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How To Take Back America

by Thom Hartmann

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Marching in the streets is important work, but wouldn't we have greater success if we also took control of the United States government?

It's vital to point out right-wing-slanted reporting in the corporate media, but isn't it also important to seize enough political power in Washington to enforce anti-trust laws to break up media monopolies?

And how are progressives -- most standing on the outside of government, looking in -- to deal with oil wars, endemic corporate cronyism, slashed environmental regulations, corporate-controlled voting machines, the devastation of America's natural areas, the fouling of our air and waters, and an administration that daily gives the pharma, HMO, banking, and insurance industries whatever they want regardless of how many people are harmed?

This lack of political power is a crisis others have faced before. We should learn from their experience.

After the crushing defeat of Barry Goldwater in 1964, a similar crisis faced a loose coalition of gun lovers, abortion foes, southern segregationists, Ayn Rand libertarians, proto-Moonies, and those who feared immigration within and communism without would destroy the America they loved. Each of these various groups had tried their own "direct action" tactics, from demonstrations to pamphleteering to organizing to fielding candidates. None had succeeded in gaining mainstream recognition or affecting American political processes. If anything, their efforts instead had led to their being branded as special interest or fringe groups, which further diminished their political power.

So the conservatives decided not to get angry, but to get power.

Led by Joseph Coors and a handful of other ultra-rich funders, they decided the only way to seize control of the American political agenda was to infiltrate and take over one of the two national political parties, using their own think tanks like the Coors-funded Heritage Foundation to mold public opinion along the way. Now they regularly get their spokespeople on radio and television talk shows and newscasts, and write a steady stream of daily op-ed

pieces for national newspapers. They launched an aggressive takeover of Dwight Eisenhower's "moderate" Republican Party, opening up the "big tent" to invite in groups that had previously been considered on the fringe. Archconservative neo-Christians who argue the Bible should replace the Constitution even funded the startup of a corporation to manufacture computer-controlled voting machines, which are now installed across the nation. And Reverend Moon took over The Washington Times newspaper and UPI.

Their efforts, as we see today, have borne fruit, as Kevin Phillips predicted they would in his prescient 1969 book "The Emerging Republican Majority," and as David Brock so well documents in his book "Blinded By The Right."

But the sweet victory of the neoconservatives in capturing control of the Republican Party, and thus of American politics, has turned bitter in the mouths of the average American and humans around the world. Soaring deficits, the evisceration of Social Security, "voluntary" pollution controls, war for oil, stacking federal benches with right-wing ideologues, bellicose and nationalist foreign policy, and the handing over of much of the infrastructure of governance to multinational corporate campaign donors has brought a vast devastation to the nation, nearly destroyed the entrepreneurial American dream, and caused the rest of the world to view us with shock and horror.

Thus, many progressives are suggesting that it's time for concerned Americans to reclaim Thomas Jefferson's Democratic Party. It may, in fact, be our only short-term hope to avoid a final total fascistic takeover of America and a third world war.

"But wait!" say the Greens and Progressives and left-leaning Reform Party members. "The Democrats have just become weaker versions of the Republicans!"

True enough, in many cases. And it isn't working for them, because, as Democrat Harry Truman said, "When voters are given a choice between voting for a Republican, or a Democrat who acts like a Republican, they'll vote for the Republican every time." (And, history shows, voters are equally uninterested in Republicans who act like Democrats.)

Alternative parties have an important place in American politics, and those in them should continue to work for their strength and vitality. They're essential as incubators of ideas and nexus points for activism. Those on the right learned this lesson well, as many groups that at times in the past had fielded their own candidates are now still intact but have also become powerful influencers of the Republican Party. Similarly, being a Green doesn't mean you can't also be a Democrat.

This is not a popular truth.

There's a long list of people who didn't like it -- Teddy Roosevelt, H. Ross Perot, John Anderson, Pat Buchanan, Ralph Nader -- but nonetheless the American constitution was written in a way that only allows for two political parties. Whenever a third party emerges, it's guaranteed to harm the party most closely aligned to it.

This was the result of a well-intentioned accident that most Americans fail to understand when looking at the thriving third, fourth, and fifth parties of democracies such as Germany,

India, or Israel. How do they do it? And why can't we have third parties here?

