modern Democrats more timid. They seize moments when they have a legislative majority, to prove that they are not the lefty reformers that the Right accuses them of being. They are now salivating for the chance to demonstrate that it is they who are best qualified to run a muscular and punitive empire.

According to Pfo theory, our role should be to advise Obama on how best to maintain the hopeful illusions of his young supporters long enough to get into the White House. Then this “movement” without organization or voice of its own will keep his feet to the fire and make sure that he enacts a progressive program. It is difficult to imagine that they believe that progressive campaign sounds meant to secure votes from the powerless will somehow translate into actual policies once he is ensconced among the powerful and getting his classified daily briefings from the CIA. If the progressive Obama boosters were to succeed in helping him win on the wings of a progressive program, his first order of business would be to reassure the Right, the Whites and the corporate elite that they have nothing to fear. We live in the post-Bill Clinton era and Obama has been a faithful student.

If the imperative to defeat McCain trumps the need for long term independent organizing, it raises the question of whether this choice is to be a cornerstone of Left strategic policy? In other words, under what conditions will it be appropriate to build a viable people’s party? After Obama’s first term when he will be faced with another reactionary threat? After a McCain term, when the nation will be desperate to end the Republican reign and left-liberals will be clamoring for a united front to elect a Democrat? Is an opposition party to wait for a mythical future when we can have our cake and eat it too -- when we can pull a third party out of the hat without having had to build it for years in the shadow of real power?

The hopes and expectations awakened by both the Clinton and Obama campaigns should not be dismissed or trivialized. Raised expectations can play out powerfully, independently of the spark that ignites them. The emergence of independent nations in Africa helped galvanize African American consciousness and fertilized the soil for the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Their example was powerful regardless of the actual nature of the states that emerged. The excitement among high school kids of color at seeing a dark leader on the threshold of power will reverberate for years but how it plays out will partly flow from the choices we make.

If elections are a “teachable moment,” what is it that will be learned? Bill Clinton raised many hopes as well, after all. Does anyone remember “a town called Hope”? Young people who had grown up in the Reagan years heaved a great sigh of relief in the conviction that everything would now be alright. Will increasingly forlorn efforts to advise Obama on how to maintain progressive illusion for his electoral base assist them in becoming long-term activists? When the inevitable disappointment arrives will it be a badge of credibility for the Left to be able to boast “we drank the Kool-Aid too, but *we* knew it was poisonous”?

Power in a Non-Profit World

Time out! Before we go any further we must address an uncomfortable (but unavoidable) question. Do we really believe -- as the World Social Forum movement has posited -- that "Another World is Possible"? (Pause here and read the question over.) In what passes for Leftist strategic discourse, one is hard-pressed to find signs that we really believe it and are fighting for it. And why should we? We are talking, after all, about taking on the most powerful empire in history, with seemingly limitless military capacity, control over the ideology industries and a strangle-hold on the political system.

Transformative change refers to a very different reality. One in which a democratically empowered grassroots makes decisions and allocates resources based on human need rather than the greedy demands of a powerful few. To place such a vision at the center of our political strategy requires the leap of faith that it is at least conceivable that we can get there from here; that sufficient strategic wisdom, cultural power and organizational capacity can be mustered to challenge the global corporations for control of our planet. It takes audacity to daydream such a thing!

A major obstacle to embracing a vision of radical possibility is the structural incapacity of the non-profit sector to act as an agent for more than superficial reforms. This sector is the offspring of the Democratic Party. It blossomed after the movements of the 50s-70s, in part responding to the demands created by those movements. It has become the official channel for the social justice aspirations of civil society. As such it has won specific reforms and saved many lives through campaigns around environmental and workplace health, human rights and access to services. At the same time it is made up of entities empowered to address only single symptomatic issues and not the fundamental underlying obstacle that stands in the way of resolving them. The world these organizations inhabit is a complex web of relationships with elected officials, regulators, foundations and the media. Their efforts are constrained by their inability to address the elephant in the room: that the controls of society have been granted to corporations to employ for their own benefit. The idea that every area of social life should have serving the common good as its primary mission, does not have a place in polite discussion.

The structural dilemma of this sector impels it to cling ever more tightly to the Democratic machinery even as it is able to extract fewer meaningful concessions. Sometimes we see such groups attacking campaigns that support their full program in order to preserve their relationships with political hacks that consistently undermine it. The die was cast in the Clinton years with the independent congressional campaign of Steve Kelly in Montana in 1994. The Sierra Club joined the effort to crush his significant challenge in order to protect a Democratic incumbent who had opposed mining reform, grazing reform and challenges to logging company subsidies. Kelly's shoestring campaign registered enough public support that it alarmed the liberal establishment. Even though Democrats in the west had moved steadily to the right on land, wilderness, water and contamination issues, the need to maintain their cozy relationship trumped any idea of a principled grassroots environmental struggle.³⁴ Like any vulnerable grassroots community referenced earlier, these non-profits cannot openly pursue their long-term interests because the only power block with whom they can seek alliances is to their

right.

To administrators whose careers have been spent within that universe, talk of a movement to replace the entire corporate/military/state system with one that meets human needs sounds like the romantic nostalgia of people who forgot to put away their Che T-shirts. The idea of risking short term advantages on “the playing field” in exchange for a longer term strategy aimed at undermining the system itself makes no sense if you see no real prospects for that to happen. It is much more reasonable to secure a few more allies in Congress and, hopefully, increased funding to make whatever improvements can be made in people’s lives.

