

Downside UP

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It's Time to Write a Progressive Platform

Dear Readers,

The election is over. The New Republican machine is in motion for 2005 and beyond. Led by the president himself, we are told that our fight in Iraq was always about spreading freedom and democracy. We are told that Social Security is in crisis and can only be saved by establishing private accounts within it. We are told that, after four years of spectacular tax cuts for the rich, the only way we can be "fiscally responsible" is to cut domestic programs which primarily benefit the lower strata of society. No lie, no deception, no denial is too outrageous.

After all, George Bush didn't actually commit himself to reconciliation and bipartisanship. When he speaks of working with people who "share our values," he is as often referring to the narrow agenda of his evangelical and corporate supporters as he is to the fundamental values of Western civilization. While he spouts conciliatory rhetoric, he renominates all of the 20 judges Senate Democrats found – out of hundreds of conservatives they approved -- too right-wing. His programs turn sex education into propaganda against women and lies about the effectiveness of condoms against both pregnancy and AIDS. It does not matter that specific documents from the president, the secretary of defense, and the new attorney general open the door to, and then authorize, torture of prisoners. It does not matter that there is concrete evidence of its taking place not only in Abu Ghraib but also in Guantanamo and elsewhere. To George Bush, the truth is whatever is convenient to say today: so he would never authorize torture of prisoners.

Spectacularly, when John Kerry, before the election, accused George Bush of planning to privatize Social Security at a cost of huge deficits, Bush denounced Kerry for scare-mongering. But, immediately after the election, Bush announced privatization as the centerpiece of his domestic agenda while proposing a budget which completely ignored the cost.

It is clear that most readers of Downside Up don't like what George Bush and his radical Republicans have been doing since 2000 and clearly plan to do between now and 2008. It is clear, indeed, that the arrogance and lying which imbues this regime generates not just antipathy to its programs but hatred of its leadership. (1) In this environment, the rhetoric of reconciliation and bipartisanship has come, on both sides, to smack of submission and surrender. Among progressives, both Democratic and Republican (2), differences with the current regime have been so profound that it has often seemed enough simply to defend what has been. It has seemed so

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obvious that the social and economic policies of the 1930's and the 1960's were better than those of the 1890's. There has seemed no need to advocate for them, much less work for an even more progressive future.

But resistance is not enough. It is never enough. The Radical Republicans have put progressives on the defensive and we have fallen back on the triumphs of the past rather than advocating a progressive agenda for the future. They have made returning to a 19th century, pre-progressive past sound like a major stride towards progress and liberty. We have stood immobilized in disbelief, like a duck hit in the head by a rock. When the country voted for these hated radicals – even if primarily in response to the rhetoric of a "war on terrorism" – all we could think of was to label the American people ignorant, brainwashed, or just plain dumb.

I've got news for us. The problem is us. We were sitting on our tushies while the radical right was winning the war of words. Now we need to tell our story.

The Lost Story of Freedom and Democracy

This story is of a bipartisan tradition, molded by both Republican and Democratic progressives. It is a heroic story of the past and a hopeful story for the future. First brought into being by the Populist farmers and workers of the late 19th century, it was nurtured by Theodore Roosevelt (Republican), William Howard Taft (Republican), and Woodrow Wilson (Democrat) in the early 20th century. It came together in the "New Deal" of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Democrat) in the 1930's, and was added to most of all by Lyndon Baines Johnson (Democrat) in the 1960's, but with some contributions from Dwight David Eisenhower (Republican), John Fitzgerald Kennedy (Democrat), and Richard Nixon (Republican) in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's.

Ours has always been a liberal agenda because its purpose has been to extend liberty. It has represented an effort to strengthen freedom, justice, democracy, and the common good against the growing power of the private corporation, a power inconceivable to the Founders of the Republic. Many in the corporate hierarchy, as well as the Republican Party as a whole, reconciled themselves to the New Deal, even working to mold and add to it. Today, most historians view FDR as the man who saved American capitalism from its own political and economic self-destruction.

But a hard core of Corporate America has continued to see – and hate -- FDR for betraying what they see as the fundamental values of American society. (3) These fundamental values center on the idea of unfettered opportunity to accumulate private wealth and power. In this understanding of our values, the primary role of government is to foster those values in the economic and political system. It is the dream of Alexander Hamilton fulfilled between the Civil War and the turn of the 20th century. And, perhaps going beyond Hamilton, it is a vision not of free markets, but markets open to individual and corporate domination in a society where the role of government is not to restrain private wealth and power but to encourage and support its concentration. (4)

Whipped as he was in the 1964 presidential election, Barry Goldwater pioneered the political reemergence of a hard core challenge to the New Deal national consensus. Milton Friedman's Capitalism and Freedom was the bible of a new, assertive, anti-progressive campaign to turn the country back to the "Robber Baron" era of the late

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19th century. Progressives ever since have been slowly losing the ideological battle for the hearts and minds of Americans. Since 1968, there have been only two Democratic presidents and both have made serious compromises with the progressive agenda. Jimmy Carter opened the door to deregulation. Bill Clinton, the most popular Democratic president since FDR, announced the “end of the era of big government” and devised a “welfare reform” program which has, quite predictably, thrown millions of women and children into more desperate poverty.

Now George Bush has presided over a reemergence not of individual freedom and enterprise so talked about by New Republicans, but of tax breaks, subsidies, and sweetheart deals: crony capitalism for the rich and powerful. The genius of the New Republican counter-revolution has been to capture for the benefit of giant – now multinational – corporations, the voting power of evangelical Protestants and other social conservatives.

