

Stunned Party Looks to the Internal Debate Ahead

By JAMES BENNET - The New York Times

November 4, 2004

Democrats began turning Wednesday to the fight that some in the party fear they wage most consistently: with one another.

Democratic politicians and operatives said the defeat of Senator John Kerry and the loss of seats in the House and the Senate were likely to fan internal debate over everything from overarching ideology to on-the-ground tactics to the qualities to look for in a candidate.

The recriminations began even before Mr. Kerry's concession, with leaks to the news media about which Democrats had given what valuable but unheeded advice to him. While condemning any acrimony, several Democratic leaders said the party would benefit from a substantive internal debate.

"You always take stock after a loss like this, and it was a big disappointment," said Representative Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri, the longtime House Democratic leader who ran against Mr. Kerry for the presidential nomination, only to see his labor ties fail to bring him the Iowa victory he had hoped would propel his candidacy.

Mr. Gephardt argued that the Democrats' failure appeared to be more of tactics than of programs -- that Mr. Kerry's proposals were popular but that the Democrats' organization, while impressive, paled beside the Republicans' machine for turning out votes.

"They used the infrastructure of gun organizations and religious organizations to get that done," he said, "and we've got to grapple with that."

But Senator Bob Graham of Florida, who also sought the presidency but who dropped out before a single primary, said the party had to address some basic positions as well.

"We ought to debate what our strategy should be in the war on terrorism," Mr. Graham said.

"We also ought to have a debate," he said, "on how we can move the debate on values beyond God, guns and gays to tolerance, concern for others, love."

The Democratic Party appeared Wednesday to be trying to find God, or at least to find a way to talk about him. Several Democrats said their candidates needed to reach evangelical Christian voters, who on Tuesday overwhelmingly supported President Bush.

"Our failure -- or our 'drawback' is a better word -- is, sometimes, to speak to our faith, and to relate to people that we share their faith," Mr. Gephardt said.

One senior Democratic official suggested that the problem was deeper than communicating.

"I do believe there is a cultural shift going on in this country," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the delicate nature of the intraparty debate. "I think the country is becoming more conservative. I think their base is growing."

Douglas Sosnik, who was a counselor to President Bill Clinton and who advised Mr. Kerry, said that contrary to the aftermath of the muddled 2000 election results, the Democrats now needed to accept that they had become -- "no ifs, ands or buts" -- the opposition party.

"As we go prospectively forward -- to the question of 'now what?' -- to me it's all going to be stuffed through the prism of what does it mean to be an opposition party," Mr. Sosnik said. "And to me, being more effective as an opposition party means being grounded outside the Beltway, through the governors."

"We've got to build the party back up from the ground up," he said. "That's going to require some bloodletting, and a rethinking on substance and style."

Some argued that the party needed to embrace policies that would appeal to voters in Southern states and across the country.

"We need to put ideas first," said Al From, founder of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, which was close to Mr. Clinton. "Over the last 40 years we've seen the turf that we compete on shrink. We've got to be a national party."

Mark Penn, a Democratic pollster from the same centrist faction of the party, said, "The Democratic Party, in terms of security and values, has to be more competitive with the Republicans, and in that sense the party is going to look for ways to rebrand itself."

But Representative Jan **Schakowsky** of Illinois said the problem was the Democrats' communication rather than their traditional platform.

"I don't think we need to trim on the social and economic justice principles of the Democratic Party at all," Ms. **Schakowsky** said.

"We can do a better job of connecting that with people's lives, not just their economic lives but their spiritual lives as well," she said. "It doesn't have to be in religious terms so much as value-laden terms."

She said, for example, that she expected that Mr. Bush would now try to "privatize" Social Security, and that the Democrats should respond by emphasizing that they wanted to preserve a "safety net" because "we care for you."

Democratic officials seemed stunned by Tuesday's vote. They said they had thought that for once they had the unity, the money, the organization and a weak enough Republican opponent to win the presidency and at least hold their own in the House and the Senate.

"With 120 million people voting, at some point it's got to settle in with us that there are just more of them than there are of us," one Democratic operative said of the Republicans, adding, "My greatest fear now is we're going to turn the guns on each other."

Several Democrats noted that the party, in belated imitation of the Republicans, was now building its own infrastructure of policy institutes to generate its positions and messages. John Podesta, the president of one such organization, the Center for American Progress, said he hoped that the party would not become bogged down in its long-running fight over moving left or center.

"There has to be a rearticulation in the party of a sense of core principles that I think people are confused about," said Mr. Podesta, who was chief of staff in the Clinton White House.

In one Senate race, in Republican-leaning Colorado, Ken Salazar, a Democrat who supports abortion rights, managed Tuesday to dispatch the beer magnate Pete Coors. Jim Carpenter, Mr. Salazar's campaign manager, said the candidate, a Roman Catholic, was "very clear that his faith was very important to him but he disagreed with the church on the issue of abortion." He said Mr. Salazar's roots in Colorado as a rancher, his personal success story and his service as state attorney general had earned him voters' trust, insulating him from attacks.

"It's difficult," Mr. Carpenter said, "for an East Coast senator to get the trust of the voters out here."