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Elections and the specter of things unseen

The day before the election, I visited Albuquerque and Las Vegas. Up close, I saw hundreds of people involved in vigorous get-out-the-vote efforts. Most were young; they seemed very idealistic. These Americans had an opportunity to make a difference, and – brought together by labor unions and such groups as the MoveOn PAC – they took it.

Watching the election returns scarcely 24 hours later, I kept an eye on the results from New Mexico and Nevada. The vote tallies were close in both states because of such activism; otherwise, the Bush-Cheney ticket would have won easily.

On Wednesday, as the pundits kept chattering on television, I thought about how far removed the TV studios and newsrooms tend to be from the active idealism of the grassroots. All over this country, literally millions of people cherish the belief that what they choose to do can make a difference. A big difference.

This belief propels many people in daily life. Yet much of the internal language of such political commitment gets lost in media translation. By the time we see accounts of political campaigns on the small screen or in print, the sound-bitten images rarely rise above a flat rendition of typecast media characters.

The passion for social justice is not a favorite media topic. On the TV news, a few seconds or even minutes are almost sure to convey little of substance. But the people I saw in New Mexico and Nevada were a far cry from the two-dimensional cutouts that so often populate the news-media landscape. Canvassing neighborhoods and passing out literature and doing all sorts of tedious necessary tasks, they were determined and inspiring.

On election eve, in a low-income Las Vegas housing project, the light was dimming and cold winds were gaining velocity as residents opened their doors and took literature from pro-Kerry canvassers. History would undergo a shift 24 hours later. The people living here, mostly African-American and Latino, would watch the TV networks and see an electoral triumph for the same president who had spent four years siding with the rich at the expense of everyone else.

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The painful, gut-wrenching consequences of poverty, and the idealism of progressive social activism, don't fit in well between upbeat commercials for everything from mouthwash to credit cards to new cars. The predominant message of advertising-driven media – explicit in the ads and often infusing the media "content" as well – is that life can be great if only we do as we're being encouraged to do. Buy the product (merchandise or a sociopolitical mindset), whether with cash or with tacit acceptance. And don't rock corporate boats.

The young people who I met in Albuquerque and Las Vegas were boat-rockers. They had no use for the anesthetizing messages of mainstream media, and vice versa. They were about thinking and feeling and helping to create history, not merely watching it go by.

Part of life, we all learn and relearn, is disappointment: sometimes fleeting, sometimes profound and enduring. For those who have yearned to evict George W. Bush from the White House, the election results are in the category of profound loss. What has occurred will have enormous negative effects on this country and the rest of the world. Yet it's also true that the presidential election of Nov. 2, 2004, is prologue.

Remaining is a vital message of the literally millions of people who worked actively for regime change in Washington this year: We will not be passive. We decline to simply accept what is dished out by the powers that be – more war, less justice, even more extreme economic disparities, less democracy. We won't give up. We are still here, and we're not going away. No matter what the news media say.

In the next year, the news will be filled with coverage of the war in Iraq, the nomination of at least one new Supreme Court justice, proposals for tax cuts and any number of other momentous issues that have not been settled by this election. We will need vibrant idealism and political activism as much as ever.

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