

America's momentous polls

USA 25/2/04

By Huck Gutman

TH-7 DAWN

THE past several months have been a remarkable time for an observer of politics in America. There has been much, much, on which to comment, much to analyse. A war in Iraq has become a swamp from which there is no exit and only bottomless muck ahead; new tax breaks for multinational corporations are passed at the very moment when Americans are deeply worried about the loss of a huge number of jobs through offshoring; an economy that was once the world's "locomotive" is stuck with flat growth rates and huge pitfalls ahead. Meanwhile, each of the two candidates for president is insisting that he is the best choice to lead the American nation forward.

Let us start with a stark fact, although political situations being what they are, there may be those who insist it is not fact but opinion.

President George W. Bush has brought disaster to both his nation and the world, and a second term for his presidency would extend and reaffirm those disasters.

At no time since the Second World War, when the megalomania of Hitler was let loose on Europe, has a single powerful individual so committed to imperial high-handedness as has President Bush. Whatever reasons may have impelled the decision to go to war against Iraq — and there were many, ranging from a desire to

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Were the American people to reject President Bush by electing Mr Kerry, their plebiscite would be a sign to the citizens of the world that a majority of the Americans do not approve of the mad adventurism instigated by Mr Bush.

If a guest drops a teacup and it falls and breaks, his host is discomfited. If that guest goes out and purchases a different teacup to replace the one which has been broken, his host will see the breakage was an accident, an aberration, and that his guest has good intentions. But if the guest looks at the broken teacup, shrugs his shoulders, and drops the saucer on the floor so its broken pieces can mingle with those of the teacup, the host will

per cent of the nation's manufacturing jobs were lost to offshoring during the three-and-a-half years of Mr. Bush's presidency. He is the first president in over 70 years — years marked by depression, war, recession, international crisis — to have overseen a job loss, not a job gain, during the years of his presidency. Poverty has increased, and the middle class shrank: for all three years of the Bush term, measurable living standards deteriorated, with the ranks of poor families increasing, the number of those without medical insurance climbing by 10 per cent, and the income of the typical household stagnating.

The longer term effects have yet to be felt. The vast economic power of the United States is eroding. The US is the world's largest debtor nation: at some future point, the bitter medicine that the IMF enforces on developing nations — massive cuts in social spending, an end to wealth transfer programmes that benefit the poor and economically disadvantaged, a priority to debt repayment over any and all government initiatives, a financier's veto power over democratic decision making — will be forced upon the United States. Not by

the IMF, which the US in good measure controls, but by the international banks and by the treasuries of other nations — including India's — which hold US treasury notes.

Four more years of Mr Bush and the US economy will be so mortgaged, so bereft of resources, that it could implode. Not that Mr Bush seems to care. The security and hopes of the middle class, and the lower classes, are not on his agenda. His policies are all about further enriching America's wealthiest families and the multinational corporations they control, right now, right away. The future be damned. Three weeks before the

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That assertion, of course, turned out to be otherwise than intended. Instead of a universal concession that America was the world's superpower (which everyone knew already), what the occupation of Iraq has proved is that America has neither the troops, nor the sophisticated weaponry, nor the international support, to make indigenous peoples do what it wants them to do. (President Bush and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, were so enamoured of the vision of American omnipotence that they forgot to read the history of the French in Algeria of the Americans in Vietnam, of the Soviets in Afghanistan, of the Russians in Chechnya: guerilla wars are stubborn and, even in the face of overwhelming force and weaponry, guerillas are remarkably successful.)

President Bush's opponent in the current presidential election, Senator John Kerry, has recognized that the single largest issue mobilizing the American electorate is the ill-fated, ill-conceived and megalomaniac adventurism in Iraq. But two years ago, he did not have the courage to firmly oppose American intervention when it was proposed, and so he is stuck with saying, now, that what he will do is finish the war by mobilizing the international support Mr Bush so sorely lacks.

Senator Kerry is, of course, right to foreground the disrepute in which America is currently held throughout the globe. No nation can ignore the will of other nations, insisting only on its own prerogatives and not those of other sovereign nations and forging all policies and actions unilaterally, and still maintain respect among those nations it has snubbed and ignored.

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never invite that guest into his home again. So with America: Mr Bush is a broken teacup. Will the American nation replace him, or affirm that breakage is of no consequence, regardless of what others think?

In this sense, the Bush-Kerry contest is the most momentous election, in international terms, that America has seen in the lifetime of any living American. The presidential contest is also the most momentous, in domestic terms, of any election in the past 70 years.

President Bush has undermined the vitality of the American economy in order that his wealthy friends and campaign contributors might become even wealthier. When he was elected, he inherited a \$230 billion budgetary surplus. This year, the budgetary deficit is slated for \$340 billion. Though a recession, a sharp drop in the stock market caused in large measure by the implosion of the dot.com boom, and an economic aftermath to the events of 9/11 are all contributory to diminished government revenues, the main reason for the deficit is that Mr Bush gave away tax cut after tax cut to wealthy Americans and to large corporations. In addition, he never vetoed a single spending bill, not one. As well, he started a very costly an ongoing war, and has not had the courage to ask a single citizen to pay for its costs. His policies are a stunning triumph of the provincial politics of re-election over fiscal probity.

There is even worse news than the budget deficit, although it is in the more technical and therefore abstruse arena of international finance. The current accounts deficit in the United States — the value of goods and services imported versus those exported, the flow of money out of the United States — was \$166 billion in the last reported quarter, for a rate of over \$650 billion a year. (India is in much better shape, with a current accounts surplus of \$1.9 billion at the end of April-June 2004, although that is a decline compared with \$3.44 billion in the previous quarter.) To enable corporations to reap quick profits, to keep prices down for American consumers, the long-term prospects of the American domestic economy are being ravaged.

One can even see immediate effects of the wilful inattention to current accounts. Over 16

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support of the president, pushed through massive new tax cuts for corporations, including clauses which make it advantageous for corporations to offshore jobs and reduce the number of their American workers.

One could go on at length about what Mr Bush has done, and what four more years of his presidency will mean. Draconian new legal curtailments, inscribed in legislation euphemistically called the Patriot Act, have been an American equivalent to the state of emergency which Indira Gandhi declared in 1975. Environmental safeguards have been routinely discarded or their enforcement postponed.

But it becomes difficult to go on enumerating the domestic disasters behind Mr Bush and those that loom ahead. The sheer magnitude of the Bush administration's wrong-headedness — it is not mere ineptitude, it is an agenda of narrow self-interest, imperial ambition, and oligarchic consolidation — saps one's will. As Bertholt Brecht once wrote, “When evil-doing comes like falling rain, who will cry out?”

Almost half of America has been lulled into accepting the rule of the oligarchs. Ignoring class interest, politically blind to their own economic distresses, millions will vote on who looks tough or who hates homosexuals or who will end a woman's right to an abortion.

The good news is that there is another half, more than half, who see President Bush as a bully who lacks both vision and compassion, who speaks of leadership but leads the American nation nowhere but towards its own demise, and who is pushing the international sphere into increased instability and mistrust. Will this majority of Americans see John Kerry as a suitable alternative? Or will they be so enervated by the magnitude of Mr Bush's misguided and awful designs on America that they stay away from the polls, beaten into hopelessness?

The next few days will tell. Either America will take a new course, or it will continue on a downward spiral into crude imperialism, smug self-centredness, and economic weakness.

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