

Liberals Want to Lead Fight Against Bush

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - They may be angry and a little depressed, but some of the nation's most liberal activists say they are confident they hold the key to beating President Bush in 2004.

With Republicans in control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, liberal activists who gathered at a Washington hotel to plot strategy on Thursday said the only winning course for Democrats in 2004 is to emphasize liberal principles and mobilize what they described as grass-roots anger over Bush's policies.

"If you look at how far to the right this administration has gone, it gives us a lot of room to maneuver," said Jonathan Greenberg, an environmental activist from New York. "We are the ones who care about the issues that most Americans care about."

The liberal approach of the party's activists puts them on a collision course with its centrist elements, including the Democratic Leadership Council, which recently described the liberal wing as "elitist" and said its agenda was a certain loser in 2004.

"We're not leading the party off a cliff, we're trying to lead the party to victory," said Roger

Hickey, co-chairman of the Campaign for America's Future, which sponsored the conference. He said the event attracted "a lot less elites than any DLC meeting I've ever been to," but participants were not trying to pick a fight with the DLC.

"I think people involved in the conference are in a very pragmatic mode," he said. "They want to see a candidate who can win."

Seven of the nine Democratic presidential candidates appeared either live or on tape on Thursday, the middle day of the three-day conference that drew about 1,500 representatives from liberal advocacy groups.

Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, who picked up early support in the campaign with his outspoken opposition to the war in Iraq, received a rousing welcome. He told the conference the way to beat Republicans was to "stand up against them and fight."

North Carolina Sen. John Edwards used the event to unveil a plan to keep down prescription drug costs, while two of the field's more moderate candidates, Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman and Florida Sen. Bob Graham, did not appear.

Many at the conference said Bush's policies were threatening social and economic progress and a progressive agenda was more crucial now than ever.

"It's a wonderful time to be in Washington, to be one of the good guys, because the bad guys are so bad," Chellie Pingree, president of Common Cause, told the conference.

Republicans said the conference and the Democratic campaign rhetoric was a sign the party did not have any new ideas.

"Americans do not reward politicians who make no effort to pursue a positive agenda, and do not follow leaders who make no effort to lead," Republican National Committee Chairman Marc

Racicot said in an e-mail to party activists.

Democratic Rep. Jan Schakowsky of Illinois said there were positive signs for progressives, from the controversy over the Bush tax bill's elimination of a child tax credit for low-income families to questions about the failure to discover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

She urged conference attendees to hatch strategies to mobilize grass-roots support, to maintain "sustained, loud, angry activity."

"In the end we're going to have to dedicate ourselves to electing Democrats," she said. "To do otherwise is simply a luxury we cannot afford."