

TRUTH AND LOATHING AT THE BALLOT BOX: THE LIZARD STRATEGY

BY RICARDO LEVINS MORALES

The oncoming presidential election represents an opportunity disguised as a problem. Here's the deal. Most progressives and leftists are convinced that getting rid of the Bush regime is a priority of the highest order (I agree but we'll come back to that). The only avenue available to achieve that is to elect the candidate of the Democratic Party who has little--in terms of vision, integrity, or policy--to recommend him.



The typical "lesser evil" strategy involves putting long-term movement-building on hold to mobilize for a politician who will deliver little of nutritional value once in office. There are three problems with this: First is that it's hard to get people excited to vote for such a choice (getting lots of folks registered doesn't mean they'll be at the polls); Second is that having set aside the struggle for the things we really want, we find ourselves weakened and demoralized after the elections when we need to confront the new office holder; Third, we end up with constituents who feel burned and disillusioned by the inevitable betrayals and are less likely to respond to our exhortations the next time around.

Times that seem dismal can be fertile ground for real creativity. That was the conclusion of Louisiana activists facing an electoral choice between a Klansman and a crook a decade ago. The following proposal is based on their "Vote for the Lizard, Not the Wizard" campaign. It is a strategy intended to galvanize marginalized voters, defeat the current administration, and

leave us more organized as an independent political force ready to challenge the next administration of whichever party.

Let's start with an overview of the landscape.

Who wins? Do we care?

Why is it in our interest to defeat Bush? His very recklessness has done more in a few years to destroy the credibility of the Empire than we could dream of accomplishing in decades. Along with it has fallen the illusion that military superiority equals invincibility. His policies have unleashed an unprecedented global anti-war movement and undermined the recruitment ability of the U.S. military. For those of us who oppose Empire these are not negative achievements. On the other hand the current regime is capable of a great deal of human and environmental destruction and views all opposition as "enemy combatants."

The Democrat, John Kerry, is a reactionary career politician with a history of accepting progressive and labor support while undermining our interests. He supported Clinton's draconian "Welfare Reform," corporate "Free Trade", "No Child Left Behind," the Patriot Act, the demolition of social programs, and is committed to escalating the war in Iraq. He would work to make our horrendous foreign policy "multilateral" so that the plunder of weaker countries will be cheaper and less controversial. "Free Trade," which Kerry supports, is a strategy to replace national sovereignty with corporate sovereignty as the cornerstone of global governance. To support that along with labor "side agreements" is like supporting slavery, but with a dental plan. He would entice us to betray each other mostly with symbolic gestures and small concessions.

In this context to speak in terms of lesser or greater evils doesn't make sense.. What we have is a different mix of dangers and opportunities. Bush could cause greater short-term damage and Kerry could engineer a more stable system of plunder.

The most compelling reason to remove Bush has to do with building global solidarity. The people of the global south are citizens of the empire; their lives subject to decisions made in the halls of U.S. power, but deprived of any say in those decisions. Those of us with the ability to cast our vote must keep in mind our sisters and brothers outside the walls.

The Bush crowd has presented the world with an unabashed declaration of supremacy and the world will see this election as a referendum on that posture. A Bush defeat strengthens the hand of those who seek to channel world anger into the anti-globalization movements. A Bush victory would strengthen the arguments of those who (like Bush and Bin Laden) see the struggle as a clash of civilizations and religions. It should be clear which outcome holds greater promise for positive change.

From this perspective the election is a way to send a message. Internees in Nazi concentration camps utilized the symbolic potential of the vote in 1933, when faced with a referendum on support for Hitler's foreign policy. Wanting the largest possible vote, the regime distributed ballots even to camp prisoners. After much debate, progressive inmates in many camps decided on the tactic of a unanimous vote for Hitler as a way to signal the world that the process was a sham. Our situation is considerably different but our message is no less important, and we must be just as innovative in getting it out to the world.

Competing strategies

The Democrats chose Kerry because he was considered "electable." That is to say, it would be difficult to attack him from the right. In selecting a colorless right wing candidate, they have chosen someone not likely to inspire the marginalized populations—people of color, immigrants, the poor and the young-- who could decide the election. Even massive voter registration is no guarantee that the newly registered will vote. The more Kerry's supporters learn about him the less appealing he appears. His reactionary politics and slippery stands will particularly hurt him with young people. This is the group with the lowest voter turnout and is the most sensitive to hypocrisy.