Struggles for homeless shelters, side agreements to treaties, pollution standards, welfare rights, media access and police review boards are not struggles for justice. They are struggles to mitigate, limit and regulate injustice. They are carried out by people who fervently hold a vision of real justice in their hearts, a vision that cannot even be articulated by their organizations. That would require being able to challenge the basic capitalist principle that private greed is the rightful and fundamental organizing principle of society. This disconnect is the source of great frustration for organizers. Thousands of institutions, campaigns and projects are working themselves ragged trying to address issues whose solutions are blocked by the entrenched power of financial interests. A Social Charter alternative could represent a solution to this powerful contradiction, offering a brighter road to thousands of activists already competent in the arts of coordination, mobilization, power mapping, communicating and targeting. The experience of other countries suggests that reform organizations tied to the power structure can eventually break away once there is an alternative power center able to undermine the legitimacy of the system. They cannot be expected, however, to take the risks needed to bring it into being.

Scholar Adolph Reed Jr. frames the Obama phenomena as a class alignment, “one that promises to cement an alliance anchored in the professional-managerial class (including, perhaps especially, the interchangeable elements of which now set the policy agendas for what remains of the women’s, environmentalist, civil rights and even labor movements) and the ‘progressive’ wing of the investor class.”³⁵

This non-profit managerial stratum is seeking a renewed influence within a global neo-liberal order that has little practical use for it. The frustration of rank and file organizers in part reflects the structural mobility of their targets. When gains are made at any level in the political system, capital can shift the locus of decision making to a jurisdiction where it has greater leverage. Municipal ordinances are wiped out by state or federal-level maneuvers (as Obama helped achieve with the Class Action Fairness Act) and international trade agreements can eviscerate national governments as a forum for popular reform. When popular opposition jeopardized elite interests in international trade negotiations, the US shifted to a strategy of pursuing multiple bi-lateral agreements. The time of non-profit corporations instigating social reforms within an expanding economy has slipped away. Increasingly their efforts are tied up in defensive actions and mitigation of the damage. An Obama presidency can offer advocacy professionals renewed access to

policy circles, insider jobs and media visibility but with no practical impact on the course of history.

Myles Horton, founder of the popular education Highlander Center is describing this sector when he says “there can be many organizations without there being a movement. Organizations with non-structural reform programs working to achieve limited goals can form alliances but there’s still no qualitative difference and no movement potential.”³⁶

These are the organizations best positioned to absorb the influx of potential new activists that Obama is supposed to generate, mostly as volunteers and fundraising targets. Redirecting some of that unleashed energy into activism for real change requires establishing a visible pole committed to such change.

Prospects for a People’s Campaign

Contrary to PoF’s Bill Fletcher, third party organizing is not merely a matter of registering righteous anger. Like any tactical device it can reflect a variety of strategy paradigms depending on the vision of those who give it life. This can include coalition-building among constituencies, accumulating administrative and organizational capacity, establishing alternative communication networks and challenging the absorption of dissent by the liberal establishment.

A people’s campaign, such as McKinney and Clemente have established, openly aligns itself with local community, labor and other struggles with independent organizing bases. McKinney and Clemente can be seen at anti-war marches, poor people’s protests and anti-police brutality events which an Obama or a Biden would avoid even acknowledging. They have raised the issues such as the post-Katrina battles, mass incarceration, street violence, militarism and police brutality that have recently provided a renewed focus for the remaining currents of the Black Power movement. They offer a more productive outlet for hip-hop political mobilization than simply registering large numbers of youth to vote Democratic. Most importantly for youth engagement, they embody a model of cynical engaged activism in contrast to the cynical politics that dominates the political culture.

Through an opposition party strategy, a movement can speak with a clear voice and articulate a radical alternative vision. Organizing and movement building are in large part a matter of creating experiences from which people can draw lessons and increase capacity. An experience of crucial value in the US context would be for grassroots activists and constituents to witness the phenomenon of leaders on the national stage who do not have to remember each morning which side of their mouth they are supposed to be speaking out of today. Leaders for whom their political and moral commitments are the one solid rock of their campaign, not their prime changeable commodity. Leaders whose line does not change depending on whom they are addressing or what stage in the campaign they are reaching.

A campaign such as this will clearly fail the ‘viability’ test. That is to say that it strays too far from elite interests to be afforded any media access or major donors. Both official and

private election rules will keep them out of debates. Media attention, to the extent that there is any, will likely be limited to speculation as to whether the campaign will hurt the Democrats.

The appeal of an independent national campaign is that it is one of the few venues available to present a full-blown political program. Given the fractured nature of US organizing, most political education is issue-focused while local electoral activism rarely addresses foreign policy or the national economy. The progressive program which Obama's leftist supporters are waiting in vain for him to espouse is being clearly articulated by McKinney and Clemente -- free from corporate money and focus groups.

