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Can John Kerry make a difference?

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DURING the Soviet Union days, a bitter joke circulated about a haughty Soviet premier who one fine day escorted his mother around his plush holiday home, showing off the beautiful lakeside location, fine antique furniture, a flock of obedient servants, and many more high-level party perks. All his.

The proud mother duly gushed over her son's power and possessions until she was suddenly struck by the dreadful thought of a single potential threat, "But what if," she worried aloud, "the Communists come to power?"

The joke resonates all too well in America today. Renowned writer Gore Vidal, among others, likes to say what the United States really needs is a two-party system, instead of the prevailing arrangement of the Republicans and Democrats behaving as two loyal wings of one overarching party of big money. What happens to ordinary Americans?

After Democratic Party candidate John Kerry's acceptance speech recently, the question whether a Democrat can beat Bush was answered resoundingly in the affirmative. Riding out of the Boston convention with a five-point lead in one poll, and barely three months to go, John Kerry has a very good shot at deposing George W. Bush. Some of us will be surprised if he does not win in a landslide. The more vexing question is whether, if elected, a Kerry presidency will change very much at all.

In a stringently stage-managed show of unity in their Boston convention at the end of July, Democratic Party leaders carefully muffled

joined Bush in utmost support of Israel, which crazily excludes any reflection on the role of the unresolved Palestinian crisis in stoking terrorism.

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This strange bind occurs because only half the potential American electorate matters. Just 51 per cent voted in the 2000 election, and those who do vote are disproportionately drawn from the well-off segment of society, which inevitably encourages conservative stances in both parties.

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So the Americans who live paycheck to paycheck will foot the bill for the Iraq war while oil companies, arms merchants, and "reconstruction" mega corpora-

state aid to the needy. Predictably, as the Democrats "pragmatically" slide rightward to court affluent "centrist" voters, the Republicans shifted ever more further to the rabid right. Hence, we ultimately get the current Bush administration, many of whose members were regarded 25 years ago as nutty extremists.

Kerry's advisers believe that they need not make many concessions to the liberal left because the left has nowhere else to go.

The situation is not so different in Pakistan where elites in the major parties have little except rhetoric to offer the poor, who comprise two-thirds of the nation.

No doubt the two countries appear similar, not only facing terrorism but also in their attitude towards the poor. The United States has brought security laws which have put the Democrat candidate in the league of many of his allies.

When the United States left did find a candidate responsive to their concerns, such as Ralph Nader, they were roundly vilified for helping elect Bush (with critics conveniently forgetting that far greater hordes of registered Democrats voted for Bush). Nonetheless, the Democrats must say something to the numerous non-wealthy: the squeezed middle class and, as Kerry put it, "those struggling to join it, who deserve a fair shot."

Kerry's convention speech undeniably hit strong chords slamming Bush's loose way with the truth at home and abroad: "I will be a commander in chief who will not mislead us into war." Kerry, despite a pro-free trade Senate record, vowed to protect American jobs from export. Despite a commitment to a balanced budget as the highest priority, Kerry teasingly

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Democratic Party leaders carefully muffled internal policy divisions, especially over whether to reverse the upward redistribution of income (instead of just "paying down the debt"), and whether to withdraw from Iraq or else "stay the course" there, as if democratizing Saddam Hussein's domain were actually George Bush's goal.

Amid red, white and blue balloons, confetti showers and throbbing music a smiling Kerry promised "a stronger America" and to uphold "the values of America's working families" for whom "wages are falling and health care costs rising".

John Kerry attacked Bush's arrogant foreign adventures but, nonetheless, an anti-war plank was thwarted in backroom party struggles to preserve Kerry's image as a tough guy, and one woman with an "end the occupation" sign was hustled out of the convention hall as soon as she lifted it. The party regulars, of course, are mostly a swarm of ambitious sharks who are happy enough to promote whatever agenda gets them where they want to go.

So, to appease the right, Kerry, playing on his record as a decorated Vietnam veteran, promised 40,000 new troops (but not, he said, for Iraq) and more special forces (presumably for Iraq, and future Iraqs).

A *New York Times*/CBS poll found that 56 per cent of Democrats urged the United States troops to "leave Iraq as soon as possible, even if Iraq is not completely stable," while only 38 per cent believed that the US should stay for "as long as it takes to make sure Iraq is a stable democracy."

Yet party insiders forced anti-war groups to swallow the feeble platform statement that "people of goodwill disagree about whether America should have gone to war in Iraq." Kerry also

tions like Halliburton rake it in. Republicans zealously slash services for the needy while raising taxes on average income earners to pay for the tax cuts for the rich and for Pentagon gadgets. But it's mighty hard to see what Democrats, especially under former president Bill Clinton, have done to change it. Half the US, mostly people of modest means, have been turned off the formal political process by a lack of candidates who dare to say anything that answer their needs.

Why is that? The Democratic Party coffers — not unlike Republican pockets — are filled mostly by big firms, banks, and affluent donors who naturally steer policy their own way: public order (keep the poor down); low taxes on themselves (cut education, housing and health spending); and strong defence (feed avaricious arms firms and foreign investors who the military really exists to protect). Perhaps the reason why Bush junior had to establish an explicitly named "Homeland Defence" agency was in order to remind the pampered military that occasionally they are more than just hired guns at the service of United States capital abroad.

What do Americans get beside expensive military fireworks shows on their television screens? Since 1973, productivity in the United States rose by a third but the benefits were all captured by the upper 20 per cent.

For everyone else living standards have been stagnant or slipped backward. Nearly half the new jobs with the highest growth rates today pay paltry wages no one can live decently on.

Meanwhile, 61 per cent of US corporations paid no tax at all last year, and over a hundred billion dollars in government subsidies for corporations exceed all

priority, Kerry teasingly declared that health care "is a right" — dangling the prospect of a national health care system. According to the polls, the American public overwhelmingly favours a multilateral defence policy and the shifting of money from defence to social needs. (Recall that right up to the Iraq invasion most Americans opposed an attack without a second UN resolution.) All these measures are deemed unspeakably "liberal" by corporate media.

Kerry's stated intent to keep troops in Iraq until international forces stabilize the country can be construed as either a hard-line stance or as a convenient "cover" for a quick pullout. It is hard to say. Could Kerry be feinting one way during the campaign in order to go the other way afterward?

Kerry may not know what to do as yet, but Iraq clearly cannot be held at a price that the United States public is willing to pay.

In the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt began as a balanced budget advocate but experimented his way into the New Deal, which rescued America from the Great Depression and prepared it for the fight against fascism.

A tendency to "flip-flop", for which Kerry is ridiculed, is not a weakness but a likely asset for any intelligent leader. The whole point of democratic politics is that the un-moneyed public can pressure otherwise insulated and imperious politicians to do flip-flops.

That's a vital sign of a functioning democracy. And it is all one can hope for in a new Kerry administration after the repugnant regime in Washington is tossed in the rubbish bin. Perhaps people other than shrewd party elites and their cronies will begin to matter again.