

The Future of the Democratic Party

by
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The future of the Democratic Party depends on our ability to see into the future. We are going to win this presidential election. We will win the White House; we are going to take back the House of Representatives. Let us think about the future. Once we win, then what? That is one of the problems of the Democratic Party.

During Bill Clinton's presidency, the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) had the majority of both the Senate and the House of Representatives. But the philosophical strategy of the Democratic Leadership Council was to be more conservative and to become more like the Republicans. This has, in my opinion, almost destroyed the Democratic Party and it tore us away from the very thinking that allowed us to win the White House in the first place.

As Democrats, we can win on the basis of our ideology and our philosophy. The DLC made it appear that it was their ideology, their philosophy, their style that brought us into power—therefore they felt that they should dictate what Clinton's policy would be for the next 8 years. So, we had some monumental errors in terms of Clinton's public decisions and his philosophy and views on social policy.

Don't get me wrong; Bill Clinton was a great President. Hilary Clinton was a great First Lady. It was a very difficult period, a very nasty period, and the fascism of the Republicans was really beginning to show its teeth. I would congratulate him for being able to withstand many of these pressures.

We were putting too much stress on the DLC's philosophy, its style, and ideology. We were constantly looking to the Right to make decisions. Unfortunately, there was no strong Left that could be practical and

command Clinton's attention. So he was always looking to the Right. He looked to the Left for small bodies of support, but we could not compete with the DLC in terms of cohesive vision and style.

Our future as the Democratic Party lies in our ability to understand that we are at a stage in America's history when the two parties are engaged in a kind of permanent war, and in such a situation, we must have the mechanical and logistical apparatus to survive.

The Democrats registered some 600,000 Congressional voters by the Internet. That number was completely demolished by Bush's 6,000,000 e-mails to constituents. This is just to give an idea of how logistically, mechanically, and technically speaking the Republicans have mastered their ability to compete. Perhaps this is the easy part, and I can say that the Democrats are on their way to dealing with this deficiency. That is why now, Democrats give anyone running for office the addresses of all the democratic residents in the country. This is an impressive achievement in the area of logistics and technology, but one that must be expanded and developed even further.

The next issue for the Left Democrats is the general terms of style and approach needed to understand our basic constituency. On this issue, the DLC must be broken away from. This may not be an optimistic view, yet we must understand that our fate does not lie in dividing up the 51% of people in America who vote while forgetting about the remaining 49%.

The area that is most critical is the area of ideology and philosophy. We need to have a clearer fix on where the future of the Democratic Party is. I think this lies in the 49% of people who do not come out and vote. Overwhelmingly, these people are the natural constituency of the Democratic Party ever since the party went back to being the party of Roosevelt. The party of Lyndon B. Johnson, when the Democrats were willing to reach out to the populace in massive ways, used the federal government to bring direct relief to the people, to really deal with basic problems—you'll remember that Johnson received overwhelming support for Medicare and Medicaid. Now, however, most people take these programs for granted, and most Republicans use Medicare and Medicaid to their advantage. Medicare is about to be block-granted to the states and

the people who are recipients of it-parents in nursing homes and so forth-are voting Republican.

There are a lot of things we take for granted in the ideology and philosophy of Roosevelt, Johnson, and Truman. Some would agree that they clearly saw themselves as the party with the constituency that constantly needed to be reached out to and the party of big spending. And yet they did not worry about the charges of big government and big spending. It is only when Newt Gingrich came on the scene and screamed at us nearly every day for being the big-spending party that we took the charge, hook, line and sinker.

To be sure, during the Clinton years, we lost sight of reaching out to those people and groups who needed assistance from the federal government, such as schools. Rather than reaching out to the schools that needed construction and repair, or even giving support for local and state government salaries, the Democrats went into office with the perception that the American people believed that Democrats were the more important and greater supporters of education than the Republicans. This unilateral belief blinded the Democrats' sense of purpose. And there was also a statistical gap where 32% of the people felt that the Democrats were more inclined to help education and local government.