Bill Fletcher argues that independent national electoral politics is not a worthy focus for activists because the rules are stacked against its success. This is true for any form of action that poses a threat to elite interests. That's why they put roadblocks in our way. Consider the strike, the picket line, the protest mobilization, the secondary boycott, international blockade-busting, solidarity work and legal defense of detainees. You don't retreat from every field that the elite signals that it wants for itself. If people engaged in opposition party activism find their road blocked by such obstacles, then the obstacles themselves become a locus for education and action. Activists can either mobilize to demand changes in the rules of the road or choose to direct their efforts onto more favorable terrain. We do not have to "sit on the sidelines" because the big boys say only Democrats and Republicans get to play.

The mainstream invisibility imposed on the campaign reflects the balance of power at the moment. This can be challenged through audacious action. If the Left intellectuals grouped around Progressives for Obama wanted to leave a lasting mark on movement history (and even get Obama to notice them), they could do so by announcing the formation of "Obama Defectors for McKinney." They could hold assemblies in major cities (especially in battleground states) and share the podium with the kinds of grassroots leaders that Obama would never be seen near. They could mobilize their media contacts and their performer friends. They would then be directly addressing the newly activated youth they speak so much about, rather than trying to get the attention of Obama's uninterested speech writers. They would be offering them something solid and true, a real politics of integrity with which to deepen their political awakening. These people came to Obama because they believed in radical possibility and saw him as the vehicle to achieve it. They deserve leaders willing to offer the real thing.

This may not elicit a tidal wave of appreciation from the Obama faithful but it would lay the basis for respect and credibility when the illusions fall away and people go searching for a political avenue that allows them to hold onto their hope. Movement building is not about instant gratification, it's about uniting people around a meaningful vision expressed in a credible program.

Fletcher approvingly quotes Francis Fox Piven to the effect that there are those who wish for an electoral politics that does not exist in the USA and wish to avoid the electoral politics that does. A more useful prescription is to use the electoral politics that does exist

in order to create the electoral politics that does not. Even big trees must start from seed. Waiting indefinitely until a powerful alternative leaps full grown onto the stage before deigning to support it will be a fruitless endeavor.

When the Right wing began its long march through the school boards and city councils to the seats of national power, they did so around a program of conservative renewal. It might appear that they were starting small and isolated. But it was not from scratch. They knew that their message could potentially resonate with a latent but immobilized power base. We are in a similar position today. Basing our political organizing on our solid radical values, on a politics “that does not yet exist,” we can offer an oasis of integrity that in a deeply thirsty land.

Can the Green Party become the vehicle to unite the marginalized constituencies I propose as being central to a reordering of power? Who can say? It has had to struggle to overcome the limitations of its white environmentalist founding demographic. Even today its record on race and poverty varies widely from state to state. What’s important is that it has stepped forward to play its part, a part for which it has systematically laid the groundwork through years of organizing against the odds. They have been rewarded with over 200 office holders in the lower levels of the political system and a nationwide network able to engage in collective work.

The stated objective of the McKinney campaign is to reach the threshold of five percent of the popular vote to qualify the party for public funds in future elections. That goal is a long shot in the Obama year. More significant will be their ability to lay the groundwork for ongoing organizing by establishing linkages among communities of color, among immigrants and youth (even those too young to vote at present) and establishing an activist presence that will survive the electoral cycle. The alliances established during the campaign should develop a program for continued education and action when the elections are over.

In organizing, one seizes opportunities as they present themselves. The availability of a leader of McKinney’s merits should not be squandered lightly. At the same time I have argued in this paper that our choices should be made with a full appreciation of the larger forces at play and it is from that perspective that I frame my support for an opposition organizing approach intended to directly build the core of that independent power block we all agree is needed. This is not a knee-jerk political reflex on my part. In 2004 I proposed a course of action (The Lizard Strategy) designed to help defeat Bush by leveraging the reactionary John Kerry into office. A Bush defeat would have been interpreted internationally as a rejection of his global war policies (Kerry’s real politics aside). The positions of the leading candidates would make such a gesture meaningless today.

Weimar and the specter of fascism

Revolutionary elder Amiri Baraka poses another danger in play in the US political scene, the threat of fascism. He notes parallels to the pre-Hitler, Weimar Republic period, in Germany in the unfolding financial crisis, the unraveling of US military adventures, and manipulation and outright theft of elections. This is a serious concern. One does not have

to find exact parallels to understand the dangerous possibilities. The danger is of a militarized state with popular support based on racism, xenophobia and authoritarian patriarchy. In addition to Baraka's observations we can also note the existence of powerful corporate-owned mercenary armies such as Blackwater, loyal only to capital (and who constitute a political as well as a military presence). Past US concessions on civil and labor rights have been conditioned by the need to present a humanist international image able to counter Nazi, and later Soviet ideological attacks. Today only Latin American left populism, still finding its international voice, is able to challenge the US in the language of human rights and justice.

This threat presents itself in the US in ways unique to our configuration of political forces. There is little evidence of confrontation between the Republican and Democratic parties over civil liberties, incarceration or militarism. Those popular sectors who have stood up to the erosion of political rights -- including liberal advocacy groups and professional associations -- have done so with no significant backing from the Democrats (who have signed on to the most onerous measures). The long rightward slide has been bipartisan, with the policies of the Carter administration paving the way for Reagan, and Clinton preparing the way for W. Bush. Is it reasonable to expect an Obama administration to challenge this rightward trajectory or to simply play its part? The next administration will probably preside over a series of dramatic foreign policy and economic failures that will not put it in a mood to champion civil liberties.

