

slopes of a volcano. It surprised me that they were a major source of information about what really goes on in Indonesia, that land of shadows. But, as the mother superior, a New Yorker, explained, "We can't speak, but we can sure read, watch, and listen. If you don't speak, you'd be amazed how much you can learn." No wonder she left Manhattan.

The Dervishes in Turkey, Sufi Muslims, combine their strange, ecstatic, whirling dance with ecumenical spirituality and uncommon grace at being treated as a tourist attraction. Some of their neighbors, Turkish Christians, are reviving the ascetic practice of living, like Simon Stylites, on top of poles. Not my cup of tea, but they're not hurting anyone.

The Amish are as "fanatical" about their religion as Americans get. They use no electricity, no cars, no colorful clothing, and are fierce pacifists, as are many other "fundamentalists." I'm still tempted to go back with them.

Then there are the practitioners of Falun Gong, the Hindu Shaktacharya of Puri, the Hasidim, and so many others with views that would drive American secularists up the wall. All are resolutely peaceful. I disagree with most, and have spent many happy, and frequently frustrating, hours with them discussing life, the universe, and everything. But I have never felt the slightest need to attack them, nor they me.

In the face of this range of beliefs, it is well nigh meaningless to define bin Laden and his ilk as "fundamentalists" or "religious extremists." He may be both, but so are billions of peaceful and gentle people.

The difference is obvious: The key is not bin Laden's conviction or certitude, but *the content of his creed*. We are opposed not to "religious extremists" per se, but only to the type of religious extremists who believe in flying planes into buildings and beheading "infidels."

In doing so we are allied with, and in large part defended by, people secularists label "religious extremists." This includes a significant proportion

of the American military, especially of the Marine Corps, who are, by most accounts, more evangelical than the population at large. Are the *New York Times* et al. seriously suggesting that the war on Islamofascism is at root a war on people like those in the U.S. armed forces?

In place of such fatuities, Ameri-

can secularists should stop trying to hitch their postmodern prejudices to the war on Islamist terrorism and instead stoop to learn something of the bewildering variety of committed belief. Their insistence on lumping together all religious convictions is bigotry and error, fundamentally so. ♦

# The End of a Left-wing Fantasy

There wasn't a huge untapped pool of Democratic voters, after all. BY GERARD ALEXANDER

IT'S NOT DIFFICULT TO DETECT a level of demoralization among some Democrats that can't be explained by the loss of a single presidential election by three points. One reason may be the death, on November 2, of a myth that has long nourished the hopes of the American left—the idea that tens of millions of non-voters (if only they could be turned out) were an ace up their sleeve.

For decades, liberals and progressives pointed out that Americans vote at much lower rates than Europeans. Since non-voting is especially high among groups that normally lean to the left—minorities and those with the lowest incomes and formal education—this meant that the building blocks of a more liberal, even social democratic, politics existed in the United States. But these people (so the thinking went) were excluded from the political process by complicated registration procedures and the failure of parties and candidates to raise issues that motivated them. To many on the left, it was a reassuring image: Outside the political system, looking in, were enough potential

voters to swamp conservatives (and moderates for that matter). It meant history was still on their side, since ways would surely be found sooner or later to mobilize these citizens.

Many Democrats shared this belief, which is why they joined progressives in passing the "motor voter" registration law in 1993. Many journalists were believers, too, regularly reporting that high turnout naturally favors Democrats.

But there were always two things wrong with this line of argument. It exaggerated the number of non-voters and it mischaracterized their likely political views. Because turnout ratios are typically calculated as a percentage of all adult residents of the United States, the number of non-voters misleadingly includes millions of people who are not eligible to vote because they're not U.S. citizens or, in many states, because they are convicted felons. There have always been millions fewer non-voters out there to be mobilized than was suggested.