Yet, when Clinton left office, the Democrats were losing their edge over the Republicans in regards to social education issues. In the public's eye, when Clinton left office, education was no longer the Democrats' issue: the Democrats and Republicans were basically tied on this issue.

Now, the Republicans are pulling ahead of us. How did that happen? The Republicans were vying for education. We Democrats did little more than nickel and dime things, and grants were done on proposal basis. There was a need for millions to participate, and yet we would receive a mere few thousand proposals. This was simply not enough to impress the education community. In this area, where we should have taken clear support and maintained our devoted constituency, the Republicans took over and moved ahead of us, particularly in the realm of perception.

Furthermore, we lost the senior citizens. After Jesse Clark Pepper left, in terms of the internal Democratic Party, there was nobody banging away at

the leadership about what we had to do to be certain that we take good care of the senior citizens. One of the mistakes that the DLC made was putting a tax on Social Security. The damage that this measure has done in terms of the Democratic Party's image is immeasurable. In the tax package of 1993, we could have forgone taxing Social Security. This was the beginning of the erosion of Democratic support from senior citizens. So I was not shocked when the AARP came out and supported the Republicans' phony Medicare prescriptions. Republicans have done that before—taken it over with a coup, and won. We can slowly see senior citizens drifting away from us every time there is an election. In the case of the House of Representatives' members, this is especially true. It has to be admitted that senior citizens are drifting away from the Democrats toward the Republicans. This may not be total and complete at the present, but we have lost them.

How many more constituencies can we lose before we go out of business? The labor union constituency generally feels that we do not fight hard enough for them, and they are right; we do not fight hard enough for them. It is true that in the present atmosphere of a Republican president, a Republican Senate, and a Republican House, there are few things we Democrats can do.

I sit on the sub-committee for work force protection. I am right in the middle of it and I know how very little help we receive from the DLC when it comes to fighting that fight, and the labor unions can sense that. So naturally they are lukewarm about helping any one of us to stay in the House, and it has to be admitted that they have become lukewarm about the Democratic Party as a whole. Moreover, certain members of the democratic leadership have made the assumption that there is nowhere to go.

The Democrats must understand what Newt Gingrich's point was—despite his rampant yelling over and over again that we must balance a budget and what a great thing it is for the country—because he understood better than anyone else that this was a potent form of propaganda.

For example, the Republicans took a beating on an education issue in which Bill Clinton called their bluff—when they were complaining that the Democrats did not “fund education.” Although the Republicans lost

the battle, they still managed—in terms of public opinion—to come back strong. They ended up passing, in the dead of night, an appropriation bill.

They talked at great lengths about standards and about testing, but nobody discussed standards that would make every state have certification measures for teachers, decent libraries, decent student centers and laboratories, and the plethora of details that must be figured into the equation of a good education bill. Then at night, without proper legislation, the Republicans took that section out, traded it out to Clinton's people, and what they put in was very impressive adding in the biggest fiscal increase in education history: six billion dollars.

This increase marked the Republicans' signature that education was no longer a Democratic issue. The Republicans were not worried about balancing the budget when it came to making a political point. And George Bush has taken this even further because balancing the budget is not a great concern of the voters. But the Democrats swallowed it; while Clinton was concerned with balancing the budget, we still gave money for education, school construction, and a number of other things that needed to be funded. We came out with a surplus. We turned around the deficit. But big deal. Then Bush enters and says that 26% to 27% of the electorate is the Republicans' constituency, and that they are going to take care of that 26% to 27%.

Now, it is silly to give as much as we can to that 26% or 27% that will undoubtedly vote Republican. Big tax cuts and huge farm sustenance programs are programs for red states, states that historically vote Republican anyway. Clinton made it a crusade to reform welfare to no end and the whole thing erupted and backfired, becoming a horrible scene in the Clinton administration.