A particularly dangerous aspect of the Obama ideological package is his vilification of poor African-Americans as the cause of their own social problems. In Obama's post-racial world, Black pathology is the major obstacle to racial equality. It is Blacks who must give up the ("divisive") fight against racism and who must take responsibility for their own cultural dysfunction. It's that colonial narrative again, the one that the empire needs in order to breathe. This reactionary paradigm, made manifest in Bill Clinton's welfare reform (which Obama praises) and rendered fashionable by Bill Cosby, can gain traction under Obama as under no other leader while he could simultaneously undermine Black resistance. Obama is well positioned to legitimize the ideological precepts needed for the next stage of rightist consolidation, as each of his recent Democratic predecessors has done. It's conceivable that a Rightist administration following Obama would be in a stronger position than a McCain government would be today to foster an authoritarian regime.

Recognizing the threat of dictatorship does mean that we are in a re-play of the 1932 German elections. Many countries have found their own routes to fascism. In South Africa in the early 1950s, President Daniel Francois Malan of the racist Nationalist Party (and the shadowy, fascistic Afrikaner Broederbond) was moving aggressively to institute the racist restrictions that would become the apartheid system, in defiance of the existing constitution. ANC leader Nelson Mandela dismissed the idea of rallying around a "progressive" wing of the white elite as the answer to the threat:

*"In any case the political immorality, cowardice and vacillations of the so-called progressives among whites render them useless as a force against fascism."*³⁷

In the end, White elements of various ideologies would join the opposition, but it was an opposition led and defined by a powerful Black insurgency with its own leadership, organization and vision. The atrophied survival instincts of today's Democratic mainstream lead it to respond to threats from the Right by donning Republican camouflage. Authoritarianism will not be stopped because Obama, Pelosi and Reid block the road shouting "They shall not pass!" These luminaries are more eager to prove their bipartisanship by "reaching out across the aisle" (which can only mean to their right!). They will start by overlooking the crimes committed against law and humanity, in plain view, by the preceding administration. Their fear of being blamed for a breach of the national defenses has made them willing allies in supporting wiretapping expansion and continuous strengthening of the repressive USA-PATRIOT ACT (which Obama voted for on at least six occasions).³⁸

The Nazis' rise was based on a strategy of accumulating power. Hitler's appointment as Chancellor was just one tactical probe among many which they had attempted, including a failed effort to win the presidential elections. Had that route also failed, they'd have pursued others. There are significant sectors today, including liberals, alarmed at the steady constriction of public political space. The Democrats are not providing them leadership, however, and frantically rallying to put and keep them in power will not change that. Better to establish a genuine oppositional pole in the political landscape that can articulate an organized response to the bipartisan rightward stampede. Of particular importance will be to foment Black-Brown political alignment, such as is symbolically embodied in the McKinney/Clemente ticket.

Local police departments are being systematically integrated into the national security apparatus with "National Security Special Events," such as this year's political conventions, providing a convenient mechanism. Current police thinking blurs the lines of distinction between street gangs, organized crime, terrorist networks and political dissent, and favors a counter-insurgency model as its mode of response. The executive branch has established a practice of repeatedly stepping beyond its legal authority and the legislature (with full Democratic complicity) either stands aside or retroactively authorizes the abuses. Facing down police repression will be a crucial dimension of movement organizing in the years to come. Doing so with the Democratic Party as our imaged protectors is frightening.

Our weakness in the face of this election is the legacy of our having not built a solid alternative political center of gravity capable of galvanizing support around a popular program (despite widespread public agreement with many of our positions). Postponing that task indefinitely in order to strengthen the hand of the Republicans' junior partners will not make us safer. We do not live in an era when Liberal leaders are equipped with spines. The right-wing trajectory of the elite means that the conditions for initiating that movement-building task will become steadily less favorable with each successive election.

The hopeful expectations of the Obama followers make a Left politics of integrity even more important. The betrayal that they will inevitably experience will send them in

search of other forms of engagement. Some may reasonably conclude that all this lovey-dovey talk of equality and justice is just a sham after all. If the only other options on the menu are McCain or apathy, we should not be surprised by their choices. The Nazis were openly courting Communist voters in 1932, enticing them with “real” answers to their frustration and class resentment.

The depth and accelerating rhythm of the global crisis calls for global systemic regime change if we are to head off the catastrophic unraveling of the planet’s thermal, water, ecological and social regulatory systems. This pressing crisis must be factored into our strategic considerations. It creates both the imperative and the promising possibility of a new road for human society, one that can address the popular aspirations to which the elite can only offer lip service. A road that will, importantly, align us with emerging opposition movements around the world.

V) Finding Our Way

Reading the strategic map

Considering the demographic pressures and commercial dynamism of the United States thirty years following its birth, it would be easy to dismiss Tecumseh's effort as a delaying action for a lost cause. The reality was far more complex. Then as now, the conflicts over land and resources were as much political as military. The competing interests of Indigenous, European and settler powers played out on a panorama of shifting alliances as each nation sought maximum advantage. If Tecumseh's coalition had consolidated in time, it would have altered the strategic balance in the central continent. Public support in the US might be counted on for limited conflicts bringing tangible results. All-out war against a solid front of native nations in a hostile international environment, would have had to be considered more carefully.