More important, the myth mischaracterized non-voters politically. It's true that minorities and the very poorest Americans have historically voted at disproportionately low rates. But it doesn't follow that the average non-voter falls to the left of the politi-

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cal aisle. For example, U.S. Census Bureau data suggest that non-voters who didn't finish high school at most made up one in five non-voters in 2000. The same data suggest that up to 30 million non-voters in 2000 had either some college education, a bachelor's degree, or an advanced degree. In other words, non-voters included many millions of middle-class Americans. In other cases, the myth-making left politically miscategorized groups that historically voted at low rates. African Americans might vote overwhelmingly Democratic. But politically sluggish young people come close to splitting evenly between Democratic- and Republican-leaning views, despite 1960s memories to the contrary. Hispanics are turning out to be much more politically diverse than some hoped (and others feared), even if we aren't sure exactly how many voted Republican this year. Finally, the ranks of non-voters have also included millions of rural and small-town residents—many of them religious—whose incomes might connote urban poverty but whose political sympathies don't. In sum, it isn't obvious at all that most non-voters would be heavily inclined to support left-of-center candidates if they entered a polling place.

The 2004 election results bear this out and may lay the myth permanently to rest. The campaign caused a healthy increase in turnout, but at least as many of the new voters cast Republican ballots as Democratic ones. Nationwide, voters increased from about 105 million in 2000 to somewhere near 120 million this year. That's a rise in turnout from about 56 percent to around 61 percent of eligible voters. In some of the battleground states, participation increases were even more impressive. In Ohio, turnout went from 57 percent in 2000 to about 66 percent this year; in Florida from about 55 percent to 66 percent; and in Minnesota from 67 percent to nearly 75 percent. (These percentages are calculated from Census Bureau population numbers for 2000 and estimates for

2003—assuming a steady percentage of each state's non-citizens and felons over 18 since the 2000 census.)

And if we compare how many votes George W. Bush added to his 2000 totals with how many John Kerry added to Al Gore's 2000 total, it's clear that Bush gained heavily among these new voters, even though Kerry had the easy pickup of many former Naderites to his totals. Bush won nearly as many new votes as Kerry did in Ohio, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. And Bush won a fifth to a quarter *more* new votes than Kerry did in Virginia and Pennsylvania, half again more than Kerry in Florida, nearly twice as many in Missouri, and over three times as many in West Virginia. In these and many other states, it turns out that the

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non-voting population has contained many people who can easily vote Republican. Karl Rove famously concluded this after the 2000 election. This time around, the GOP identified millions of "lazy" Republican voters who needed to be mobilized into showing up on Election Day.

Of course, even with the increases of 2004, the ranks of non-voters *still* number up to 75 million. But the other lesson of the 2004 election is that it's not clear how many more votes can practically be wrung from the eligible population. There are several reasons for the non-voting that remains, and none of them is likely to go away anytime soon. That's true of both the reasons that liberal and progressive strategists have traditionally stressed: onerous registration procedures and election campaigns that don't appeal to non-

voters. It is difficult to imagine a future election campaign conducted with higher levels of energy and publicity than this year's. Certainly the campaign *against* Bush united and motivated liberals and progressives to an unprecedented degree. Hand-somely funded pro-Kerry groups like America Coming Together absorbed virtually all the costs of registering and voting in many states. They poured tens of millions of dollars into bringing forms to people's doors, helping to fill them out and turn them in. It's not clear that they can mobilize many more voters than they did this year in states like Ohio and Florida, though they will surely try. And where is there any other low-hanging liberal electoral fruit these days? Despite stereotypes, for example, voting rates among eligible African Americans have been steadily approaching those of whites.

Another reason for non-voting is lower turnout rates in non-battleground states. But since they won't shift national election outcomes, these potential votes aren't an ace up anyone's sleeve, liberal or conservative. Finally, the remaining non-voting population includes many who are in no position to vote (remember that the adult population includes millions of people with mental disabilities) as well as people who remain—at least to political junkies of all stripes—mystifyingly disengaged from politics no matter what's on the ballot.

We can all hope for even greater participation in 2008. But there is a good chance that highly motivated and well-funded get-out-the-vote efforts have wrung from the electorate about as many votes as they plausibly can, at least in the battleground states that decide elections. That might explain why a number of liberal commentators have been blaming Bush's reelection not on people not showing up to the polls but on the "ignorance" and "stupidity" of the many who did turn out. A myth has just died. And some of its former adherents, at least, seem to know it. ♦