

# **THE UNITED STATES AND THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

**A VIEW FROM NEAR AND FAR**

**Víctor Pérez-Díaz**

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Let's imagine a train traveling through the open country. We are sitting in a compartment looking out of the window. A moment ago we saw a village on a hill. Now we can see a house in the distance. We are about to arrive at a station. For someone looking out of this window the village is part of the past, the house of the present, and the station of the future. But if someone climbed up on top of the train he would be able to see the village, the house and the station at the same time and get a better view of the scenery to which all these things belong.<sup>1</sup>

If we look at the American Presidential Elections of November 2000 in this way, from a view point of the first months of 2001, with the train on the move again, the station behind and us sitting on the roof, the landmarks on the route are the present moment but looking towards the approaching future, the dispute over the vote in the state of Florida, the election and, at a greater distance, the electoral campaign. Perhaps in this way we can get a better understanding of both the events which pass by, like the scenery, and that which stay with us, the United States with a complex and resilient political system yet with some striking defects, a capable but limited political class and a lively, ambitious, semi-complacent and disconcerted society.

The process of viewing the route and scenery placing ourselves at this time and looking backwards and forwards has two advantages. Firstly it allows us to start out with the “moment of truth”. What was a promise for some and a threat for other has come true. We now have a President who is already getting down to work. Secondly, the moment at which the idea or the imagined becomes reality can help us to assess the proportions of the phenomenon we are talking about. Let me explain what I mean.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was written in January 2001, back to Spain after a few months teaching at New York University. The idea of a shifting (and moving) perspective (“... near and far”) comes from the title of a show of abstract paintings by a Spanish artist, Marina Olivares, in which a landscape of sorts is evoked as being both far away and close at hand. (A Spanish version has been published in *Política Exterior*, March/April 2001, vol. XV, n. 80, 39-61.)

To the extent that we are used to imagining, mistakenly perhaps, that one part of the world obeys the orders of a benevolent demiurge and the other responds to the orders of a wicked conspiracy, we are set on attributing excessive importance to the Presidential election in the most powerful society on earth (but not omnipotent). We may attribute powers of good and bad to the American Presidential elections which they simply do not have. So perhaps it is not a bad idea to begin by slightly lowering the expectations of what the new President of the United States, George Walker Bush, will probably do in the next few months or years.

## **1. The United States in the world**

We will begin with the basis of any foreign policy, that is to say, some understanding of the position of the United States in the world, but beforehand it would be a good idea to clear up some misconceptions. Firstly, the United States is “within the world” and not “outside it”, even if sometimes the North Americans do not think so, and it lacks the real option to go in and out of the world as it freely chooses. It can only decide the manner in which it remains within. Considering that its relations with the rest of the world have experienced a huge change during the last decade because of the effect of globalization and the collapse of the Soviet Union, its doubts about whether to intervene “more or less” in the world are, to some extent, rhetorical. The fact is, ever more often the only practical way for the United States to be present in the world is to be in it “in full”. Secondly, there may be some misunderstandings on the effects of its intervention. These may be considerable but not so great, for better or worse, as many North Americans like to think.

It is quite normal that countries be narcissist and see themselves as the center of the world. Sometimes they are such in the modality of victims. Thus, they may feel themselves to be the center of the world because of great suffering at the hands of evil neighbors or of distant conquerors, of cruel fate or their own madness. They suffer but they exist, in an atmosphere of self-pity and resentment. At other times

countries are narcissist in a glorious way. They sing the praises of their exemplary character, their civilizing mission or their privileged relationship with omnipotent gods who allow them to participate in their will and their power. At this time, in one way or another, there may be about one or two hundred nations on the planet suffering from this narcissist "disease". The disease, however, if that's what it is, does not necessarily signify an absence of reasonable grounds. Sometimes it just expresses a certain proclivity to exaggeration.

The narcissist variant of the United States is based on the belief that it makes up a universal-historic agent with a civilizing mission to complete. This belief is founded on certain reasonable grounds which, by now, should be obvious. Almost since the dawn of the last century the United States has worked within an institutional framework quite favorable, all things considered, for the development of a political system with limited authority and representative government, a market economy and a culture of relative tolerance towards diversity. Concentrating only on the last century it seems clear that the defeat of totalitarianism in particular has been above all its doing. Without this defeat and so without the intervention of the United States, Europeans, for instance, would be living under very unpleasant circumstances. Some, the most restless, in concentration camps, and with a medium to high chance of being murdered at any moment. Others, the most acquiescent, cowed in their own homes and forced to put up with the enthusiastic songs of young people with an arm held high, those from the right with the fascist salute and those from the left with a clenched fist. So it is true the United States has earned the respect of all those who hold the value of an order of liberty in great esteem because it has successfully defended it at times of utmost difficulty.

Having said this, it is also obvious not only that Americans have not been and are not alone in defending liberty with determination but also that they have limited capacities. And they are limited not only by the resistance from reality abroad but by their own internal problems and also because respond to the ideal image they have

of themselves only up to a certain point. It is true that the conduct of the United States reflects interests and values which spur it to be a key piece (but not the only one) in a world order which is to be a mix between an order of liberty and a playing field for predatory strategies. This mix gives its conduct an ambiguous tinge of true morality and instrumental manipulation, which is, by the way, probably inherent in the *civitas terrestris* even in its most hospitable variants.

