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Surviving the Bush Years

By Dan Petegorsky, Executive Director



For all his “aw, shucks” posture and his derision as a lightweight by pundits and comedians alike, George W. Bush has moved quickly and aggressively to define a reactionary agenda that will have the full weight of all three branches of government behind it.

The shift in federal power is as great as we’ve seen since Ronald Reagan’s ascent to the presidency twenty years ago. Bush has appointed cabinet heads who’ve led the way in moving right-wing agendas in the states. The Department of Health and Human Services is now the dominion of former Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson, whose welfare reform became a national “model” even as Wisconsin saw an increase in black infant mortality rates. And thanks to Bush, the Justice Department is now under the command

of John Ashcroft — a man who thwarted school desegregation as attorney general in Missouri and who has spoken admiringly of Confederates as “patriots.”

Equally alarming, with critical fights looming over the apportionment of political power in all 50 states, the Bush Administration is now in control of the process governing how census data will be tabulated. It is preparing to issue rules that will all but ensure that statistical methods previously used to correct the traditional undercounting of people of color and the poor will now be set aside. This will assure, as in Florida, under-counting of those constituencies. So much for “electoral reform.”

During the Clinton years, the right wing shifted its battles to the state level, where conservative governors and legislatures increasingly held sway. In the West, we’ve been fighting these battles now for many years, and have seen how the right has been able to move its agenda. We have also learned how to develop effective responses and pilot new solutions.

Ironically, for all the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on media during the 2000 election cycle, grassroots organizing and voter mobilization played a stronger role than we could have imagined. As you’ll see from the articles in this issue, organizers were successful across our region in registering and educating new voters, increasing voter turnout, and fighting critical challenges at the ballot.

This new organizing spirit will be a vital asset in the Bush years — especially as states now begin to experience the kinds of budget shortfalls we haven’t seen in a decade. Fiscal pressures will be high, just at the point when families receiving public assistance will be running up against time limits imposed through new welfare programs administered by the states. These are the kinds of circumstances in which, if we aren’t careful, we end up fighting each other.

Many of Bush’s initiatives (like “faith based” social services and private school vouchers) seem designed to split our core constituencies, pitting people against one another. We will have to work hard to build effective alliances across the divided physical and social geographies of the West.

At the heart of this work is a commitment to direct and honest discussion of the many factors that divide us, as well as to the painstaking task of building relationships that bridge those differences. This work is not easy — but it is critical if the progressive movement is to emerge stronger from the challenges of the Bush years.