

Turning Up The Heat On Bush

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For a nanosecond after November's election defeat, the Democratic unity forged by the radical provocations of George W. Bush seemed intact. From the corporate-funded Democratic Leadership Council to Howard Dean's new Democracy for America, Democrats drew similar conclusions from the election about what needed to be done: Challenge the right in the so-called red states and develop a compelling narrative that speaks to working people--don't simply offer a critique of Bush and a passel of "plans." Champion values, not simply policy proposals. Don't compromise with Bush's reactionary agenda. Expose Republican corruption, while pushing electoral reform. Stand firm on long-held social values, from women's rights to gay rights. Confront Bush's disastrous priorities at home and follies abroad.

But this brief interlude of common sense and purpose quickly descended into rancor and division. Peter Beinart of The New Republic and Al From of the DLC rolled out the tumbrels once more, calling on Democrats to purge liberalism of the taint of MoveOn.org, Michael Moore and the antiwar movement. Apparently anyone who worries about the suppression of civil liberties at home, doubts that the reign of drug lords in Afghanistan represents the dawning of democracy, prematurely opposed the debacle in Iraq or isn't prepared to turn the fight against Al Qaeda terrorists into the organizing principle of American politics is to be read out of their Democratic Party. Then, normally staunch Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi floated for chair of the party former Congressman Tim Roemer, a New Democrat distinguished mostly for his opposition to women's right to choose, his vote to repeal the estate tax and his ignorance of grassroots politics. Consolidating its corporate backing, the DLC solemnly warned against "economic populism" or "turning up the volume on anti-business and class welfare schemes"--despite the corporate feeding frenzy that is about to take place in Washington and Bush's slavish catering to the "haves and have-mores," whom he calls "my base."

After a year in which progressives drove the debate, roused and registered the voters, raised the dough and knocked on the doors, the corporate wing of the Democratic Party is trying to reassert control. Its assault on MoveOn.org and the Dean campaign--the center of new energy in the party--is reminiscent of 1973, when corporate lobbyist Bob Strauss became head of the party and tossed out the McGovern mailing list, insuring that the party would remain dependent on big-donor funding.

This time, however, the entrenched interests aren't likely to succeed, no matter who becomes party chair. That's because progressives have begun building an independent infrastructure to generate ideas, drive campaigns, persuade citizens, nurture movement progressives and challenge the right. It includes a range of new groups such as MoveOn.org, Wellstone Action, Progressive Majority, the Center for American Progress, Air America, Working America and America Coming Together, along with established groups that have displayed new reach and sophistication such as ACORN, the NAACP, the Campaign for America's Future (which I help direct) and the League of Conservation Voters. These groups--and their state and local allies--came out of this election emboldened, not discouraged. Just as the infrastructure that the right built drove the Republican resurgence, these groups and their activists--not the party regulars or the corporate retainers--will stir the Democratic drink.

The challenge to the electoral malfeasance in Ohio provided an early example. Inside the Beltway, protesting the President's electors was unimaginable. But progressive organizers, together with third-party activists, liberal lawyers, Internet muckrakers and civil rights groups, kept the heat on. Representative John Conyers responded with a report detailing the outrages in Ohio, where the Secretary of State--shades of Katherine Harris--was co-chair of the Bush campaign. The Rev. Jesse Jackson and others called on senators to support progressive House legislators who were demanding a debate. When Senator Barbara Boxer stood up, the public learned more about the shabby state of our democracy and the need for drastic electoral reform. The lesson is clear: When progressives move, Democrats will follow. "Don't expect this place to lead," says Representative George Miller. "Organize and force us to catch up."

As the buildup to his inaugural address shows, Bush's provocative agenda, which unified movement progressives and party regulars in the last election, will help organize the opposition in Bush's second term. By posing a continued threat to America's future, Bush also provides the opportunity for movement progressives to frame a large argument about the country's values and direction. Progressives should be mobilizing unremitting opposition to Bush's wrongheaded course, and demanding the same from their elected representatives.