## **2. A tale of two millennia**

At this time a reasonable version of this “civilizing mission” which would take its historic roots (and ours) as a reference point, could be presented as “a tale of two millennia” in the following way. During the first centuries of the second millennium, Christian Europe had to face various combined challenges. It had to defend itself from a dangerous outside world and therefore it converted and incorporated slaves and northern invaders and curbed the Arab and Mongolian invasions. What it did not manage to incorporate became the object of a strategy of contention in the Mediterranean and the sweeping planes of Eurasia, and it was defined, in spite of the many links and reciprocal influences, as something fundamentally distinct and potentially hostile. Within its borders, Europe lay down the basis for a complex system of coexistence and tension between the temporal and spiritual powers, which opened the way, probably without arising from any specific design, to a plural, relatively decentralized and complex political order which conferred margins and provided opportunities for the development of cultural debates, local exemptions and liberties, an individualist moral and a market economy.

Now, at the beginning of the third millennium, the heirs to this Christian Europe of a thousand years ago are, above all, the United States and the European Union. Although their political and military capacities are different there is a certain balance between their demographic, economic and cultural resources. Above all they have elective affinities which arise from the similarity of their institutional frameworks

and their cultural origins. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the United States has been, and still is to a large extent (but in the future it will be less so), what the Europeans who left the Old World behind (firstly the English and then many other European peoples) did in the New World.

Strangely their historic task seems analogous (but not identical) to that of their ancestors a thousand years ago. They have to keep faith with the institutional and cultural traditions which defined them, but their relationship with their environment is different. The environment is difficult but it is no longer a question of the relatively close areas of Northern Europe, North Africa and central Asia but it spreads to cover the whole of the planet. Nor is it possible to define whatever is outside as “the other”. The borders are so porous that in many areas they have become non-existent. All that the United States, and in its own way the European Union, can do is to gradually adapt to a growing process of interdependence, striving to keep a reasonable level of control over certain of their own affairs, and to have a certain influence over the design of the emerging world order whose institutional framework would be, as far as possible, comparable to their own.

### **3. The limits of the political system**

Clearly when the United States carries out this task it can call it the exercise of world leadership, more or less assertive or more or less humble, just as the Europeans can say that they hope to become a superpower and co-lead the world. This operation of “putting a name on things” is easy to do but it is unlikely that it has much effect on the things themselves. And the thing is that if a superpower, however big it may be, cannot get out of the network of interdependence of this world, neither can it control it. Its capacity for influence in this network is limited, on one hand by the maneuvers of a myriad of uncontrollable groups and on the other by the limits of its own capacity for attention, its capacity for understanding the situations and its resources of all kinds.

To start with, it is a good idea to remember the limits of the political system. There are still many people who think that the political system is the central focus of a society and the place where the fundamental decisions affecting its course are taken and where the so-called sovereignty of the people is exercised. In reality this is rather a naive (but not totally mistaken) conception of the importance of the political system in an order of liberty. In the case of the United States, even if its political system worked as a coherent and centralized whole, this would not “control” and “decide the course” of its market economy, nor its society, except to a very limited extent.

However, what is more, it is not a coherent, centralized system. The design of the North American political system imposes division and separation of powers and involves a game of checks and balance, that is to say the handling of endemic instability. The Presidency has to contend with the two branches of the Congress, that is the Senate and the House of Representatives which add up to more than five hundred political entrepreneurs (at this time 535 senators and representatives) who sometimes act as a party but frequently go their own way. And with a system of courts of justice which is extremely complex and “uncontrollable”. All of which is only part of a political system in which the states (which consider themselves to hold sovereignty in their own sphere of activity) also have to be taken into account, as well as local administration and a number of independent government agencies.

At the same time this political system operates in an environment of lively, multiform economic and social groups and is under the animated control of a relatively heterogeneous media, many lobbies and a “civil society” (in the limited and colloquial sense of the word) or “third sector” which can encompass consumers, ecologists, unions, professional associations, not to mention churches and sects of all shades and a disperse intelligentsia, without going into the ethnic minorities or gender movements (of which feminism is only a part).



Finally we must remember that the President only controls the executive up to a certain point. Strictly speaking, the President only has tight control over the White House, as each of its departments enjoys, de facto, considerable room for maneuver, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the capacity of the President to make his Cabinet into a coherent team and depending on the agenda of the secretaries themselves and their capacity to put this into practice, control their staff and sway the Senate and House of Representative Committees, the press, the lobbies or the media.

#### **4. Looking forwards: the foreign policy**

Having said this, and getting straight into the subject, the kind of intervention in the world which can be expected at first sight from the team of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld (and other key members of the Cabinet) will be, to a large extent, prudent and probably reactive (or preventive). It is to be hoped that they will reformulate the traditional mixture of appeals to the values of a free world and the strategic interests of the country. That they make it quite clear that, in principle, this requires the diffusion of the institutions of the rule of law, liberal democracy and the market economy, which involves thinking not only from the point of view of countries but of large regions of the world, of international regimes and of risk identification on a world scale. That they continue to oscillate between unilateralism and multilateralism in foreign affairs but with a certain preference for the former. That perhaps they combine greater realism in handling the economic (as well as political and demographic) difficulties of countries such as Russia with an increase in defense spending and with greater care when using diplomatic activity (overcoming what some people consider to be a state of relative demoralization of the overseas staff and perhaps reducing the excessive use of unilateral sanctions seen in the last decade).