The prognosis would be for a prolonged conflict. Native forces could rely on superior mobility, intimate knowledge of the terrain and the support from the resident population while the US would be dependent on vulnerable lines of supply in a hostile land. Embroiling the US in a major confrontation with all of its Indian neighbors to the west would leave it vulnerable to attack from European rivals eager to take advantage of the new nation. At the same time, tensions were rising to the south of the new republic as Seminole-controlled regions in Florida were becoming a magnet to African people escaping the slave plantations. Tecumseh's nation would block the expansionist ambitions of the slave aristocracy, necessary to bolster their power relative to the mercantile North. As was the case with the Seminole territory, a vast Native region, hostile to and bordering the US, would offer an obvious refuge to escapees from slavery.

Native control over the fur trade and transportation routes across the woods and plains would provide leverage in their relationships, and not only with France and Britain. Major markets in nations with no colonial foothold in America were also dependent on the North American fur trade and would have an interest in preventing threats their access. The Metis, a mestizo people of mostly Indigenous, French and Scottish extraction -- and key players in the fur trade -- were aligned politically and economically with Native interests (Tecumseh's secretary, Billy Caldwell, was Potawatomi-European Metis). Even if the US were to overcome or dodge these challenges, a unified territorial alliance would have had a major impact on the ultimate map of North America that would emerge, and the relative position of Native peoples within it.

The premise of the movement strategy proposed here echoes Tecumseh's in important ways. We can only progress based on an alliance committed to our real interests and that does not sell out our natural allies in exchange for concessions on narrow interests. This is not a recipe for isolation but is rather the way to accumulate power. It requires us to boldly embrace the language of radical possibility. Leaders who cannot believe in it must be replaced with those who can. As far as I know, this summarizes the experience of every transformative movement.

A public opposition movement united around a distinct call for a just society will have a broadened menu of strategic options. We might, as it suits us, choose to support a mainstream political candidate, launch an alternative campaign, mobilize to define the issues while not participating directly, call for a boycott or pursue other options. Having numbers on the street united behind our own vision gives meaning to any of these choices. Delivering progressive constituencies to Obama with neither leverage, demands nor a radicalizing program only distracts from our real task of building such a social force. It might be understandable after years of Bush, but it's not serious political strategy.

If the US were home to a dynamic Liberalism ready and able to block the road to a militarized future and confident enough to impose life-support on a hostile corporate class, then options might look different. Such a Liberalism is not on the horizon, however. Acting as though it were there will not give it life. There are those who wish to engage with a Democratic Party that does not exist and do not wish to come to terms with the Democratic Party that does. There is no "there" there.

The "Obama moment" that our progressive friends keep alluding to is indeed a moment to seize. But the excited youngsters who gave Obama his primary victories have begun to back away as his conservative colors have come into focus. The kids aren't fools. We should honor their intelligence by using all our abilities to propel an alternative vision to the fore, one with integrity and justice at its core.

Tecumseh and Accountability

For Tecumseh, the central issue for his native nation was unity around the defense of land. The confederation he sought to build would have as its foundation an agreement that no peoples' land could be sold or transferred except by consent of the united leadership. To sell territory to the United States undermined the prospects for all native people and was to be considered treason. Leaders (or imposters) who violated this sacred pledge would have forfeited their right to live.

A Social Charter provides a standard for accountability. Situating our organizing within a collective commitment to justice provides a basis to challenge each other around opportunism, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. It gives us standing to require the best from each other.

Meaning of the Obama Moment

If you pay close attention to your enemies they will always tell you how they are vulnerable. We can get some indications by looking at what the "Obama moment" is about. A viable mainstream candidate needs popular enthusiasm and the confidence of sectors of the elite. There is no inherent quality that destines one candidate to be invisible and another to be viable. If Cynthia McKinney were signaling her commitment to fulfill the elite's non-negotiable agenda, she would no doubt be a known name to the US public. Her abandonment of a progressive past would make her irresistible to the "news" media. She'd be interviewed by serious TV hosts about recent international developments and would have received enough contributions to purchase TV time in several states.

Obama was able to reassure the elite while speaking the language of radical possibility to the base. That such an appeal ignited a wildfire of excitement is of profound significance. It complements the premise of the Tecumseh strategy that the legitimacy of the status quo is eroding. Republicans propose strengthening a reactionary social base to control the rest of society. Democrats prefer a broader social base but cannot deliver on their promises. The decline of US global dominance will create conditions that may outstrip the ability of either of these strategies. What will emerge in their place will be a matter for contention.

The late conservative economist Milton Friedman once opined, “Only a crisis, actual or perceived, produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”

Ideas don’t just happen to be “lying around.” They originate somewhere. It would be more accurate to say that crises bring to light the processes that have been maturing in the dark. What answers people seize on in times of flux depends on what forces and which people have been at work implanting ideas in periods that popular educator Myles Horton calls the “ebb times.”

The Obama upsurge is not just a matter of young idealists coming of age. It also reflects the stark fears of people losing their homes and jobs and the chronic insults of discrimination and disrespect. When collective hopes are disappointed, people often turn to more narrow definitions of identity through which to defend their interests. If progressive forces will not put a credible alternative on the table then we should not be surprised when people do not flock to us.

The Obama road revisited

I must confess to some confusion about how the Obama craze has played out. That he has awakened a base of supporters hungering for a better world is fine and wonderful. That he has stirred such passions among seasoned movement veterans is cause for concern.