The red states that receive farm subsidies still turned away Clinton's tariff programs and that just reinforces the idea that red states will be Republican as voters. Also, while we were doing that, the farm subsidies were going up, and keep in mind that the farming population is about 2% of the total population of the nation—they are less than 2% of the population and yet they walk off with a \$520,000,000 per-five-year subsidiary bill, a pure giveaway. This is the same subsidy that the welfare families get, yet they are not getting nearly enough of it.

Now, the quotas which the government gave to individual farmers and families have been forged into the hands of corporations. We were bold last time and said that no corporation could get more than a \$275,000 minimum balance while no one subsidy should be more than \$275,000.

This is the type of initiative that the Democrats keep supporting, even though it clearly represents the Republicans' constituency. If one was to look at a map of the United States during election night, they would find that the states which overwhelmingly support Republicans are the states which receive more subsidies, per capita, than any other state in the union. Studies are released yearly that reinforce the fact that the southern states, as well as Arizona and New Mexico, get more, per capita, than any of the northern states. So it's no surprise that on election night we see that the red states are overwhelmingly the farm states.

New York, on the other hand, gets nothing. New York is the state that gives money away; at one point about 9 years ago, New York had about \$9 billion more flowing out as tax money to the federal office than it had coming back in, in terms of benefits and programs for our constituency. Yet the state has the biggest defense operations and terror alerts. The Democrats allow money to flow out of New York, and constantly fail to make the big spending, the label Democrats have been synonymous with, on their very own constituency. If our constituency is the working families and the working poor, then bringing them back into the fold is absolutely necessary. This means fighting for them in terms of spending, clearly.

The Democrats have not even begun to make sense of their style. In order to promote ourselves, much like Newt Gingrich understood, the Democrats must be able reach out, rally, and organize our very constituency. It is so essential a point that without this crucial aspect, we will simply not survive.

Newt Gingrich understands it. Newt Gingrich is probably the most brilliant politician since Machiavelli. He understands the law and how to create a fund system. He did not just come into power because he raised a lot of money. He had a fund system down at the city council level where there are moves and publicists, then at the state level, and from there they began quietly taking over the state houses across the country. Tip O'Neill

used to say that “all politics is local.” All politics begins local, but as you go, a lot of the system has to be integrated from the top to the bottom.

For example, he made a reform that is still intact. Republicans entering Congress do not have to wait forever to become a chairman or a sub-committee chairman. In 6 years, they can turn over. They change the chairmanships every 6 years, and that means kicking out the old roles. The Republicans then arrange ways in which the freshman can be highlighted on the floor, immediately. My guys, on the other hand, are told that if they hang around for two years and if they stay in their respective communities for most of the time, then they can talk about being integrated into the system.

That which is free makes full use of very talented people. The truth is, there are no dumb people in Congress; evil people, perhaps, but they are not dumb. They all have something to offer. This is part of the advantage of the Republicans’ mentality. They may do terrible things, but they do them with great guile and genius, and this is what Democrats must understand.

We have to revamp the party. There is much more than can be said about our style and approach. But most important is that ideologically and philosophically we return to dedicating ourselves to the folks who are left out of the system, who remain powerless. We must dedicate ourselves to empowering them, for we will not and cannot survive otherwise. The future of the Democratic Party as a force is one that works on trying to do exactly that.

Howard Dean gave us a great boost forward. I am very supportive of Dean simply because he jumped up there and just said it. It shook up many of our colleagues and Congressmen and that was good because it demonstrated the fact that he was not beholden to just a handful of contributors. The future of his organization and the future of the Democrats are now seen as a broadening innovation of contributions. We must get beyond the fact that the fat cats control everything; there are this set of corporate puppeteers and puppet masters or that set of corporate puppeteers and puppet masters...the Democrats control one set and the Republicans control the other...we have to break out of that in order to

reach a new era of the Democratic Left. Dean has shown us how to break out of it.

I think a win by Kerry will certainly demonstrate a return to Democratic values. The Bush agenda may include a whole host of changes that could include the draft and even more ludicrous measures. If the Republicans manage to get re-elected after all they have done, the unthinkable really may come. The first item that must be on our agenda is making sure America remains hopeful and that there is still hope for the Democratic Party to survive.

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