The new administration will probably follow the established criteria of supporting the liberalization process of the world market, although this does not mean it will

necessarily stop using protectionist tools when it is fitting or when there is considerable local interest involved. But in the fundamental aspects its commercial policy will be well-disposed towards the long-term interests of the big multi-nationals, and this policy will be put into practice in line with their strategies, with the addition of some measures aimed at the diffusion of the rules of the game which require rather more transparent behavior from the corporate world and of environmental measures dragged along by events. It is probable that it will tend to resist pressure from those who are convinced that the planet is heating up quickly from the "greenhouse effect", even though these pressures will no doubt intensify considerably.

The new government will try to get wider authority to negotiate free trade agreements with Latin America and it will have to confront any regional economic crisis which arises when they are in power, on the basis of a pragmatic, ad hoc analysis. We will see what stance it takes in the controversy over the general criteria to be used for the activities of the International Monetary Fund and the American Treasury when the time comes to deal with these crisis. Up to now the effects of the rescue operations in countries in crisis have turned out to be negative for the middle and working classes in question and they have sent misleading, if not mistaken, signals to international investors (to be careless with their loans) and to governments (to take too long with the reforms of the time). Who knows, perhaps the new leaders will even apply their philosophy of "compassionate conservatism" ("compassion in exchange for responsibility") to the subject of debt in the developing world (which could reinforce the strategy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, of presenting a "human face" in their dealings with these countries).

It is highly likely that the new administration will maintain its commitments in Europe, still with its traditional give and take with the European Union over the relationship with NATO and the European Intervention Force. It will continue to be involved in Bosnia and Kosovo, unwillingly and also quite aware that these are

unresolved problems which scarcely permit an apparent *modus vivendi*, and are only patch-up jobs which have been the result of interventions at possibly the wrong moment.

It will continue to be involved in the problem of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. Either rather pretending it is doing something, in public relations exercises, or trying to limit the scale of the conflict. But most likely, sticking to the policy of following well established paths and refusing to accept that the balance of fifty years of policy in this field is an abyss of reciprocal mistrust, hate and fear between the two communities. It has been said, in a display of “realism”, that the two sides are “condemned to understand each other” as if the expression itself did not contain an insolvable contradiction between its two terms. In any case it is difficult for the United States with its tendency to act on a time scale of years, months, weeks or even days, to understand the way to make its strategy, or disposition, for “solving problems” fit in with the strategies of historic parties such as the Israelis and Arabs whose watches mark time by centuries and who seem to have a warehouse of infinite dimensions to store their grievances. All this, at the same time, may well lead the Americans back, once and again, to an interpretation of the processes of change in the Islamic countries which is often simplistic and distorted.

It is possible that the United States will let things continue sliding down the slope which brought Colombia to civil war with repercussions in its border territories. Wary, the Americans will keep their presence within certain limits. Most likely, they will not face up to the fact (difficult to accept) that as drug dealing is one of the essential factors which has led to this situation, it is the demand for drugs in North American society (although also elsewhere) under illegal conditions, which has given the decisive impulse to the growth in drug dealing.

And we could go on like this but what's the point? It is a hypothetical exercise which may be refuted by the first crisis which takes place. All I am suggesting is that

if it is a question of making predictions, little more than this can be said. The broad outlines of foreign policy are laid down by a tradition of several decades, which has been decisively shaped by the “grand strategy” of military contention and ideological confrontation of the eighties which hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union and brought with it a new world stage. Important strategic changes cannot be expected and it is a case of checking if the team which takes over and continues this tradition in the fundamentals, will know how to combine vision and prudence and if it will be more or less realistic and capable when tackling practical problems. By definition this can only be seen as events take place.

For the moment the only relatively new initiative is the anti-ballistic defense extolled by the new Defense Secretary for some years, whose premises were tentatively accepted by President Clinton's administration. In short, it is a question of readjustment in the face of a situation which is considered to be potentially ever more dangerous as a consequence of the relatively uncontrollable nature of the new emerging world order or disorder. If access to mass destruction technology (nuclear, chemical and biological arms) become widespread, and if the aggressive agents disperse and are more difficult to identify (terrorists and drug dealers perhaps in collusion with the so-called rogue states) the conclusion is that preventive defense is necessary *urbi et orbi*, at least as long as other gentler complementary strategies based on an improvement in intelligence services, the activities of international legal institutions and the diffusion of pacifist, humanitarian moral feelings, do have any effect. It may be that this initiative have quite extraordinary consequences in the long run even though its effects be muted or even confusing in the short term.

## **5. The domestic policy**

Could something very different have been expected from a Gore administration as far as the broad outlines of foreign policy are concerned? It is doubtful. Would he have reacted very differently to specific contingencies which might arise in the

future? We shall never know. In any case, for many people the scarcely perceptible differences in foreign policy appear much greater when it comes to home affairs. But, although a dispassionate, distanced interpretation of Bush's declarations, his first initiatives and his appointments suggest differences, when it comes down to it, it raises the uncertainty that we are perhaps facing a contrast which is far more dramatic.

If we can take events in Texas (where Bush has been governor for several years) as a precedent, it could be expected that the new President will focus his attention on three or four issues, apart from reacting to whatever problems which may arise. Among the latter we can anticipate pressures from John McCain and other people to introduce reforms in the legislation on political campaign financing (to control and limit the influence of soft money which represented income of 243 million dollars for the Democrats and 244 million for the Republicans in the last campaign) or the political confusion which could arise if it were discovered months later that Al Gore was in fact the winner of the elections in the State of Florida.

