

**CounterPunch on the Stump****View from the Road**

In these final weeks of Campaign 2000 we CounterPunch editors have been criss-crossing the country with our book on Al Gore (quick! call 1-800-840-3683 and have a copy rushed to you, \$19.50 S/H included). We've talked at book stores from Seattle, Washington to Brattleboro, Vermont, college campuses from the University of Washington to the University of Maryland, from the courthouse steps in Ukiah to the Judson Church in New York. We've had the pleasure of meeting scores of CounterPunchers. In the course of these travels we've been in many debates.

On October 16, we went to a debate at the Hothouse in downtown Chicago, a great club featuring good music and political events. Here were ranged advocates of the Nader/Green third party bid against Democratic loyalists. We heard an organizer from the UE put up a strong argument as to why labor should rethink its loyalty to the Democrats. He pointed out that at the stroke of a pen Clinton could have helped labor immensely by any number of executive orders. No such orders came. When the shipworkers at Avondale were battling their employers, Clinton/Gore could have exercised some muscle for the union since the federal government was the yard's prime customer. Not such muscle was exerted. After eight long years there's been nothing on striker replacement.

Despite all the bright talk of New Labor, unions have actually lost ground in the Clinton-Gore years, simply because the legal playing field is so tilted in favor of the employers. There's no prospect on earth that a Gore-Lieberman administration would work to slant this playing field the other way. Back in 1993 and 1994 when Democrats held the White House and Congress, what did Clinton-Gore do for labor? They pushed through NAFTA.

The most arrogant sounds that night in the Hothouse came out of the mouth of James Weinstein, owner of *In This Times*, who has been filling his pages with Gore apologias from the likes of Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club. Weinstein dismissed the Nader/Green challenge as a naïve exercise in futility by political romantics who would soon relapse into torpor after their brief quadrennial upsurge. To which we were tempted to point out that most con-

spicuous form of quadrennial activity is from people like Weinstein, who awaken from their long doze every four years to call for loyalty to the Democratic ticket. The one thing you can say about Naderites and active greens is that they work for their causes, month after month, year after year.

Just like *In These Times*, the Nation has been sounding the tocsin for Gore. We're not sure what the magazine will do by way of formal endorsement but it's clear that the magazine that endorsed Jesse Jackson in 1988 is now on the side of the man who put the most vicious slanders against Jackson that year. In the October 16 edition of *The Nation*, Eric Alterman huffed and puffed for more than 7,000 words, straining to prove the unprovable: namely, that the policy gulf dividing Bush from Gore is profound and that the election of Gore will save the country from a nosedive into fascism. Alterman's harangue was preceded by an entire issue of *The Nation* devoted to scaremongering about the threat Bush poses to a "delicately balanced" Supreme Court. Both are part of *The Nation's* increasingly shrill project to intimidate potential Nader voters into crawling into the Gore camp.

Alterman cranks out three arguments for electing Gore: executive orders, the veto and the courts. All of these are cast in the negative. In other words, it's not that Gore is good on any issue the Left cares about. It's just that Bush would be worse. Much worse, Alterman trembles. The evidence he marshals forth is not compelling.

On matters of sexual politics, Alterman suggests that Gore is a real hero and that Bush is a villain who is itching to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and attack gays. There's not much substance to these charges. Even Susan Estrich, Dukakis's former campaign manager, writing in an earlier edition of the Nation, predicts that Bush won't seek to overturn *Roe*.

In fact abortion is already beyond the effective reach of many women in this country and Gore is most certainly among those to blame for this state of affairs. Unsurprisingly, Alterman sidesteps Gore's own record on abortion. During his congressional career, Gore had an 84 percent pro-Life record, backing several versions of the Hyde amendment and the even more obnoxious Siljander amendment, which defined

life as beginning at conception. Gore voted against federal funding of abortions for poor women and wrote to constituents in Tennessee that he believed abortion was "immoral". You think this guy is someone to rely on? On gays, Alterman conjures up an image of Bush as a vengeful homophobe. But his running mate Dick Cheney, whose daughter Mary is a lesbian, has laid out a libertarian attitude toward gay rights that must make Pat Robertson and James Dobson cringe. Contrast this to Gore, whose record on gay issues is abysmal. During his first campaign in 1976, Gore denounced gays as engaging in "abnormal" sexual conduct. Later, he publicly vowed not to take money from gay groups and he joined with Jesse Helms in voting for a string of anti-gay measures in the senate.

