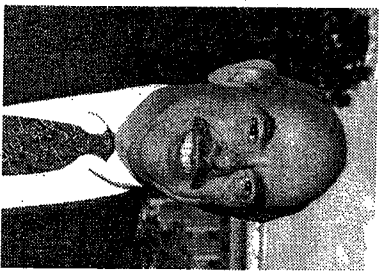


guest column



What Bush's Election Means For Issues We Care About

Local congressman says Democrats need to think hard about this last election and learn important lessons from it.

By Congressman Henry Waxman

In the wake of this month's election, many people in Beverly Hills and other parts of Los Angeles who supported Sen. Kerry's campaign are left wondering what the impact will be on the issues we care about.

The truth is that this year's election--like that in 2000--was very close and that the country remains deeply divided. In fact, as in 2000, the margin of victory in the presidential campaign was just one state, and we continue to have one of the most closely divided House of Representatives in modern history.

I am not satisfied with "close." I think Democrats need to think hard about this last election and learn important lessons from it. We need to understand why some Americans don't believe Democrats share

their values. And we need to know why so many Americans think Democrats aren't on their side, even though it's Democrats who are fighting for better jobs, better health care, a better environment and better educational opportunities for all Americans.

The mindset among Republican leaders in Washington is already becoming apparent. Many believe they have a mandate to move the country sharply to the right. The mood in Washington is reminiscent of 1994, when a newly elected Republican majority mounted assaults on health care for the poor, environmental laws and worker protections.

In the coming months I expect that the Republican majority in Washington will try to repeal some of the most important parts

of the Clean Air Act. I expect the President will nominate federal judges--even for the Supreme Court--who are intent on overturning *Roe v. Wade* and taking away a woman's right to choose. And I expect they will continue to insist on budget and tax policies that undermine the basic fairness and opportunities that were nurtured over the last 70 years.

In 1994, President Clinton was in the White House and he vetoed the worst excesses of the Republican Congress and moderated others. The stakes are higher now. With one party in control, the public cannot rely on the President to check the abuses of the legislative branch or the Congress to control the abuses of the executive branch.

The post-election appointments of the President exemplify the challenges ahead. The President has appointed close political friends to fill vacancies created by the resignation of many cabinet secretaries and senior-level officials. This continues a pattern in which the Administration rewards loyalty and secrecy over the objective analysis and dissent that is essential in vetting public policy.

One example is the President's nomination of White House Counsel Alberto R. Gonzales to be the next Attorney General. As White House Counsel, Mr. Gonzales adopted extreme legal positions, concluding that the Geneva Conventions do not apply to detainees held at Guantanamo Bay and that enemy combatants--even those that were U.S. citizens--could be held indefinitely without court review or right to counsel. These are not the values most Americans want in the person charged to uphold the nation's civil rights laws.

The nomination of Condoleezza Rice to succeed Colin Powell as Secretary of State replaces one of the most independent and respected voices in the Administration with another White House insider. Ms. Rice's loyalty to the President is unquestioned, but the same cannot be said about her judgment. Instead of being held accountable for the misleading intelligence that led the nation into the Iraq war, she is now being promoted to serve as the country's highest ranking diplomat.

As the senior Democrat on the House Government Reform Committee, I have the responsibility to conduct oversight of the Bush Administration and its policies, and I will continue to do so as vigorously as possible. In the three weeks since the election, I have disclosed new State Department documents that undermine the Administration's claims that Halliburton's Iraqi contracts were awarded without political pressure. I have also released documents that show that FDA failed to provide effective oversight that could have prevented the flu vaccine shortage. These documents raise basic questions about the Administration's commitment to enforcing our food and drug laws.

Despite the obstacles we face, this is not the time to lose heart. Fundamental questions about America's values and the direction of our nation will be decided over the next four years. Ultimately, the most powerful force in the country is not the President or the Congress, but an engaged and informed public. ■

Congressman Henry Waxman (D-Los Angeles) represents the 30th District, which includes Beverly Hills and the Westside.