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Media in the winter of our 'disremorse'

Early in the coldest season, optimists think of the day after solstice. It's predictable: the hemisphere will start tilting toward more light and warmth. But in the politics of human societies, there's no reliable way to tell how long a bone-rattling chill will last — or how far it might go. A government's harsher policies could provoke kinetic revulsion and progressive resurgence. Or the dominant political atmosphere might have an overall effect of strengthening and perpetuating itself.

By now, the 2004 electorate has been spliced and diced to the culinary standard of American punditry. Countless journalists have joined with other analysts to explain what it all really means. But the news media still don't tell us much about underlying aspects of mood that can't be broken out with poll numbers. Wooden questions yield data about stiff answers. Fact-based reporters may not offer much more human truth than a fact-based phone book.

Today, in the real world of the United States — in this closely and fiercely divided country — large numbers of people see President George W. Bush as despicable. But the tenor of daily reporting does little to incorporate such assessments into the mix of media coverage. And the conciliatory noises coming from Democrats on Capitol Hill are misleading; they don't reflect the hostility that persists at the grassroots.

Potentially volatile, the rage toward Washington's current rulers is percolating underneath the recent often-cutesy news items about upticks of interest in emigrating to Canada and fantasies of blue-state secession. The extensive foreboding in the present-day United States is often of a character and vehemence that mainstream U.S. media reporting is either unwilling or unable to evoke.

Many millions of Americans would tell a suitably inquiring journalist that they don't really regret John Kerry's loss — that what they find horrific is the new four-year lease on the White House for an administration with an unrepentant track

MEDIABEAT 2004 | NORMAN SOLOMON

record of mendacity and extreme ideological zeal.

With two federal branches under the control of those zealots, the final arbiter of the third branch — the Supreme Court — is now under severe threat of wink-and-nod judicial fundamentalism. More than ever, in this context, journalism is a thin yet vital reed. Protection of civil liberties and abortion rights is at imminent risk. Yet the news media keep giving enormous deference to the USA's bastions of consolidated economic and electoral power.

Absent from daily news coverage is remorse.

So, the major media outlets of the United States are entering this winter in a resolute state of “disremorse” — about 180 degrees from any sense of national apology or expressed regret. In the aftermath of a 51 percent victory for the Rove-Cheney-Bush regime on Election Day, the breast-beating and halo-preening exercises have intensified. And while a cast of characters — Ashcroft, Powell, Ridge, etc. — heads toward the exits, virtually interchangeable players step into their roles.

With all the comings and goings, remorse is still light-years away as top officials speak and news media report. No need to mention people who don't have a home; no need to focus on the children and adults with paltry health care, or on the overall human impacts of so much scarcity in the midst of great wealth. These profound concerns really matter in people's lives. Yet it's as though the reigning politicians and media have found ways to take our minds off our minds.

The nerve-blocking anesthetics of mass media impede the flow of feeling in unauthorized directions. Cause and effect are disconnected, so that it seems unavoidable and natural for children to live in poverty across town or for U.S. troops to be killing and dying in Iraq. Right now, it's a struggle to disrupt the numbing media chatter about miscalculations and mistakes — to insist on acknowledgment of moral culpability. America's winter of disremorse is not about nature, it's about a lack of nurture for what remains frozen: our capacity to innovate and cooperate sufficiently to stop the “leaders” who destroy life in our names.

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