Following Obama’s selection of the old imperial war-hawk Joe Biden to share the Democratic ticket, Bill Fletcher wrote a disturbing analysis for the Black Commentator. He starts by asserting that, “From the standpoint of campaign strategy, I must say that it was a brilliant decision.” I suppose you could say this of all of Obama’s pandering moves to the right. The choosing between viability and integrity is not a dilemma that costs an ambitious politician much sleep. He then posits that Obama’s VP choice “clarifies two critical points,” first that the democratic ticket is “liberal/centrist,” and not “progressive” and second, that “we can now settle the question that Obama is not a candidate of a social movement.”³⁹

That someone of Fletcher’s formidable analytical abilities is just now discovering these things is astonishing! Was there ever a reason (other than blind faith) to believe otherwise? If we return to the founding letter of Progressives for Obama, which Fletcher authored with three colleagues, we find evidence of both the blindness and the faith. They are assessing Obama’s then recently delivered speech on racism (offered in response to

the Rev. Wright controversy):

“The future has arrived. Obama’s march 17 speech on racism was as great a speech as ever given by a presidential candidate, revealing a philosophical depth, personal authenticity and political intelligence that should convince all but the hardest ideologues that he carries unmatched leadership potentials for overcoming the divide-and-conquer tactics which have sundered Americans since the first slave ships arrived here in chains... Only words? What words they were.”⁴⁰

If they had listened more discerningly, perhaps with a bit more ‘ideological hardness,’ they might have taken note of these Obama words:

“...the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren’t simply controversial. They weren’t simply a religious leader’s effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country -- a view that sees racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle east as rooted primarily in the actions of our stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam.”

In place of the politics of divide and conquer we are to be offered a politics of unite and conquer: bring together domestic constituencies to better confront global challenges to US hegemony. Obama has never left much room for doubt that his politics are quite consistent with those of a Joseph Biden.

After acknowledging that Obama’s rightward moves “do not reflect a movement toward a new politics,” Fletcher sums up his thinking:

“That said, I remain steadfast in support of the Obama candidacy. I do so because I am clear about what the candidacy represents and what it does not. One does not support a candidate because s/he represents a fundamental break with the past. Supporting candidates must be decided upon an assessment of the moment, specifically, the overall balance of forces and the openings that can emerge through the victory of a specific candidate. In that regard, real politics are not the politics of anger and symbolism, but are the politics of coalition building with a longterm objective of changing the balance of power and, ultimately, introducing a new practice of politics.”

The statement of principle at the center of this passage is reasonable: we make choices in line with our understanding of the balance of forces, although I would suggest that openings can be engendered through strategic political organizing, not simply as a product of who wins. He continues to hammer on his pet distinction between “real politics” (presumably begging Obama to talk Left to us) and what he angrily dismisses as “the politics of anger and symbolism,” which is his code for opposition electoral politics.

In place of a concrete critique of such politics, grounded in an exposition of the actual political moment, Fletcher relies on repetition of the phrase “politics of anger.” We on the

Left must “reject the politics of anger,” he admonishes, and must prepare to “actually build progressive, grassroots electoral organizations that ally with other social movements.” Again referring to “the symbolic politics of anger, we should have enough of third party candidacies that express our outrage with the two mainstream parties.” He then prescribes “building an organization” of our own because “Lacking organization, we are condemned to howling in the dark, hoping to get someone’s attention.”

If he is referring to the McKinney/Clemente campaign (in an earlier piece he makes clear that they are indeed included), then something is quite out of order. That campaign, headed by radical Black and Puerto Rican women, is based on organizing around a positive political program; supporting coalition building among the disenfranchised; and constructing a long term grassroots electoral organization on the basis of these alliances in order to change the balance of power and introduce a new practice of politics. In other words it is embodying all the elements that I -- and according to his formula, Fletcher as well -- would wish from such a campaign. Fletcher’s “politics of anger and symbolism” cannot be discerned anywhere outside of his own angry thoughts.

Perhaps he means that all those goals should be pursued, but only sometime when they won’t threaten the urgent imperative to support Obama (whom we have just discovered is a centrist Democrat). If that is the case, then he should make his case. His resort to distracting rhetoric is disappointing.

What remains unanswered in PfO materials is the central question of how joining the Obama campaign without offering an alternative vision will connect Leftists to Obama’s supporters in any way that is meaningful to movement building. I keep thinking I must have missed a page somewhere. It has not turned up.

Leadership: the movie

For people too young to know what national leadership with integrity looks like, or for those who are convinced that it is a thing of the past, the appearance of an Obama can be pretty exciting. We get to feel part of something exciting and wonderful. If we squint our eyes we can ignore fact the there is no real change being offered. We can convince ourselves that we can finally take pride in being USAmerican, and will be viewed with respect around the world.

It represents a victory that a politician of African descent can seriously contend for national power. It suggests an advance against the most dehumanizing White perceptions of African Americans in this most backward of countries. But representing a victory is not the same as the victory itself. The achievement of high office by Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Alberto Gonzales, Colin Powell, Thomas Clarence, Condoleesa Rice and other women and people of color likewise represent the fruit of struggles that were meant to secure power and expanded rights on the street.

