Whither the Democrats?

John B. Judis, who co-authored the important new book The Emerging Democratic Majority, confronts the recent U.S. election outcome.

GOP political strategist Jeffrey Bell offers an important alternative explanation.

It’s National Security, Stupid!

by John B. Judis

In the 1996, 1998, and 2000 elections, Democrats increased their margin in Congress, and in the 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential elections, Democrats increased their presidential vote. Al Gore lost the presidency in 2000, but won the popular vote. It looked like a new Democratic majority would replace the conservative Republican majority that had taken hold in the 1980s and had reached its peak in November 1994. But this trend was clearly set back by the November 2002 election, which handed control over both houses of Congress back to the Republicans. The question is whether, and under what circumstances, the trend toward a Democratic majority could resume.

There is one major factor that contributed toward a Democratic shift in the 1990s. Over the past fifty years, the United States has been moving from an industrial society to a post-industrial society characterized by a new workforce devoted primarily to the production of ideas rather than things, a transformed geography centered in new post-industrial metropolises, and a new understanding of the role of government, family, religion, sex, work, leisure, nature, and the market. The conservative Republicans of the 1980s were a backlash to the first stirrings of this social revolution. They stood for old-time fundamentalist religion and laissez-faire economics in opposition to women’s rights, civil rights, immigration, and environmental and consumer protection.

But the old Democratic party was also tone-deaf to this historical transformation. Before the 1960s, the Democrats were based in the unionized blue-collar work-
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duct of the war against terror. On the eve of the
election, a revealing Gallup Poll found that vot-
ers gave a greater weight to the complex of “ter-
rorism, war, and international issues” than to the
set of economic issues around social security and
prescription drug prices.

As long as national security concerns remain
paramount, and as long as Bush and the Repub-
licans are seen as more effective in meeting them
than the Democrats, Republicans will enjoy an
advantage in Congressional and Presidential ele-
cctions, just as they did during the 1980s. If American fears of
terror from abroad should finally abate, and cease to preoccupy
Americans, then it is likely the factors favoring Democrats will
reassert themselves. Or if the Bush administration should be
unsuccessful in prosecuting the war on terror—with the United
States becoming bogged down, for instance, in a protracted and
expensive occupation of Iraq and faced by rising instances of
terrorism—then voters might reconsider the Republicans as the
part of national security. Which outcome is the more likely—it
won’t be clear for two or as long as four years.

No, It’s a Deeper, More Fundamental
Problem of Cultural Detachment

BY JEFFREY BELL

The biggest near-term problem with John Judis’s hope
for Democratic dominance is the same one that the
party’s 2002 campaign strategy ran into: its tacit de-
sire to take foreign policy and the war on terror “off
the table.”

Foreign policy does occasionally drop from
view in American politics, as the three presidential
elections from 1992 to 2000 prove. But in the peri-
od since the emergence of the United States as a
global power in the Spanish American War, which
encompasses the twenty-six presidential elections
between 1900 and 2000, I would list only three oth-
er elections—1924, 1928, and 1932—in this cate-
gory. We may applaud or lament this pattern, but un-
less things change in a way rather difficult at the mo-
ment to foresee, the inward-looking 1992–2000 elec-
tion cycle is quite likely to be remembered as an aberration.

So Democrats will need a foreign pol-
icy—but what? Anyone you meet can tell
you the downside of a me-too approach to
the hawkishness of President Bush, as at-
tempted by former House Minority Leader
Richard Gephardt (MO) in the recent cam-
paign. If it was meant to take the war “off
the table,” it certainly failed. But is Judis
certain that the Democrats would have
fared better if their new House leader, Nan-
cy Pelosi (CA), had been calling the for-

cign-policy shots? Under the much-ma-
ligned Gephardt strategy, not a single

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Democratic House incumbent was defeated for re-election, other than in five districts completely rearranged by redistricting.

However defensible, the Gephardt strategy is probably unsustainable. As has been true for at least three and one-half decades, the base of the Democratic Party is considerably more dovish than the Republicans on issues of war and peace. Even former Vice President Gore, in 1991 one of just ten Democratic senators to vote to authorize war with Iraq, has defected to the doves. And if Bush’s conduct of the war goes badly, this may look better in general-election terms than it does right now.

But the likely Democratic trend toward skepticism on the war underlines a deeper problem with The Emerging Democratic Majority, the challenging new book Judis has co-authored with Ruy Teixeira. For the heart of the Democratic base’s dislike of the war and of George W. Bush is rooted not in foreign-policy realism or pacifism, but in a stinging critique of the United States itself rooted in the values wars of the 1960s. For the dominant Democratic world-view, the last thing the America of George W. Bush should be doing is reshaping the rest of the world in its own image. It should instead be reshaping itself.

Judis and Teixeira acknowledge that this stance was a disaster for the Democratic Party of the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. They argue that due to the upsurge of Democratic-leaning immigrant groups and the emergence of a post-industrial economy, America is today a different country. The far greater numbers of left-leaning professionals (government workers, teachers, and lawyers) and the emergence of a multicultural “ideopolis”—knowledge-centered settlement clusters built around university towns and the New Economy—presage far greater openness to the left’s cultural critique.

Bill Clinton is fondly remembered as a Democratic president who benefited from the demographic changes boosting the left side of the culture wars, without needlessly antagonizing millions of traditionalist voters. But this did not always come easy. Following the huge Democratic losses in the 1994 elections, Clinton pulled the plug on the campaign for sexual openness being waged by Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders. And for all his personal scandals, a Clinton presidency engaged in abolishing the federal welfare entitlement and successfully reducing the crime rate proved a difficult moving target for antagonistic social conservatives.

The greatest danger of an increasingly militant Democratic attack on Bush and the war is that it will bring out the rawest, most arrogant aspects of 1960s liberalism. The Democrats’ return to basics could wind up making this a much more Republican country.

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