



Coffee Cup Revolutionaries

by Shekhar Deshpande

The mid-term election tested the free and critical spirit of the media in a way that the Gulf War or the O.J. Simpson trial couldn't. For the first time in a long while, one could see through the political commitments of the media.

In an already narrow spectrum of the Democratic and Republican parties, the election provided a chance to see the ideological polarization between the Left and Right that is appropriate for the political scenario in this country.

The overwhelming electoral victory of the Republicans showcased the failure of the Democrats in a number of areas. The media tried either to pacify the demoralized liberals or made far more out of the victory than what the exit polls and elections results allowed.

One way to test this phenomenon is to see how *The New York Times*, in its analyses for the working rich and arm-chair social activists, appeared liberal in the face of the daily Right bombardment of Washington, D.C., by Gingrich and gang. Bob Herbert, Frank Rich, Anthony Lewis, et al finally appeared to be getting at some real facts about the elections, presenting a liberal view, almost as a nec-

essary antidote to the flaming Right wing rhetoric of the Contract With America.

That may be a mixed blessing of the election. Finally, we can see what Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich have been talking about when they complain of the "liberal" media bias.

Even though *The New York Times* deploys the ethnocentric and eagerly upper class view of urban America, couched in its idea of a "balanced" view of journalism, it, along with *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and Jennings-Rather-Brokaw team, was accused by the Right wing as being eternally "evil" and liberal, reporting only on the corruption of the Right and glossing over the pitfalls of the liberals.

But the first two or three weeks since elections make the so-called liberal media quite essential watch dogs in some mild sense of the term. During the next two years, we may see a sharpened polarization that is already under way.

The big media (some leading newspapers, the TV Networks, the weeklies) may appear to be mildly critical and appropriately situated in their role as anti-establishment and anti-populist and the little media (mainly the Talk Radio, but also small newspapers and some

weeklies or magazines like *The American Spectator*) may seem to represent the increasingly populist, anti-liberal bias of the Right.

American journalism was protected until recently from this kind of partisan polarization. On the face of it, the idea of representing objectivity by paying attention to "both sides" of the issue somehow gave these media an appearance of fairness and balance. But this first election of the Talk Radio may have changed all that.

The successful positioning by Rush Limbaugh, Bob Grant and other hosts as overtly partisan soldiers of the (Right wing) population, against the imaginary ghosts of the "liberal" media, consistently working against the "people," and against some fictional moral world of Right wing purity has become now an established feature of American political life.

The involvement of several radio talk hosts around the country in elections and the congruence between the views of the exit polls and the talk show hosts has confirmed this role. To add to all of this, Newt Gingrich has already stated that he intends to use Talk Radio against the liberal media "to get his message out."

In the meantime, the liberal and the Left media, or whatever is left

around, showed just how ineffectual they are in shaping social consciousness.

One has to admit, political disasters like these bring out the best in the Left. Their analysis are always sharp, entertaining and quite impressive. Their enemies are not imaginary, their analysis of the emerging Right has been quite perceptive. *The Village Voice*, *The Nation*, *Z Magazine* and the *Progressive*, to name a few, have provided critical commentary in recent days (including after the recent election) when hope seemed quite a distant entity. But two things are clearly lacking in making their role effective.

First, the writing speaks to the already converted and second, their tone is still distinctly urban, upper middle class and completely lacking in consistent commitment to a social program.

The election results could be attributed to the immobilization (or, thanks to Clinton, demobilization) of the Democratic constituents and coalition. The brighter vision of criticism still belongs to and should belong to the educated intellectuals in the colleges, universities and social organizations. But that crowd has become increasingly isolated from real political purpose.

Aside from churning out stylized theoretical analysis of the mun-



dane, this crowd has become reliant on the *Voice* and the *Nation*. In fact, arm-chair analysis has become a substitute for political awareness or involvement.

The increasing comforts in academic life and petty battles like those fought over political correctness have made this group more isolated than ever. Academic life constructs its own imaginaries, lives off its own fantasies and rarely plays a role in mobilizing the core constituents who want freedom in the moral sphere, responsibility in social programs and courage in financial planning.

The Right has become successful precisely because it appropri-

ated these issues in a language and world view that common folks could understand. That view is simplistic and therefore not worthy of emulation, but the actual programs of the Right are not simplistic. It is a plan to re-structure the moral, the social and the financial relations in the country first and the rest of the world later.

The liberal and the Left have not found a language for their complex understanding in the world. Simple or not, that language must be able to communicate with those who live outside of theoretical and critical precepts. Here the Left media have simply failed.

When you read their brilliant diagnoses of the elections, you are left to wonder: how will those who care for the poor, live with the oppressed, stand for diversity, promote respect and understanding, struggle for their identity, guard their moral and social pride "get all of this" post-mortem of the decline and fall of the liberal and the Left in this country.

Until that takes place, the polarization of the American media will continue; alienation of the working from the political process will become permanent; and journalism will continue to drift away from its responsibility toward a self-aggrandizing role in arm-chair, coffee-cup revolution.