This is Hollywood version of leadership. Like any blockbuster movie it features special effects and scripts carefully crafted to elicit the emotional responses desired from targeted audiences. It is underwritten by the same interests that sponsor military exports, poisoned

communities and mass incarceration. In this narrative a new Black leadership has arisen to fulfill King's 1965 dream, one mature enough to blame Blacks for their problems and reassure Whites that all is well. It's King without the content.

A people's campaign faces limitations due to lack of resources and the hostility of the mainstream media. These limits could be significantly offset if the Left intellectual strata could break its gaze from the oncoming headlights and offer their legitimizing power to the task of opposition movement building. The limitations of a Democratic coat-tails strategy, on the other hand, are structural. No matter how much support we pour into it, it will not move the political process to the Left or establish an independent pole that represents our peoples' hopes.

A movement-wide commitment to a politics of integrity as represented by the Greens would advance the radical cause both on and off the electoral field. It would pose an ideological challenge to the rightist trajectory of Obama and engage with the people energized by the Senator because they thought he represented the real thing. Even if Obama loses the election we will still be stronger with the nucleus of our own radical coalition than basking in the narrow space afforded by the Democratic Party but not any closer to having an instrument of our own with which to pursue our own distinct agenda.

The fear factor: Palin + McCain = Pain

To some readers it will seem incomprehensible to consider any line of action that does not have the election of Senators Barak Obama and Joe Biden as its primary objective. The Republican ticket, with its overt program of drilling, war and patriarchy surely presents too great a threat for us to be messing around with campaigns that aren't going to win anyway. Couldn't we just concentrate on promoting independent political work at the local level (and in non-electoral arenas) while supporting the Democrats on the national scene?

There are two flaws in this plan. First of all, there's the cat principle. If you are reading a newspaper, your cat knows to lie down on top of it in order to gain your attention. National elections are a rare moment in US politics when the public attention is focused on the direction of the country. It provides a context to raise a comprehensive program for "a new politics." Limiting that discussion to corporate representatives banishes real change from national consideration.

The other is that if we go all out to elect a Democratic administration, we cannot then abandon it. The threat from the Right will be just as real the day after the election when the Right wing sound machine will crank up its attack on the new office holders. We will then find ourselves scrambling to counter the Rightist attacks so as not to lose what little protection we have, and working to elect even dismal Democrats to in order to shore up their numbers in Congress. On issues of war, health, environment, energy, equality and so forth, we will accept "what we can get" because forcing the issues would enable a Republican return to power. We might even fantasize about converting the Democrats into a people's party, not because it's a real possibility, but because breaking out of that box is too frightening a prospect. Outside of that box is where the road to freedom begins.

The selection of Governor Palin to be McCain's running mate has raised fears of a future president who believes that an imminent apocalypse is God's will, having her hand beside the launch button for a massive nuclear arsenal. When President Nixon sank into bitterness and alcoholism the nuclear chain of command was secretly circumvented by his underlings. The governing inner circle can distinguish between the personal obsessions of an individual politician and the policy interests of the ruling elite. The button that a President Palin would be allowed to toy with would not have any more live wires in it than it did under Nixon or (we may speculate) under Bush.

Tecumseh and the accommodationists

Following Tecumseh's death at Moraviantown, Ontario on October 5, 1813, elements of his coalition continued to resist the US Americans for as long as they could. When General Andrew Jackson suppressed the last fighting forces of the Red Sticks Creeks in March of 1814, his army included major contingents of Lower Town (White Sticks) Creeks, Choctaw and Cherokee. These Native factions had made common cause with the white government in hopes that their service would protect their own land bases from being usurped in turn. It did not work out that way. The appetites of the ascendant nation did not distinguish "enemy Indian" from "allied India." Tecumseh had been right. It was interested only in identifying "vulnerable" Indian. Upon the conclusion of the fighting Jackson seized all Creek lands, Red Stick and White Stick, comprising half of Alabama and part of southern Georgia. Many defeated Red Sticks made their way to Florida where they would play a role in the pending Seminole Wars of resistance. As the resisting tribes were suppressed, the only possible source of protection for the ones remaining (including the accommodationists) vanished. Without the fist, the fingers would be broken.

We should be all too familiar with this pattern. For decades the AFL-CIO assisted the US government in undermining and destroying independent unions around the world in the hopes of earning special consideration for its own US members. In the process it helped undercut the bargaining position of its own constituency. It helped to compromise the ability of workers abroad to resist the sweatshop invasion and severely downsized the concept and possibilities for solidarity. It is the bargain offered, in different ways, by the Democratic and Republican parties: support the empire, betray your natural allies, and we'll give you some respect. Access is a seductive enticement. It's so exciting to be seated for dinner that you almost don't mind that you only get crumbs. The liberal group MoveOn, which built its membership on the basis of opposing the war in Iraq, now broadcasts only fluff about Obama and silence regarding his commitment, not to end the war, but rather (as journalist Naomi Klein puts it) to "downsize the occupation" in Iraq while supersizing it in Afghanistan.