The reason is because in America -- unlike most other modern democracies -- we have regional "winner take all" types of elections, rather than proportional representation where the group with, say, 30 percent of the vote, would end up with 30 percent of the seats in government. It's a critical flaw built into our system, so well identified in Robert A. Dahl's brilliant book "How Democratic Is the American Constitution?"

When the delegates assembled in Philadelphia in 1787 to craft a constitution, republican democracy had never before been tried anywhere in what was known as "the civilized world." There were also, at that moment, no political parties, and "father of the Constitution" James Madison warned loudly in Federalist #10 against their ever emerging.

In part, Madison issued his warning because he knew that the system they were creating would, in the presence of political parties, rapidly become far less democratic. In the regional winner-take-all type of elections the Framers wrote into the Constitution, the loser in a two-party race -- even if s/he had fully 49.9 percent of the vote -- would end up with no voice whatsoever. And the combined losers in a 3- or more-party race could even be the candidates or parties whose overall position was most closely embraced by the majority of the people.

The best solution to this unfairness, in 1787, was to speak out against the formation of political parties ("factions"), as Madison did at length and in several venues. But within a decade of the Constitution's ratification, Jefferson's split with Adams had led to the emergence of two strong political parties, and the problems Madison foresaw began and are with us to this day.

This is particularly problematic in presidential elections. H. Ross Perot's participation in the 1992 election drew enough votes away from the elder George Bush that Bill Clinton won without a true majority. Similarly, Ralph Nader's participation in the 2000 election drew enough votes away from Al Gore that it was easy for the Supreme Court and Jeb Bush to deflect media notice away from Florida's illegal vote-rigging in the pre-election purging of the voter rolls and thus select George W. Bush as President.

Conservative activists recognized this inherent flaw in the electoral system of the United States and decided to do something about it, recruiting Ronald Reagan and forming his infamous "kitchen cabinet." They took over the Republican Party and then successfully seized control of the government of the United States of America. As we can see by comparing documents from the 1990s Project For A New American Century with today's war in Iraq, these once-marginalized conservative ideologues are the real power behind Bush's throne.

Liberals weren't so practically minded. Instead of funding think tanks to influence public opinion, subsidizing radio and TV talk show hosts nationwide, and working to take over the Democratic Party, many left to create their own parties while others gave up on mainstream politics altogether. The remaining Democrats were caught in the awkward position of having to try to embrace the same corporate donors as the Republicans, although they weren't anywhere near as successful as Republicans because they hadn't (and haven't) so fully sold

out to corporate and wealthy interests.

We see the result in races across the nation, such as my state of Vermont. In the 2002 election for Governor and Lieutenant Governor, the people who voted for the Democratic and Progressive candidates constituted a clear majority. Nonetheless, the Republican candidates became Governor and Lieutenant Governor with 45 percent and 41 percent of the vote respectively because each had more votes than his Democratic or Progressive opponents alone. (Example: Republican Brian Dubie -- 41%; Democrat Peter Shumlin -- 32%; Progressive Anthony Pollina -- 25%. The Republican "won.")

Similarly, Republicans have overtly used third-party participation on the left to their advantage. In a July 12, 2002 story in the Washington Post titled "GOP Figure Behind Greens Offer, N.M. Official Says," Post writer Thomas B. Edsall noted that: "The chairman of the Republican Party of New Mexico said yesterday he was approached by a GOP figure who asked him to offer the state Green Party at least \$100,000 to run candidates in two contested congressional districts in an effort to divide the Democratic vote."

The Republicans well understand -- and carefully use -- the fact that in the American electoral system a third-party candidate will always harm the major-party candidate with whom s/he is most closely aligned.

The Australians solved this problem in the last decade by instituting nationwide instant run-off voting (IRV), a system that is making inroads in communities across the United States. There are also efforts to reform our electoral system along the lines of other democratic nations, instituting proportional representation systems such as first proposed by John Stuart Mill in 1861 and now adopted by virtually every democracy in the world except the US, Australia, Greece, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

These are good and important efforts for the long-term future of American democracy. But they won't happen in time to influence the 2004 elections, and we're facing a crisis right now. A few Democratic stalwarts survive who may oppose Bush on the national stage, but while the rest of us fixated on the war, neo-cons are creeping on cat's paws into the very heart of Jefferson's Party.

Thus, the best immediate solution to advance the progressive agenda is for progressives to join and take back the Democratic Party, in the same way conservatives seized control of the Republican Party.

