

CounterPunch

Election Special

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Political Diary

THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE HIM

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN
AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

Looking through the rubble of the Kerry campaign, a couple of telling statistics from Ohio. The first is not entirely unexpected. Exit polls showed Ohioans rated jobs and the economy as their most pressing concerns. Not surprising, given the fact that the past four years have laid waste much of the state. Now try this one: 43 per cent of those who put the economy as their prime focus said they trusted Bush more on this issue than Kerry, who won the confidence of only 38 per cent.

Look at closer at two parts of Ohio – the south-eastern Appalachian counties bordering West Virginia, and the north-western counties – harrowed by job loss over the past four years. Meigs county, in the south-eastern coal belt, lost 30 per cent of its jobs across Bush's first term. Bush won the county easily. Mercer county, in the north-west part of the state, lost 10 per cent of its jobs in the past four years. Bush won there by a 3-1 margin.

In other words, though seared by unemployment, drenched by a torrent of campaign ads costing the Kerry campaign \$5 million a week in the final stretch, offered six hours of presidential debates, a large number of voters in those counties turn out not have believed a word Kerry was saying. Indeed it emerges in the kiss-and-tell stories now coming from campaign veterans, that his own staff didn't find Kerry particularly persuasive either. If you can't win in coal country where one in three have just lost

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The Wreckage

BY JOANN WYPIJEWSKI

So now George Bush and Karl Rove are geniuses. Religion is the guiding star of politics, and equality, privacy, church/state separation and antidiscrimination are for sissies. The class-based politics of the twentieth century is gone, says John Kerry's pollster Mark Melman, along with just about every talking head on television since November 2, and Democrats are in for a long period of soul searching to figure out how to appeal to the "new morality", how to wrap together a message and a messenger for a country of determined God-botherers. If only Joe Lieberman had been the candidate! If only gays would crawl away and die!

Victory has a way of making winners into geniuses, losers into fools. But there was no genius to the Republican victory on November 2, as there is nothing moral or even new about the new morality. In 1988 at the Republican National Convention, Pat Buchanan declared there was a "culture war" in America; W's men picked up on the theme without the fearsome rhetorical bombast that helped sink Bush Sr, and followed the playbook Republicans have been operating off since the 1970s, when they learned from Anita Bryant and Phyllis Schlafly that gay-bashing and opposition to abortion could translate into political power.

Rove formulated a strategy to make voters out of the 4 million fundamentalist Christians who sat out 2000. He crafted White House policy on late-term abortion and gay marriage, saw to it that the president was on message regularly invoking his personal colloquy with the Almighty, and ensured an extra added incentive as Bush backers bankrolled ballot initiatives

against gay marriage in eleven states. On November 2 all of those initiatives passed, and exit polls that were discredited because they gave the early edge to Kerry are now looked upon as scripture because they identified 23 percent of the electorate as "Evangelical", with 78 percent of them going for Bush. (The question of why 22 percent went for Kerry and what "Evangelical" means anyway were left unanswered.)

From various quarters, voices suggest Kerry had some character flaws that were decisive, some excess of secularism or at least a failure to grasp the profundity of church-going in Americans' lives. From the left, those who always opposed the Democrat see in Bush's victory vindication for the view that Kerry was too snooty, too straitened in personality and political vision, too pro-war, pro-business, even pro-Massachusetts, and a phony to boot, what with the goose-hunting, Harley-riding and other anxious efforts to prove to the Real Men in the electorate that he was indeed one of them. All of that, true or not, is beside the point.

There is no quality intrinsic to the character of the successful candidate. Absent the success, no one would list the smirk, swagger, bad grammar, censorious reflexes, faux populism and all-around frat boy mien of George W. Bush as essentially "presidential" — any more than they would Richard Nixon's paranoia and profanity. Candidates are their party's inventions. Products of its evolving character, needs, tactics and ideological deep structure, they are made or broken to the extent that the party does its job organizing the voting blocs. Toward the end of the

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their jobs, where can you win outside the big cities?

Money certainly wasn't the problem. The Kerry campaign had tons of it. But they didn't know how to spend it and the chronic inability of Kerry himself to make up his mind seeped through the whole of the high command, beginning with Mary Beth Cahill, the campaign manager, who decided not to counter-attack on the Swiftboat ads, a decision which was probably as deadly a torpedo in the hull of SS Kerry as his adoption and maintenance of a pro-war position on Iraq.