It seems that the priority issues on Bush's agenda are tax reduction and education. The former has gradually become a less controversial issue than it appeared to be during the election campaign. Consensus is developing around a positive interpretation of the situation (once the shock produced by the brutal drop in family spending at the end of 2000 had been discounted) according to which the potential, long-term improvement in the economy and the plan for a surplus of (presumably) about 3 trillion dollars in the next decade provide the possibility of combining a reduction of the debt with an important lowering of taxes, although the exact amount is still to be discussed (Bush is proposing a drop of 1,6 trillion).

As far as education is concerned, Bush's proposal to considerably increase federal spending on this item in exchange for the introduction of quality standards, tests and responsibility devices hardly seems to raise opposition because the country is

convinced of the need for substantial improvements in the quality of primary and secondary education (and perhaps also because most people overestimate the impact of the tests and do not see any alternative to them). What is being discussed is the (additional) proposal that parents of children who attend schools which (repeatedly) fail the quality tests can receive federal money to help them leave these schools and enrol in private or religious schools. This initiative (a limited version of the proposal to introduce vouchers which, in its more radical version, has recently been rejected in referendums in both California and Colorado) has the majority support of African Americans, but has met with resistance from the state teaching unions and could pose problems from the point of view of the constitutional separation of church and state.

From the new Secretary for Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson, ex-governor of Wisconsin, we can expect variations along the lines of the 1996 reform of the welfare system which was the result of a Republican initiative backed by Bill Clinton and it seems that the leaders of both the major parties are proud of it as they share the underlying philosophy of encouraging people to move from the welfare system to paid employment. It is possible that this continuation may reflect a greater sensitivity towards the specific problems of different groups within the population which are dependant on the welfare system, and in particular the problem of combining work and bringing up a family (we can even envisage a strange convergence of the concerns of part of the feminist movement and the so-called compassionate conservatives around these issues). Probably the new administration will try to promote a more active role for religious organizations in the provision of social services financed with federal government money (which could, once again, come up against the traditional interpretation of the constitutional rule of the separation of church and state). On the other hand, it does not seem likely that much progress will be made in reducing the considerable number of North Americans without medical insurance, which is about 15% of the population at this time (24% of which have an annual income of less than 25,000 dollars), in spite of the fact that unemployment is at 4%.

The most controversial nominations have been those of John Ashcroft as U.S. Attorney General and Gale Norton as Secretary of State for the Interior. Some democrats initially interpreted these nominations as a challenge and as a break with the tacit understanding by which the Democrats would not question the legitimacy of Bush's election if Bush for his part abstained from nominating relatively belligerent conservatives to key posts. But in fact Norton's appointment passed the procedure quite quickly, and in the end the Senate confirmed Ashcroft's nomination. Most basic issues in their area of competence are going to be the object of complex struggles which will be carried on at different levels and in different stages for quite a long time (for instance, those regarding the environment) and, most likely, some particularly thorny questions are going to be left to one side.

Bush can make heart-felt declarations with great conviction on the right to life of the embryo and foetus in the mother's womb and he can proscribe the use of American tax-payers' money to finance pro-abortion activities in other countries, but it hardly seems likely that he will get embroiled in a costly political battle to revise the Supreme Court doctrine in the case of Roe versus Wade and so modify the status quo which establishes the right of American women to have abortions (modification which would otherwise only move the battlefield to the legislative courts of the different states in the Union). It is a battle in public opinion in which the two extremes (pro-life and pro-choice) are relatively balanced, with a basically indecisive center which, for the time being, clearly leans towards a tolerant attitude of leaving the decision to abort, within certain limits, up to the conscience of the individual. The nomination of the judges who Bush hopes will cover the vacancies in the Supreme Court needs the approval of a Senate which is experiencing an unstable, uneasy balance, two years before the elections for partial renewal, in which any attempt to force things may well prove to be counterproductive.

Probably Bush will maintain the tendencies, markedly promoted by Clinton, of increasing the number of police on the streets and inmates in prisons. This is a policy

of short-term problem solving which voters usually appreciate. In this way the country can avoid facing up to the basic problem of the connection between criminality on one hand and the diffusion of firearms, the massive consumption of drugs, racial discrimination and persistent poverty and social exclusion on the other. It is an unsolved problem and one which has been unsolvable up until now (considering the terms in which it is usually approached), scarcely alleviated by the levels of philanthropy which are considerable but insufficient (above all bearing in mind that the country has about two million people in prison and a little over four million with suspended sentences or on probation).

All this only serves to point out what is really obvious; that, from the beginning it would be logical to expect a relatively “centrist” leadership both in foreign policy and home affairs; that is to say fitted to the outlook, with its areas of light and blind-spots, of the majority of the population sitting on the fence between the two big parties. Bush may be more or less inspired in his statements of a general nature and give signs of a more or less marked personality and he may be a more or less capable manager. But his entrance on the scene suggests someone who wants to present himself as a moderate, predictable political figure; a sensible, decent man who follows the advice of wise men.

## **6. Looking backwards: querying the electoral results**

But if this is the way things are how can we reconcile the anticlimax of a ceremonious inauguration, this apparent political moderation and such attentive first steps with “the sound and the fury” of the previous months?