Liberal groups are pushing Kerry as a true working class hero, papering over how far to the right his party has gone. . Some well-meaning populists are hyping the slogan "Let's take America back!" Unless they mean "back to 1491," it represents nostalgia for a golden era that only makes sense if it is racially coded to exclude vast numbers of our people. Whenever that time was, I, for one, do not want to go back there and am appalled that I'd be invited. The "good old days" don't look so good from the other side of the tracks!

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Some Greens are hoping that Kerry will say enough of the right things to justify their voting for him. Ralph Nader is trying to move Kerry's positions toward the left. This is like helping the wolf into a sheep costume. To get Kerry to mouth progressive positions does not do any favors to the constituencies who might be fooled by it. There is nothing in Kerry's history, or that of his New Democrats, to suggest that he'd feel obligated by any progressive sounds he made during a campaign. The Greens are pursuing a strategy of "vote for us as long as it won't affect the outcome." It may appeal to the white environmental base of the party but is not likely to reach the broad mass of politically excluded constituencies that make up the bulk of non-voters.

The Lizard Campaign

The Lizard strategy takes its name and inspiration from the 1991 Louisiana governor's race. That year the Republican nomination was won by David Duke, the former "Imperial Wizard" of the Ku Klux Klan. Duke's neo-fascist politics galvanized a grassroots opposition. His opponent was the corrupt, scandal-ridden incumbent. Governor Edward's standing was so bad that it was not possible to make a positive case for him. The opposition chose instead to organize their campaign behind slogans such as "Vote for the Lizard, Not the Wizard." This permitted a successful campaign that did not stoop to selling a bill of goods to the rank and file voters. The message was that voting for the incumbent was a tactical choice that did not require promoting illusions about Edwards.

A Lizard campaign would allow us to disengage completely from Kerry and his politics. Indeed it will elicit the open hostility of the Democratic leadership and its allies. If the emergence of a significant Lizard voting block (in the current juncture any voting block is significant!) causes them to adjust their positions then so be it, but it is not the goal of the strategy.

What would the implications be of a Lizard approach to the 2004 presidential race?

It would not be based on lies. Organizing around a slogan such as "Elect the Flake, Evict the Snake" would put into words what—it seems—millions are feeling.

We would go into the election clear that we are voting for a corporate management team and that we will have to fight for every gain we hope to make.

It would engage marginalized and first-time voters without patronizing them. Young people, people of color, poor

workers, and recent immigrants are intelligent and quite capable of comprehending nuance, complexity, and tactical choices.

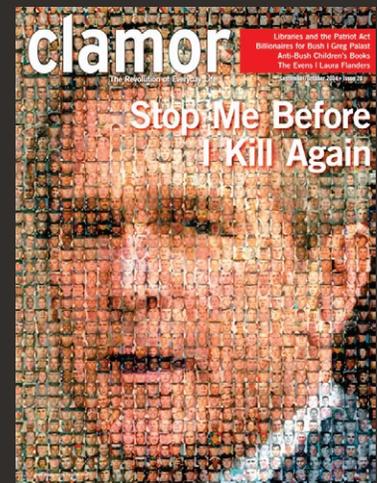
It would develop a voting block that would be immune from any dirty tricks used against Kerry because our stand is not based on any illusions about him.

It would not leave the people we organize vulnerable to disappointment when they are forgotten after the victory party. In fact they would enter the post-election prepared fight.

It would allow people to effectively oppose Bush while taking a stand against Kerry's opportunist politics.

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It would begin to loosen the ideological ties that bind large sectors of voters to the Democratic Party even as it offers them ever fewer benefits.

It could raise the real issues of interest to grassroots people, and propose real solutions, even as they are ignored by the major parties. It could draw on grassroots community, union, and movement leaders and artists who would never be invited to a Kerry rally.

It could capture the imagination with a creative campaign—like the resounding victory of “none of the above” in the Puerto Rican referendum in 1999 in response to three unacceptable options on the ballot.

It would be a natural habitat for musicians, poets and other creative instigators.

It could activate constituencies that might form the basis for future independent politics—people that the third parties have not effectively mobilized.

Although coordination and sharing of experience can help to build it, the campaign would not require a central authority.

In a close election it could be decisive even if it only caught fire in a few key states.

If a Lizard block can have an impact under the stacked rules of the current system, we can raise challenge of reforms such as instant run-off voting that could really shift the balance in U.S. politics.

It will be difficult to mobilize people to confront a Kerry administration if we’ve spent the preceding months extolling his virtues.

What happens in the streets, workplaces, and communities, determines the course of politics. A Lizard strategy can compliment such organizing by developing independent grassroots power in the political field. Radical political strategy should always be based on telling the truth. We should seize on the elections as an opportunity to unite diverse communities into a political current prepared to confront the battles to come.

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