A majority of Americans already express doubts about Bush's handling of foreign and economic affairs and the Iraq War. These doubts will increase as Bush pursues an economic policy that rewards the few while the many lose ground, fails to respond to the broken healthcare system,

opposes a living wage and defends trade and tax policies that accelerate the flight of jobs abroad and the decline of incomes and security at home [see John Nichols, "A Fight We Can Win," page 13].

Bush's drive to privatize Social Security, the centerpiece of his agenda, will expose the right and put Republicans at risk. Bush touts a fraudulent immediate crisis in a program that's in relatively good shape to rationalize deep cuts in benefits while borrowing \$2 trillion so Wall Street can feed on the savings of citizens. Progressives will use the fight over privatization to contrast the benefits of shared security with the risks of the right's policies, which leave citizens on their own in a global economy of accelerating instability. Opposition will enable progressives to forge a broad coalition ranging from the Catholic Conference to the AARP and the AFL-CIO. This fight to defend America's most successful retirement and antipoverty program can and must be won.

Bush's new budget will call for extending tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans while cutting investment in education and healthcare. This offends the common sense of most Americans and offers progressives the opportunity to challenge the President's perverted priorities while making the case for public investment in areas that Americans agree are vital to their families and our country's future. Bush's pledge to pack the courts with zealots will mobilize progressives in defense of equal rights, women's right to choose and corporate accountability. (Spooked by Senator Tom Daschle's defeat in South Dakota, many Senate Democrats are skittish about this battle, and will need to feel the heat from the activist base of the party.) The debacle in Iraq indicts the militarist unilateralism of the Bush Administration and provides progressives with the obligation to push for an exit strategy from an occupation that a majority of Americans now oppose. In this effort, the antiwar movement can make strategic alliances with much of the realist establishment, from George Bush Sr.'s national security adviser Brent Scowcroft to growing portions of the uniformed military as well as intelligence and State Department professionals.

At the same time, progressives should develop and push positive ideas for change: minimum- and living-wage campaigns, progressive tax reform, strategic initiatives like the Apollo Project for good jobs and energy independence. A "blue-state strategy"--elaborating a state and local agenda on such issues as healthcare and education reform--can provide models and demonstrate the attractiveness of progressive ideas.

None of this will be led by the lobbyists and retainers of the Democratic Party machine, such as it is. In the House, minority leader Pelosi will keep the caucus generally unified in opposition to the Bush agenda, but House boss Tom DeLay brutally locks Democrats out of the room whenever he pleases. Progressive champions like Jan **Schakowsky**, Hilda Solis, John Conyers, new Black Caucus chair Mel Watt, Barney Frank and others will help guide and support outside progressive mobilizations. The barons of the Senate are less organized and more frightened, as illustrated by minority leader Harry Reid's bizarre public acceptance of the idea of Antonin Scalia as Chief Justice. Senators Dick Durbin, Jon Corzine, Barbara Boxer and newly elected Barack Obama will help define the debate, but external pressure will be vital.

All stripes of Democrats agree on the need to persuade voters, not simply mobilize the base. But persuasion requires committed activists, passionate in their cause, ready to enlist and challenge their neighbors. Progressives haven't yet made up for the decline of union halls, nor matched the right's ubiquitous media clamor. But the pathbreaking house parties organized by MoveOn.org and the Dean campaign, and the extraordinary training provided by Wellstone Action, provide new models for educating activists and encouraging them to organize their neighbors.

So forget about the chattering classes and the corporate wing of the party, now fantasizing about purging the new energies unleashed in the last election. What matters isn't what they say in Washington, but what progressives do on the ground across the country. We have just begun to build. The radical agenda of the Bush Administration--and its abject failure--will continue to set the stage not for a retreat to the center but for a fierce, passionate reform movement.

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