The answer is not simple. Everything depends on how we are to understand events in the procedure of querying the electoral results in the state of Florida. In my opinion the turmoil of this procedure had nothing to do with the contrast between the political content of the possible presidencies of Bush and Gore but rather with other



factors. What became clear was not the depth of the division in the American electorate over public policies but, above all, certain aspects of the nature of the country and the functioning of its institutions.

During the process of contesting the election, many Americans felt anxiety and unease but others, perhaps making the most of a bad job, tried to convince themselves that they were in the best of all possible worlds. According to them the (American) democratic system is almost by definition disordered and confused but comes out triumphant in the end and the display of partisan passions involves or rouses civic spirit. These observations show an excessive and illogical optimism. They presume that the institutions function alone and not through human beings who can distort them, and that the blinder human beings become (through passion or interest) the more they see, or the more fallible they are the more perfect.

What is true is that the spectacle around the voting in Florida (and letting aside the fiasco of the initial reporting by the media) was to a large extent (but not completely) that of excessive partisanship and a weak presence of impartial authorities and it gave way to a generalized suspicion for many that the rules were to be used tortuously when the occasion arose.

The attempt by Katherine Harris, Secretary of State in Florida, to confirm Bush's triumph in the legal period laid down by the state, could be interpreted as arising from a rigorous interpretation of her duty but there was an excess of haste in an extremely serious matter which required examination. The archaic, botched way of handling the electoral procedure, starting with the design of the voting bulletins and continuing with the instructions for counting and checking votes, produced a certain sense of embarrassment hardly compensated by the fact that this was not only one state in particular but probably a common feature of the procedures in many other places in the country. The toeing-and-froing between the proceedings in the legislature with a Republican majority and the Supreme Court in Florida with an

apparent democrat majority, all coherent (up to a certain point) with a partisan interpretation of the situation, was worrying. All the more so when the proceedings were carried out against a background dominated by statements and counter-statements from the lawyers of each side and by intensely partisan comments in a large part of the media not to mention the outbursts of passion in the local party machinery.

The final decision from the Supreme Court of the United States on December 13 settled the question but did not lay to rest the basic uneasiness. Even though seven (out of a total of nine) judges accepted that the recount of the vote in certain counties (as Gore wanted and as the Supreme Court in Florida advocated) posed problems of fairness and questioned the principle of equality before the law (or equal protection from the law) guaranteed by the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution, only five of them (considered to be conservative or close to the Bush's ideological position) believed that there was no possible remedy for the situation because the time allowed for this had expired, against two who thought that it was still possible to try a recount in the whole state and another two who rejected the principle premise and considered that the recount in the counties in question should go on until the end.

The outcome has been a dubious decision which has achieved compliance but which is only partially shared. The legitimacy of the final choice has not been called into question by the disparity between the vote of the electoral college (which has given the presidency to Bush, thanks to the vote of the delegates from the state of Florida) and the popular vote, since, in spite of the protests from some people, the country understands that this procedure corresponds to the federal arrangement of its political system as it has always been interpreted. But this legitimacy of the final choice rests on the Supreme Court's authority which must interpret the procedure and decide, in the last resort, the exact moment when it should be brought to an end. It is a basis for legitimacy which is sure but narrow, which will need to be complemented by the legitimacy of exercise which comes from presidential activity capable

of attracting relatively ample support from the population. At least initially, although the majority of the country considered Bush's electoral victory to be legitimate only one out of five democrats shared this point of view. (Furthermore, as the laws in Florida allow the general public to examine the voting papers and as this examination is already under way, it is possible that after some months it will transpire that if the recount had been carried out in the whole state at the correct time, Al Gore would have obtained the majority of the votes, although the opposite is equally possible.)

All this has left a bitter taste because two traits of the character of society have come to the surface and they are easily confused. On one hand, there is the considerable pugnacity typical of people who are conscious of their rights and careful of their interests, not very deferential towards authority, ready to go to court, to negotiate hard, and to fight to the bitter end. On the other hand, in certain situations, we may find in them, and as if they went through an invisible line, a proclivity to excess in the satisfaction of their interests and the achievement of their objectives, even at the cost of respect for the rule of law. When this happens the rules are solemnly cited when they are favorable but submitted to a procedure of "creative interpretation" when they are not.

It is this situation of having crossed this invisible line, of having gone over the top, with some people about to cheat to achieve their objectives and defeat the adversary, which may be suggested by the "irrational exuberance" of the process of calling the voting in the state of Florida into question. It is well known that when some people are up to no good they look for cover and alibis to show their moral indignation against those who are to be the object of their outrage. They are stirred by thoughts of what those "others" want to do to them, the affronts they themselves are about to suffer, their rights that cannot be waived and their sacred interests threatened by the wickedness of others. And thus disposed, they attack.

My hypothesis is that the excessive partisanship of the discussion in this case responded partly to the habit of pugnacity which is a character trait of the people in the country and partly to an over-reaction and over-dramatization of the situation by each party which, basically, knew that the political differences were not so extraordinary, but sensed that it would be a good idea to heat things up so that, in the midst of confusion, their excesses might go unnoticed or could be justified.