There was confusion in the campaign on what message to push, an endless flip-flop that got so bad that his aides finally stripped Kerry of his cellphone. This too shouldn't surprised anyone remembering Kerry back in 1990 when he was agonizing over his vote on the first Gulf war. He jumped so nimbly from one side of the fence to the other that his staff had to prepare two different press releases in a single day, one announcing that Kerry was for the war; the other, that he was for peace.

As it turned out the Kerry campaign didn't spend all the money that it raised. Two weeks after the election Donna Brazile, trying to oust Terry McAuliffe as DNC chair, disclosed that there was a \$15 million surplus in the Kerry war chest that she and other party strategists implored

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Kerry to release so that it could be rushed into senate campaigns in crunch states. Kerry turned them down. Had he let go of the money close races in Kentucky, Oklahoma, Alaska and Florida might easily have gone the other way and the Democrats would have recaptured the senate. Exactly the same thing happened in 1996 when Clinton was sitting on an Annapurna of cash, plus a huge lead over Bob Dole, and nonetheless told Gephardt and Dodd, who were begging for money, to get lost. Kerry, by the way, is still refusing to release the money.

GREENS: A ROUT

The Greens, who rejected Nader and announced a decorous strategy of trying to ensure a Kerry victory, took a terrible thrashing as reward for their milquetoast prudence. The ticket of David Cobb and Pat MaMarche, (an autotelic version of Benedict Arnold who vowed to vote against herself if the Democratic ticket seemed imperiled in Maine) garnered only 130,000 votes nationwide. When they had Nader on the ticket in 2001 the Greens got 3.5 million. This time Nader pulled 550,000 even he was kept off the ballot in six out of the ten states where he racked up his biggest numbers in 2000. To put the Greens' performance in perspective, they were not only outvoted by the Libertarians, but by the Constitutionalists.

Cobb had defended his "safe state" strategy by saying the game was all about party building. Maybe the idea was a variant of the Fallujah strategy: to destroy the party we had to destroy it. As the ashes settled on November 2 and the Green votes were counted, it emerged that Cobb's microscopic tally meant that the Greens lost their presidential ballot line status in more than one third of the states, including Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, Montana, Connecticut, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island and Utah.

The Greens can't even lay claim to one of the best showings of a green. In Moraga California Linda Deschambault was elected to the town council. Her ploy? It was a non-partisan race, so as Linda says, "I hid the fact I was a Green".

MONTANA: LIGHT AMID THE DARKNESS

There's a distressing tendency amid the bicoastal left to write off the middle of the country as enemy territory. It's an

ignorant and self-defeating generalization at all times, as Montana testified right through 2004. Earlier in the year the voters chased out a right-wing governor. On Nov 2 in this Republican state the Democrats seized control of the state house. See, such things don't only happen in Vermont.

Through the direct democracy of the ballot initiative, voters legalized medical marijuana and most significantly beat back a multi-million dollar campaign by the gold-mining industry to overturn a ban on heap-leach mining, a process requiring large amounts of cyanide and often poisons trout streams, grazing lands and well water.

The ban had been narrowly approved, 51-49, by Montana voters four years ago. This time the mining companies, not without clout in Montana as a glance at Butte from the interstate will attest, threw themselves in into the fray with torrents of cash and dire pictures of Montana plunged into destitution by the eviction of the mining companies. The forces fighting to preserve the ban were led by the redoubtable Jim Jensen at the Montana Environmental Center.

CounterPunch writer Steve Hendricks, who lives in Helena, tells us, "I credit Jensen almost entirely with the win, not only because he ran the campaign, but more importantly because he has taken hard line, hard-left positions on the environment and I think it's his firmness in planting the flag out left that has shifted popular opinion." The voters upheld the ban 58-42.

So far as the marijuana initiative was concerned, the Marijuana Policy Project, a national group advocating liberalization of the marijuana laws across the country, spent about \$600,000 pushing an initiative that sets low allowable quantities (six plants, one ounce) and offers two-tiered protection.

Medical users who get registration cards are protected from arrest or prosecution. Medical users without cards can be arrested and tried (but can raise a "medical-use" defense if their doctor is willing to testify for them in open court). Diagnoses of depression and other mood disorders do not qualify patients for registration cards. The measure passed by a 62-38 margin, and Bruce Mirken of the MPP called it "a huge win."

Fred Gardner, whose very popular (**Election** continued on page 6)