



HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE SECOND BUSH ADMINISTRATION

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What is the impact on global human rights and democracy of a second Bush stint in the White House? The answer to this question depends partly on the final results of the election: if the count is very close, there may be more pressure to contain the more outrageously unilateralist positions and sentiments of over the last four years. Early indications, however, are that the margin of victory will be wide enough to give Bush the electoral credibility he lacked until now. No longer a president 'by appointment' but a truly elected one, Bush now has room and justification to consolidate the conservative counter-revolution that has been gestating since the 1960s, and which gained its fullest expression and force to date under his first administration. This now overt movement is about rolling back 'liberal rights' domestically, most notably abortion rights, gay rights, but also the notion of a progressive and interventionist state that should play an active role in fighting racial and class discrimination. It is about replacing a liberal, Rawlsian version of justice with a quasi-biblical one, in which sinners should rightfully see their 'rights' curtailed, in which criminals should be punished rather than rehabilitated, in which patriots proudly bear arms in the face of those who would attack sacred constitutional rights, and in which increasing disparities of wealth are justified by a modern



conservative replay of Puritan divine predestination, whereby worldly wealth is the outer sign of divine favour.

Internationally – and this is somewhat paradoxical – the attack on the fragile normative and institutional structures that act as a fine-line bulwark against human rights violations globally was carried while trumpeting the cause of ‘democracy promotion’ in the Middle East and beyond. Counter intuitive as this may be, it has meant that the Bush administration has engaged in a sustained campaign against the International Criminal Court, violated all due process in Guantánamo, and shown its darkest face in Abu Ghraib, even as it declares total war on an ‘axis of evil’ in the name of peace and liberal democratic values.

The question is whether these tendencies will be consolidated or mitigated over the next four years. The prognosis is not good. At home, the Democratic Party and liberals more generally have lost the lead and direction. Bush won not just because there are many voters who genuinely agree with his vision of politics and society, but also because the alternative was no alternative. Much as one might sympathise with Kerry, it has been hard not to notice how inconsistent is his vision both for America and for the world, not least Iraq. Internationally, there has already been an implicit recognition on the part of the administration that ‘going it alone’ does not work as well as supposed in the aftermath of Afghanistan and the early Iraqi ‘cake walk’. But this small opening will be of little use if Europeans are unable to come up with credible *European* policies towards Iraq, Israel and Palestine, as well as towards the US. Europeans must sell a



different brand of democracy promotion, which is as much about protecting basic rights as it is about regular elections. Such policies exist, but they are weak, low key and presently unable to compete with the American might when that might is moving in a different direction.

Defending global human rights means that liberals in the US, Europe and elsewhere must go on the offensive, forging an ideological alternative to the world Bush envisages. If the next four years are usefully employed in forging such an alternative, they will not be wasted. Meanwhile, the prospects are bleak for global human rights, as we must live caught between the extremes: crudely put, Bin Lad-ism on one side, and Bush-ism on the other. Whether Kerry could have changed this equation significantly is uncertain, even unlikely. But that the defeat of Bush would have signalled an important defeat of a way of looking at politics and society is clear. In the absence of electoral defeat, the alternative is to go on the offensive in the war of ideas. It is not possible to win hearts and minds for human rights in distant lands, when domestic European and American hearts and minds are so divided over what constitutes the 'good society'.