## **7. The elections**

Rewinding the film a little further we can now take a closer look at the overall result of the November 6 elections (leaving to one side what happened in Florida). The result was a virtual draw not only in the Presidential elections (as Gore obtained about 49% of the vote and Bush 48%), but also in the final composition of both the Senate and the House of Representatives (to a lesser extent in the latter, because the Republicans maintained a small but significant difference).

It can be sustained that the result revealed a deeply divided country but perhaps the fact that it was split in half might lead the spectator to a certain amount of confusion as to the real depth of the division. To begin with, it is striking that the democratic and republican candidates between them collected nearly the whole of the vote, reducing Ralph Nader, the only candidate at a national level who tried to draw up a political alternative which was profoundly different from the other two, to a marginal position. Perhaps this failure will stimulate Nader to go back to the social milieu which is closest to his reform agenda, that is “civil society” (in the restricted and colloquial sense of the term). This relates to the core of his message which is to build a civic movement, re-define citizen involvement in public affairs and in this way promote a continuous reform process while keeping a certain distance from both parties. By contrast, his followers’ attempt to push the democratic party towards the left, rejecting Clinton's centrist strategy (which gave the democrats at least eight years in the White House) seems to lack future.

In fact, differences in votes between Bush and Gore because of differences in income, education and age were not very great. There was an interesting difference in men's preference for Bush and women's for Gore, which suggests interesting domestic tensions and conversations but not necessarily divorce between the genders (even more so as the difference between married men and women was minimal), especially if we bear in mind that the difference in opinion which went with the voting tendencies seems small as far as basic matters such as the economy, foreign affairs and "law and order" policies are concerned. The differences might have something to do with the shades of opinion on social policy issues although here the differences were relatively blurred due to the convergence of republicans and democrats around keeping on the basic 1996 reform of the welfare system. However, it is probable that the differences in opinion have been more significant on family and moral policy issues (and particularly concerning abortion) without these differences reaching a point where the country could be split between two contradictory cultures. Cultural differences do exist, but the tensions are cushioned by many factors and, last but not least, by a tradition of reciprocal tolerance.

It is quite true that there were differences by states and the system of majority, not proportional representation, exaggerates the contrast between the East and West and the industrial states opting for Gore and the center and west (up to the Rocky Mountains) opting for Bush. But the variations in the number of votes were small in most states (although not in Texas and New York, for example). Nor were the differences extreme as far as the Hispanic vote was concerned. The exception was the Jewish vote (perhaps with the added motivation of the presence of Joe Lieberman together with Gore in the democratic candidacy), and above all the Afro-American vote.

This last group has been almost unanimously in favor of Gore (by about nine to one). This seems surprising at first but may respond to the combination of economic prosperity and therefore considerable improvement in the level of employment in the

Afro-American population, and the gestures of inclusion made by the Clinton administration which permeated deeply through this segment of the population, and it may reflect the “fact of life” (corroborated by recent polls) that most whites and blacks simply do not live, work or worship together. This striking difference in voting behavior has taken place in spite of other factors, such as the notable increase in the prison population, which is an extreme case of social exclusion (and which particularly affects the Afro-Americans), or the expansion of a moderate black middle-class, or the specific support for certain of Bush's proposals (such as, for example, the support from a wide majority for his education vouchers: 60% of Afro-Americans, according to a survey of 1999 and 72 percent of those with incomes below 15,000 dollars).

## **8. The electoral campaign**

The affirmation that, in general terms, the division of the country in halves cannot be interpreted as a deep division seems to be backed up by the analysis of the actual nature and content of the electoral campaign. To start with we may remark that there are two ways of understanding the American experience when it comes to following the political debates. For some people the American public hardly takes any interest in them and has a superficial, erratic opinion on public affairs, possibly being easily impressed and manipulated, and it has even been suggested that its opinions, given for the opinion polls of the moment, are pseudo-opinions, ways of self-affirmation pretending to have an opinion when what it has is a ready-made stereotype. For other people, and here I include myself, the fragmentary, selective attention of the American public to political debates (and even its wavering at the moment of articulating and expressing its opinions on different public policies) should be set in the framework of its wider experience. It is the experience of a society which, in general, applies considerable measures of common sense and realism to practical matters; which is moderately involved in the control of communal affairs in its town, county and state, and used to taking part in numerous political elections; which has

a relatively high level of participation in a wide-range of associations; which has a medium to high level of education (about half of the demographic cohorts in the last twenty to thirty years have had a university experience); and it is quite used to discussing (it may even be described as a disputatious society), and to defending its own point of view. For those who take this view, the public would have had the information, resources and sufficient criteria available in order to form a reasonable (and debatable) opinion on the political option that was presented.

This said, it should be pointed out that the campaign was extremely long and, as far as it goes, quite substantive. The part of the country interested in this matter, let's say, in principle, the two thirds of the electorate who made the effort to register as voters (of which two thirds actually voted when it came down to it), had more than enough time and opportunity to compare the characters and positions of the candidates, above all after Labor Day, at the beginning of September when the campaign entered its final stage. The exposure of the candidate to endless audiences and questions was unceasing. There were three long, moderately comprehensive debates between the candidates for the Presidency and another very instructive one between the candidates for the Vice-presidency.

The strange thing about the campaign was that the opinions on both candidates seemed to oscillate in such a way that the slight predilection for Bush's character was compensated by a slight inclination for Gore's stances. And both the public and candidates kept up this oscillation much to the desperation of the experts who hoped to establish a tendency. Instead of a lineal story with a clear crescendo and finale, they were up against an eighteenth-century ballet full of arabesques, and ending with the indecisive star, in this case the sovereign nation, looking as if it was offering its hand to both suitors.

