

Patrick Lawrence

## **In the ruins of American democracy**

A lot has changed since the major American political parties began to assume their modern form—the Democrats in the late 1820s, the Jacksonian era, and the Republicans in the mid-1850s, when the extension of slavery to new territories polarized the nation. One thing hasn't. With the rise of industry, finance capital, and corporate culture onward from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the fundamental purpose of America's two mainstream parties has been constant: It is to fix the parameters of acceptable policy and public debate. Together, to put this point another way, Democrats and Republicans long ago planted the fence posts that circumscribe American political culture, and these markers remain in full view.

The elections held 5 November, which send Donald Trump back to the White House and Kamala Harris home, is the clearest case in point in my lifetime. Larry Fink the chief executive of BlackRock, the fund-management company with \$11.5 trillion in invested assets, put it with bold, painful clarity when he spoke at a conference of financial-services firms two weeks before Americans went to the polls. "I'm tired of hearing this is the biggest election in your lifetime. The reality is overtime it doesn't matter," Fink said. "It really doesn't matter. We work with both administrations and are having conversations with both candidates."

I have to agree with Fink on this point. It doesn't much matter that the incompetent Trump trounced the even-more-incompetent Harris this past week. Distinctions

between what the major parties now offer voters have narrowed to the point there are no longer any to speak of. There are tens of millions of American voters who will find this judgment shocking, but I cannot help them. To note the most pressing question of our time, when both major candidates profess their full commitment to terrorist Israel's real-time genocide against the Palestinian people, and as we speak expand this savagery to Lebanon, one must recognize this is the choice-of-no-choice and refuse it as a matter of preserving one's basic humanity.

The outcomes of American elections have not, indeed, mattered for a very long time, in my view. This is why—and I must advise readers of this straightaway—I have never voted in my life, with one exception that I immediately regretted. But it is nonetheless worth considering the reasons this is so. How did America, the Western powers' trumpet player in the marching band of democracy for more than 250 years, get to the point it holds elections on regular schedules, as it always has, but these elections have been rendered more or less without consequence or, indeed, meaning? When did the nation's political procedures decline into mere spectacle?

We must begin not with Larry Fink, the financialized economy, or altogether the over-corporatization of American life, important as these are, but with the power of the Deep State. This is the fundamental reality we must recognize before we consider all the rest.

The national-security state that took shape after the 1945 victories was but a decade and a half old on 22 November 1963. The Central Intelligence Agency, descendant of the wartime Office of Strategic Services, was launched in 1947; President Truman authorized the National Security Agency—this by secret

decree—at the end of 1951. And, as the C.I.A.'s responsibility for the assassination of President Kennedy is now established fact, we can conclude the Deep State made an announcement on that fateful autumn day: No president could thenceforth stand against the invisible government's interests, as Kennedy had determined to do after the Bay of Pigs disaster opened his eyes to its power.

None has. It has been increasingly evident since Kennedy's murder that occupants of the White House must take care to align their policies according to the Deep State's directives, however formally or informally these are conveyed—or, an alternative, have no policies of their own to align. Since the Ronald Reagan years, one also notes a preference for inexperienced presidents who are unsophisticated in matters of national policy and so are given to the guidance of those around him. George W. Bush, 2001 to 2009, is an obvious example.

Kamala Harris is just the sort of president the Deep State has come to favor since the Bush II years. Harris, with not a stable idea in her head in matters of national security, would have taken orders in the way of a cocktail waitress. As to Trump, his quixotic quest when the man of property arrived in Washington from New York eight years ago was to “drain the swamp.” Instead, the swamp pulled him under. The Deep State is plainly concerned about the next Trump administration—this is why the whole of it, including mainstream media, vigorously backed Harris—but the thought that Trump will master Washington's unseen sources of power this time is out of the question.

Just as Americans were offered no chance to vote against genocide on 5 November, to put this point another way, they were offered no opportunity to vote against the imperium and its objectionably manifold business.



There was talk, way back in the 1970s, of limiting the amount of money that could be spent in support of political campaigns at least minimally in the way Europeans impose such limits in the interest of democratic fairness. This was always fated to go nowhere, however, in that Capitol Hill legislators would have to pass laws that would deprive them of the private-sector largesse from which they benefited. The preposterous Supreme Court decision of 2010, known as *Citizens United*, declared corporations to be people and so made campaign donations a free-speech question. There has never since been any serious talk of campaign-finance reform.

The campaign to get Kamala Harris into the White House is a kind of apotheosis in this regard. As charted in the graphs linked [here](#), published 25 October in *The New York Times*, Harris's political machine raised more than \$1 billion in the brief period after party elites and "the donor class" advanced her as the Democratic candidate with no reference to Democratic voters' preferences. Taking Harris and Trump together, the two candidates spent half a billion dollars—advertising, media, door-to-door canvassing, and so on—in the two weeks before *The Times* published official data.

As striking as these numbers, the donor class—this now an acceptable phrase in America's political discourse—operated entirely in public view as its members imposed their choice on the party. When it became evident last summer that Joe Biden could not carry the election due to his mental decline, donors withheld donations and so forced him out of the race within a matter of days. The money

flowed to Harris, in the hundreds of millions of dollars, instantly after she was forced on the party with no pretense of democratic procedure.

This boldly visible corruption of the political process, and the party elites' corresponding indifference to how visible these operations were to the naked eye, may be unprecedented in America's political history. Even the pretense of a democratic system seems to have been cast aside. But we must instantly note something else as we consider these phenomena. Harris not only lost: She was shellacked, as Americans used to say. The billion-plus spending, and along with it grossly prejudicial media coverage in Harris's favor, did not prove effective.

I do not argue here that Americans have just witnessed the beginning of some historically significant revival of American democracy. Nothing of the sort. There is too much institutional corruption, too little legislation restraining the powers of undemocratic elites, the boundaries of permissible discourse are too narrow for any such prospect. There has been too much decay over too long a period, in short, to read this as a major moment. Donald Trump, let us not forget, will once again prove other than a "change agent," as Americans say.

But something of importance just occurred, and we will understand this only over time. Established loyalties—black Americans and other minorities always vote Democratic, women and suburban dwellers do, too—have been broken. Harris's proposal to win by way of the national mood—"Joy!" "Vibes!"—proved an embarrassing flop. The Gaza crisis matters to many more people than the Democrats supposed. "Identity politics" appears to be done: One hopes we will hear a lot less now about approved pronouns, the sexual preferences of teenagers, the historical, inescapable, undeniable racism of all white people, and so on.

But we cannot say what is next—not just yet. In my read, and at this early moment, the important thing to note is that people who are taught from birth they live in a land where there are no classes may have just had a taste of an emerging class war. This—people acting and voting according to their interests—would be an excellent advance in my view. To progress, it is always essential to look upon one’s present circumstances with the clearest of eyes, seeing matters just as they are.

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