Since the election of Clinton and Gore, industrial jobs have continued to flee the country, in large measure due to the more than 200 trade pacts brokered since 1993. Alterman doesn't mention NAFTA, GATT, the China deal or the African trade agreement. He merely shrugs that "as important as trade policy is... it remains an uncomfortable stretch to insist that it somehow trumps everything else put together". Of course, there's not much else on the other side of the table. What NAFTA and GATT haven't done to working folk, Gore's Reinventing Government (REGO) scheme, which also goes unmentioned, has. Among other onslaughts on working people, Gore's

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Reinvention "privatized" or simply axed about 360,000 federal jobs, way beyond the wildest hopes of either Reagan or George H. Bush. Take the National Labor Relations Board, which Alterman suggests would be gutted by Bush. Alterman is looking at the wrong calendar. Gore has already beat Bush to it. REGO slashed the NLRB staff and budget by more than 30 percent.

Affirmative action? Another reason to back Gore over Bush, Alterman says. But he carefully overlooks the fact, as reported by Alterman's pal George Stephanopoulos, that Gore tried to use REGO as a way to end affirmative action guidelines for federal contracts. He failed, barely. But his REGO schemes, by jettisoning merit pay systems, did end up hurting minority federal workers to such an extent that Blacks in Government, a group of African-American civil service employees, referred to it as "economic genocide".

Take the military. "On missile defense, Gore's most appalling cave-in to right-wing hysteria, the Vice President cravenly favors 'developing the technology for a national missile defense system to protect against ballistic-missile attacks from rogue states,'" Alterman writes. "But Bush says he would deploy a much more extensive defense right away, whether it works or not." Actually, Gore supports a portable missile defense system that can be shipped off to the Middle East or the Straits of Taiwan. In other words, the system would be designed to be used as part of Gore's "forward engagement" military strategy, a gameplan for accelerated interventionism. Bush's plan is nuttier, but less malign. He talks about a global missile defense system that would be shared with Russian and even China. And it goes hand

in hand with Bush's plan to unilaterally dismantle a large stockpile of nuclear missiles. Star Wars, which has been going strong through administrations stretching back to the early 1960s, will never work. If Republicans, for whom the whole mad enterprise has become an article of quasi-religious faith, use it as a rationale for cuts in weapons that represent as greater threat, why spurn the bargain. Every time a Star Wars test shot goes awry, it sinks the Pentagon yet further into welcome disrepute.

Alterman ignores Gore's own attack on the Bush plan as being too risky and "destabilizing." Gore doesn't want to dis-

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arm, he wants to fund a new generation of "more efficient" nuclear missiles. This is a replay of Gore's scheme in the early 1980s to sell the Reagan administration on the Midgetman missile.

Alterman weirdly asserts that Gore's backing of Star Wars represents "his most appalling cave-in to the rightwing". To our knowledge, the Star Wars scheme is typical defense porkbarrel, the kind of big ticket handout that has always enjoyed bipartisan backing in Washington. It would be tough to pick Gore's worst act as a politician, but a

top five list might look something like this: the dismantling of welfare; the expansion of the federal death penalty; the assault on habeas corpus; the bombing of Yugoslavia; the genocidal sanctions against Iraq that have starved and killed more than one million children. Nothing from Alterman on such matters.

Alterman resurrects that old canard that liberal presidents (read any Democrat) give legitimacy to progressive causes. This is top-down thinking of the most frigid kind and it is devastatingly wrong. The Democratic Party can more accurately be defined as the graveyard of social movements. (Alterman, like Gore, skipped Seattle.) Progressive causes are infused with legitimacy by the power of popular movements, not by the liberality or graciousness of leaders. An elitist like Alterman can't suppress his excitement over the very notion of the executive office, as if he were part of the parlor cabinet in the court of the Sun King. Alterman's prose becomes moist with excitement about the president's "awesome ability to make things happen just by saying so", as if the President were a medieval king who could cure scrofula with a touch of his hand. Who but Clinton, Alterman effuses, would have awarded John Kenneth Galbraith and George McGovern the presidential medal of freedom? We're pretty sure that Galbraith and McGovern, both loyal Democrats, are behind Gore/Lieberman, but both men also have a fine sense of irony. We think that they would be highly amused by the idea that the quality of executive power in America can be assayed by the recipients of presidential medals. CP

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