But we might assume that if this doubt continued until the end and related to character on one hand and the position on the other it was because society did not consider the differences to be great either in one case or the other.

From the point of view of political positions there was some confusion among Gore's supporters because, in his attempt to distance himself from Clinton and to counteract the threat from Nader, he seemed to move from the center to the center-left. In this way, perhaps, he did not capitalize on the political benefits arising from the prosperity of the nineties and partly contradicted his own political career. His flirting with the rhetoric of "against big-capital" seemed opportunist and in fact it could not have fitted in with the attitudes of American society and even less so at the time of the elections which was perceived to be a period of economic expansion. This rhetoric could not find a sounding board in an electoral body in which 70% of the voters held shares in the stock market (directly or through investment funds) and 53% lived in families with income of over 50,000 dollars. Probably in this way Gore merely managed to make the Republican argument which only attributed a modest role in the economic success of those years to the Clinton administration (in which Gore had played an important part) seem more plausible.

Considering the basic agreement on foreign policy, the discussions on this had to be far from conclusive and the second debate between Gore and Bush showed the latter was more capable than had been thought of producing apparently coherent, sensible and even subtle reasoning in this field. In social policy, the *leit motiv* of "compassionate conservatism" allowed Bush to deflate part of the criticisms aimed at him, even more so since his record in education policy in Texas, while not particularly brilliant seemed presentable and since the positions of both candidates converged when it came to maintaining the basic part of the 1996 reform of the welfare system. As to the concerns of a sector of the moderate vote (not to mention the "liberals" in American political speech) about Bush's nomination of conservative judges to the Supreme Court, or an attempt on his part to bring into question the



constitutional right to abort, the edge was partly taken off by Bush's discretion and moderate tone on the matter.

This meant that the campaign itself softened the differences in opinion between the candidates to such an extent that the way was open for the issue of character to take on such considerable importance. The reason why this favored Bush is not quite clear. Both candidates had a relatively elusive, indistinct appearance in spite of their efforts to appear approachable. Bush had been a man without a goal for many years, with some “nomadic years” of which very little was ever known. It has been said of him that, like all the Bushes, he was little inclined towards introspection and neither did he make much effort to explain himself eloquently. Gore seemed to err to the other extreme. His explicit enunciation of his political positions produced the impression of an excess of detail which may have concealed an empty, opportunist strategy.

It is likely that in this contrast between an “under-articulate” and an “over-articulate” candidate, the weight on the scales tipped towards the former for two reasons. Firstly because perhaps the public felt much less at ease with Gore's character than with Bush's for the simple reason that this unease was related to a much longer experience. In 2000 Bush was a new arrival on the national political scene whereas Gore had been vice-President for eight years and an important senator for a much longer time. Secondly, and above all, because he had to bear the full weight of his closeness to the figure of Clinton, equally elusive but in a different way.

Future historians will discuss *ad nauseam*, if Gore's electoral strategy of distancing himself from Clinton was reasonable or counterproductive. But it could be argued that as far as the subject of character was or came to be important, Clinton's character was an unfavorable rather than favorable factor.

It must be acknowledged that on this point the perspectives of the Americans and the Europeans tend to differ. Many Europeans tend to underrate the moral and symbolic importance of President Clinton's impeachment, partly because they do not understand the importance of the application of the law to the highest authorities of their own nations, possibly because centuries of deference to power has left them little used to this kind of action. But the case of the United States is different. Although many Americans understand that there were traps in the proceedings, excesses of hypocrisy, lack of respect towards the private sphere of people's lives and a lack of proportion in the actions of many of President Clinton's adversaries, still the falseness of his declarations under oath (that he himself confirmed at the very last moment when he was already about to leave the presidency) have never been either condoned or accepted by the majority of the country. He can be considered as a manager of public affairs, admired as a political animal and an attractive personality but impeachment remains like a black cloud hanging over his character as President of the country.

## **9. The symbol and the reality of the result**

The 2000 Presidential elections have put George W. Bush in a key position for influencing the course his country takes but only up to a certain point. The complexity of the political system of which he is part conditions his movements. But the political system is nothing more than a part of the whole. The economy, society and culture of the United States has, each of them, their own logic for development and respond to their own internal tensions, and to a large extent politics will have to fit in with this.

This means that the most important political decisions can easily be adopted outside the President's field of action or with him playing a secondary role, especially in domestic policy. The most likely is that the decisive impulses for the solution (provisional as always) to the problems relating to education, the environment,

welfare reform and health and abortion to give but a few examples, come (if they ever come) from the states, the courts, businesses, organizations in civil society or social movements, the church, etc., either with the aid of or against the resistance of the Federal Government.

Probably something similar will happen with the tone and nature of public debate as far as the important issues of internal policy are concerned (ethnic identity or gender, the family, relations between the state and the church, or the interpretive philosophy of the constitution) and abroad (adjustment to the emerging world order or disorder). The President can have some influence in this debate but once again the decisive moral arguments and feelings will be those coming from the grassroots as well as from the basic experiences and everyday life of the community.

It may well be, however, that this pressure from below will be diverse and uncertain because American society finds itself, in this respect, in a doubtful, disconcerting situation, and that their doubts have been in some way reflected in the electoral and political oscillations of recent months.