The SEIU, an early and enthusiastic labor backer of Obama has launched a major campaign to organize WalMart stores but has nothing to say about Obama choosing WalMart champion Jacob Furman as his chief economic advisor. While forces to his right are busy preparing the policies they intend for him to implement, those to the left respond to each humiliation by reaffirming their unconditional loyalty. Klein succinctly captured what this will mean for their place in a possible Obama government: "If you've proven

that you are a doormat, you can pretty much expect to get stomped on.”⁴¹

The logic that has governed US progressive betrayals of the colonized world is pretty straightforward. If we have two candidates who are bad on foreign policy and one of them will cut us some slack on domestic issues, well it's pretty obvious that we choose the one that's going to give us something. In political terms it means joining a de facto alliance with US foreign policy rather than solidarity with the people in its crosshairs. The current election poses that choice in a world where this can no longer be our little secret. In fact two-time electoral support for Bush has been cited by Islamists to justify targeting US American civilians. Obama has outlined his policy of a huge troop surge to Afghanistan backed up with unilateral preemptive strikes on Pakistani soil. Are we willing to sign on?

Conclusion

The problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of sustainable unity. The challenge posed by Tecumseh in the face of a young, expanding power must be resolved in the era of that power's decline. As in Tecumseh's day, we do not have unlimited time. As in his day we face an opposition that understands better than many of us do the threat to their power of a courageous and unified movement. The system of racial and colonial exploitation that has defined the age of corporate dominance has determined our lives and narrowed our prospects for too long. It will need to be dismantled if the world's people are ever to experience a brighter future. This should not be treated as a mere slogan or a fairy-tale for some ever-receding future. It must become the centerpiece of our practical activist agenda. It will only be accomplished collectively and intentionally and systematically. But it can be done.

If we face a historical imperative today it is to overcome the paralysis of strategic vision instilled in our movements through the good cop-bad cop application of terror and co-optation three and a half decades ago. We must let go the tiresome mantra that “we are weak, we are powerless.” It is true that no national movement has confronted so entrenched and powerful a ruling elite as that which we face, but, and more telling, no movement has been more blind to the material, technological and ideological advantages within its grasp or the depth and breadth of its potential alliances around the world.

Obama's promised economic rebirth appears destined to be burned as fuel for an expanding war in Afghanistan, Pakistan and perhaps other unhappy lands in the region. The logic by which we would work to elect Obama would require that we then defend him. No matter how far right he moves, he will always seem a few degrees better than the Republican threat. In plain view of our global audience of assembly workers, child soldiers and migrant farm workers, we will have, in effect, joined the pro-war coalition in exchange for a fistful of tiny promises. Can't you already hear the voices of our labor and civic leaders explaining that, while they personally are not comfortable with the aggressive use of military power “we must give the President's policies a chance to work”? That is the looking glass world we must fight our way out of!

The ideological exhaustion of the non-profit advocacy model has left many of its own foot soldiers longing for more meaningful avenues for change. These are the organizers who feel as though they are “treading water” while they wait for a chance to make a difference. It explains their embrace of a political campaign that was smart enough to address them in the language of their hunger, our hunger.

We must step back to view the broader landscape through which we are moving. The overwhelming scientific consensus on planetary warming is that we’re in big trouble. Very big. Trouble that will extract rapidly escalating costs on humanity and our non-human relatives.

It is as though we were on a ship bound for an island that lies to our west, where we can make a better life. The ship’s owners have promised that it will take us there, but they continue to steer it northward. Sometimes they are willing to placate us by steering a few degrees westward from true north. With enough time, we might rationalize, we will end up going in the right direction. A glance at the map, however, reveals that we are approaching shallow, rocky waters that will destroy our boat. We will have to change course in short order, not just to reach our dreams, but in order to survive. If the ship’s managers refuse to do so then they must be removed. If our own leaders will not take on the task of removing them, they must be replaced.

This is the moment we are living. The dime of difference is real. It can be painfully real. But it is not sufficient to meet the challenge of our time and it must not be permitted to control our minds forever. Our declaration of independence cannot be put off indefinitely.

The technology and innovation for an ecologically sound society exist. They are not compatible with our current ‘operating system.’ The progress made in transportation, energy generation, conservation and food production are blocked by a social structure that serves an intransigent, unelected corporate cult of greediness. The tasks of social transformation and environmental rescue have become one.

If we conclude that the threats are real then our long-term and short-term tasks can be merged into one: create a critical mass of opposition forces, united around a commonly developed vision of a truly different social order. Even our short term ability to maneuver and win reforms will benefit more from the establishment of that political counter-weight than from who gets elected to run the empire.

If we are serious about changing the course of society then we must recognize that our fortunes are inextricably bound up with those of six billion other poor, working, farming, displaced, enlisted and imprisoned people around the world. Betraying their hopes in exchange for the promise of concessions for our own people will not cut it anymore. Without the perspective, experience and assistance of friends in other countries, we cannot win. “All of us or none” is the most powerful organizing principle ever devised...and it is global.

Undermining a destructive but deeply embedded social system is difficult and complex.

There is no simple recipe. If we engage our communities in creating a unifying vision that is worth fighting for, we can endeavor to open that reservoir of strategic brilliance that is the renewable energy source for social movements. It comes down to a strategy of directly challenging the moral legitimacy of the Consensus, accumulating the organizational and cultural capacity to impede its functioning, and nurturing and protecting the emerging structures of an alternative society. The very process of laying this groundwork creates the conditions that make it plausible. Whether we take large steps or small ones is less important than that they lead in the same direction, to where we really want to go, to where the fires form one circle and we can boldly demand a better world for our children. To where we can hope that one day soon we will have earned the right (and it must be earned!) to say “Tecumseh, we have come!”

Endnotes

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