After writing the first draft of this article, just as the first 2003 attack of Baghdad began, I thought about how the Democratic Party could change if most of the protesters in the streets were to join the Democratic Party and run for leadership positions in their local town or county. In short order, it could become a powerful force for progressive principles and democracy in America and the world, maybe even in time to influence the 2004 election.

So, I called the Democratic headquarters in my home state of Vermont.

"Sign me up!" I said to the startled young man who answered the phone.

"What?" he said, taken aback by my enthusiasm.

"I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore," I said, standing and waving my arm as I talked on the phone. "We have to stop the right-wingers from ripping up our constitution, despoiling our earth, and turning America into a fascist state! Sign me up!"

"Are you a Democrat?" he said.

"Can I be a progressive Democrat?"

"Sure!" he said.

"Then I'm also a Democrat now!"

He chuckled, and said. "We're getting a lot of calls like this."

He took my contact information, and gave me the name of my county's Party leader. I told him to put me on the list for future fundraising events, to let me know how and when I could run for local Party leadership, and how I could participate on a regular basis in the decision-making processes of "my" local Democratic Party.

An hour after that call, I received an email characteristic of so many I get these days.

"I've never been so depressed in my entire life," the correspondent, an attorney and longtime progressive activist wrote. "Bush is completely ignoring us. My nation, using the same rationale Germany did in the 1930s, has just gone to war against a nation that did not attack it, and my president has declared himself a military dictator. Every time we announce peace marches, they raise the 'threat level' so they can keep us away from government buildings or use force to prevent us from marching. I've lost all hope."

A few minutes later, another old friend and activist wrote that her "heart was heavy and tears came easily." A flood of other emails arrived after the publication of my most recent article on Common Dreams, and all but one expressed despair, fear, or panic.

So I've started answering them by saying:

"The nation I love is confronting a crisis no smaller than those faced by Roosevelt, Lincoln, and Washington: a crisis that will determine if American democracy survives to the next generation. So-called 'conservatives' are turning our government inside out, trying, as they say, 'to drown it in the bathtub,' killing off regulatory agencies, ripping up the Constitution, cutting funding to social services, and turning pollution controls over to industry. Government expenses in the trillions of dollars are being shifted from us, today, to the shoulders of our children, who will certainly have to repay the deficits Bush's so-called 'tax cuts' (which are really tax deferrals) are racking up. War is being waged in our name and without our consent.

"And, most disconcerting, the leadership of this administration is made up of blatantly profiteering CEOs, former defense industry lobbyists, and failed hack politicians so outside the mainstream that one -- Ashcroft - even lost an election in his home state against a dead guy.

"Unlike most other modern democracies, our American electoral system only allows for two political parties, at least at the national level. So, given that the rich, the polluters, the paranoid,

and the zealot war-mongers got to the Republicans first, we have no choice but to take back the Democratic Party, reinvigorate it, reorient it, and lead it to success in 2004. We may not be able to stop Bush now, but we sure as hell can throw him out of office next year at the ballot box."

But what, some have said in response, about the corporate-controlled media?

That was the same problem faced by the Christian Right 25 years ago, when the coverage they could get was of Tammy Faye Bakker scandals. But once they'd taken over the Republican Party, the press could no longer ignore them, and Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell are now regulars on network TV.

Another person answered my now-form-email by saying, "I want to participate in producing a detailed plan for the future of America, rather than just joining a corrupt and tired-out political party."

My response was that if there were enough of us in the Democratic Party, it could become a cleaned-up and powerful activist force. It's possible: just look at how the anti-abortion and gun-nut folks took over the once-moribund Republican Party.

Another said, "But what about their rigged computer-controlled voting machines?"

My answer is that only a political party as large and resourceful as the Democrats could have the power to re-institute exit polling, and catch scams like the voter-list purges Jeb Bush used to steal the 2000 and 2002 elections for himself and his brother.

And the Democratic Party can only do it if we, in massive numbers, join it, embrace it, and ultimately gain a powerful and decisive voice in its policy-making and selection of candidates.

Thom Hartmann is the author of over a dozen books, including *Unequal Protection* and *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*. This article is copyright by Thom Hartmann, but permission is granted for reprint in print, email, blog, or web media so long as this credit is attached.

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