The country is at a historic moment of intense accentuation of its internal diversity. It is highly likely that this makes it more inclined to reinforce its traditions, as a way of preventing a Tower of Babel, or the generalization of the experience of an “unhappy conscience” (like that of Rameau's nephew in Hegel's interpretation), that is to say the “post-modernist” experience of those who want to be everything at one time and affirm all their “abstract” possibilities without fulfilling them, without submitting to the discipline of reality and institutions.

Perhaps Bush's election can be partly interpreted as indicative, or symbolic, of a search for security in the styles of prudence, moderation and pragmatism and in a discourse which returns to the cultural roots of responsible, interdependent individualism, the community and local associations, religion and family (in one

form or another), English as the vehicle for internal communication and a strict interpretation of the Constitution as a relatively firm, stable anchor of co-existence (and not as indefinitely open to an unpredictable evolution).

Thus, Bush is would be the ordinary man who had his moments of wandering (just as every ordinary person has had or wishes he had), to come back as the prodigal son, to be sensible and to take charge of everything.

### **10. The limits and the potentialities of the United States**

However, a symbol is not reality itself and it is not enough to stick with tradition or return to it (if this is the case) in order to solve the problems of the moment. It is necessary to understand them and confront them in the present. It is a good idea to remember here that what we have been able to observe in these elections suggests some of the limits of the United States in understanding both the world and itself.

These limits exist and are of utmost importance. I have already referred to some of them in the first section of this essay, in tracing the principle outlines of the foreign and domestic policies which could be expected at first sight from the new Republican administration. But I want to make it clear that these limits apply not merely to the political class but also to a certain extent to the whole of the most significant group of the social body. They are the limits of the debate in the public space and those of the consensus between the two major parties, and also those from the horizon of attention for the majority of the country formed by the two big social segments (which overlap), the “middle class” and the “working families”, which are equal to two thirds of the country (and which are sometimes called by the generic term “American society”). The limits of vision of this extended social aggregate has two roots. One relates to its way of placing itself in the global structure of society and the other to the nature of its basic culture.

Firstly, it is a social aggregate made out of people most of which only partly understand both the highest and lowest levels of society. It may be suggested that they have an ambivalent relationship with the highest. They admire it and are irritated by it, distrusting it and from time to time being affected by an anti-big business or anti-corporation rhetoric. However, they believe or imagine that their own prosperity depends on the functioning of a market economy whose dynamism is presumably sustained by the aggressive, or even predatory strategies of this same milieu of big business.

At the same time, they may have a similarly ambiguous attitude towards the lowest level. They know that if they go back one or two generations in their own families, they may well come across the difficult experiences of some immigrants who belonged to this level, at least for a certain length of time, but who moved out with an enormous effort. As they apply these standards of self-reliance and hard work to the lowest classes of today, they find them wanting. To the extent that they harbor suspicions about their moral character, they may evade feelings of responsibility towards them. At the same time, they are afraid of sinking to their lower level. For these reasons they have accepted and even demanded quite a harsh policy of “law and order” and show themselves fairly reticent in providing health care or, more generally, welfare for everyone. Although, on the other hand, they are well aware of the advisability of extending the education system and they are more than willing to take part in voluntary organizations for social works.

Secondly, in the basic cultural leanings of this social aggregate and perhaps *grosso modo* of the whole of the society, there is internal tension between the ideal adhesion to an order of liberty, embodied in an institutional framework which is relatively well-established in its daily experience, and its involvement in the multiple, energetic, hurried, absorbing activities of a *societas cupiditatis*, that is to say, a society obsessed by its own interests, anxious to satisfy its desires, and determined to attain success and social recognition through the securing of wealth,

power and social status at the highest possible levels. This form of society defines a basic experience of life as a rushed experience, with desires always to be satisfied, goals always to be reached, rights to be defended and decisions to be continuously made.

Naturally, this is an enormous incentive for the society to actually have ever greater wealth, power and fame. But not necessarily for it to have other things, for example emotional richness, greater aesthetic capacity or even greater understanding (not to be confused with more “information”); and it could be argued that these limits on understanding are at the root of the blind-spots and insufficiencies of the country and of its political class both in foreign and domestic policy. On the other hand, the same intensity devoted to fulfilling the objectives set by each person brings with it the possibility (only the possibility) that, in such a society, there is a generalized instrumentation of things (and people) so that individuals and groups may achieve their own objectives. This can include, at a given time, the instrumentation of the institutions of an order of liberty (such as, for example, the game rules of elections).

The diagnosis throws light on an unstable balance; the forecast, on a future open to various possibilities, all the more intriguing as we are at a historic moment in which societies must learn from each other as they face together the challenges of the next century. Every society has its own limits, and exaggerating those of the United States could be the way to conceal those of other countries. In our case, Europe, these limitations are greater, apart from anything else, because at least the United States knows it is a country but Europe still does not know what it is, and therefore, for the moment, lacks an understanding of its own identity. We still have to learn from the United States how to be “one and diverse”. We have to learn from its dynamism and its complexity, with its wise moves and its mistakes. Above all we must learn from its deep and genuine commitment to an order of liberty, and even from its fallibility when it comes to bringing it about.

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Tel.: (34) 91 5414746 • Fax: (34) 91 5593045 • e-mail: [asp@ctv.es](mailto:asp@ctv.es)