The Strange Turns of Racism and Xenophobia

Up until recently, foreign policy and the politics of race often muddied the waters of the progressive agenda. Racism and xenophobia (hatred of foreigners) combined not only to inspire anti-Catholic/anti-Jewish/anti-immigrant movements in Democratic as well as Republican strongholds, but also to form the basis of what is often called an “isolationist” foreign policy. It was not in fact isolationist at all. The United States, which sent its tiny navy to fight the “Barbary Pirates” in the Mediterranean under Thomas Jefferson, never practiced separation from the rest of the world. It only practiced extreme uncooperativeness and “me-firstism.” It routinely intervened unilaterally in Latin America starting in the late 19th century. Woodrow Wilson was no less an interventionist than the infamous Teddy Roosevelt. The United States threw up huge tariffs against European competitors. It refused to join the League of Nations.

But, starting with the Republican – yes, the Republican – presidents of the 1920’s, the United States also turned progressive in its foreign policy. FDR pulled together a new approach (sometimes more in word than deed) to Latin America, called the “Good Neighbor Policy,” and led the country into the United Nations at the end of World War II. Since World War II, Republicans have provided as much leadership as Democrats in working with other countries to solve the world’s problems. Richard Nixon opened the door to China. The apparent consensus on a progressive foreign policy outlived that on domestic programs.

At the same time, one of the political bases of the Democratic Party was the “Solid South” which simultaneously inspired some of our country’s most progressive social, political, and economic movements (e.g. the Populists), and for more than half of the 20th century blocked all efforts to protect the rights of African Americans, even from lynching. (5) The South was Democratic because the Republicans had won the Civil War. African Americans were Republican – though by the end of the 19th century they were rarely allowed to vote in the South.

Then, a political realignment began, a realignment which was ultimately to straighten the two parties into more ideologically consistent organizations. In the 1930’s, in response to New Deal social programs and the rhetorical support of FDR’s wife, Eleanor, African Americans in the North moved overwhelmingly into a Democratic Party still dominated by Southern segregationists. The party’s new African American

constituency led, however, in the 1960's, to increasing support for African American rights in the South. It culminated in the civil rights legislation supported and pushed by former Dixiecrat Senator, now President, Lyndon Baines Johnson. Finally, in response, the Party's Southern leadership began changing parties, officially joining the Republican Party which had been courting them since the 1960's. Neither John Kerry nor, in 2000, Al Gore, a Southerner from Tennessee, won a single Southern state, and today fewer and fewer Democrats remain in statewide office anywhere in the South.

Realigning the Political Map

The realignment of the country along strict party lines separating progressives and anti-progressives is not complete. For example, consider the two senators from Maine, both of whom are Republican in a state which gave Democrat Kerry an 8.2% margin of victory. Nonetheless, the 2000-2008 New Republican counter-revolution is a culmination of 40 years of political shifting into two parties divided sharply on every major issue, foreign and domestic, facing the country. These include the role of the corporation in society; the role of government in relation to the corporation and the individual; religion and the morality and values derived from religion; the place of the United States in world affairs; and attitudes towards differences in nationality and in race, sex and sexuality. None of these issues is new. They all date back to the 19th century and some to the founding of the republic. But they are now all starkly highlighted because they are no longer veiled by the amorphous and contradictory behavior of heterogeneous political parties. (6)

However much for the worse, the New Republican revolution, has clearly presented, for those who wish to see, its agenda for the United States. In doing so, it has just as clearly sharpened the image of the progressive agenda. But the progressive response cannot stop with just being not-Republican. For 40 years we have been losing ground in the battle of political realignment. We have responded not by clarifying our own progressive agenda but by compromising it. We have been trying to hold together a Democratic Party which did not represent our values but which we have assumed was our only route to national political power.

Now we have a party which is more uniformly progressive than any major party has ever been. It is a new era. Far from a time, as some on the Democratic Left are saying, to consider a third party, or, some on the Democratic Right are saying, to move to the center, this is the time for Democrats to stop acting as if they are embarrassed by their values. (7) It's Republicans who should be embarrassed. The Democratic Party has something great to sell. It is "liberal" and it is good, traditional, and moral. It is about far more important values than the sloganizing of "pro-life" and "pro-marriage."

The progressive agenda is about caring for our brothers and sisters. It is about treating all human beings as we would wish to be treated. It is about living in a diverse world of all God's people. It is about equal opportunity and justice. It is, if those of you who are not Christian can bear this way of saying it, what Jesus replied when: *A teacher of the Law was there who heard the discussion. He saw that Jesus had given the Sadducees a good answer, so he came to him with a question: "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus replied, "The most important one is this: 'Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'*

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The second most important commandment is this: 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment more important than these two." (Good News Translation, Mark 12:28-34). When was the last time you heard a Republican evangelical quoting this statement?! (8)

Our challenge is great. There are no easy answers. The greatest danger for Democrats clearly lies in the winner-take-all system of vote-counting, and the constitutional bias of the Senate and the electoral college for low population states. (Each state gets two senators regardless of population, and in presidential elections, the electoral college counts state votes by the number of senators and representatives.) But given the continued strength of the Democrats on economic issues, the shakiness of a Bush election based primarily on fear of terrorism, and the likelihood that some of the unacknowledged lies and failures of the Bush Government could blow up in their faces, it is no time to race to the middle with a Southern/rural/conservative agenda.

Indeed, I think there is a malaise over the land, and it reflects a lack of enthusiasm among most Americans for the results of the election they have just had. Polls indicated an unprecedented lack of support for a president who, on the eve of his inaugural, could not summon even a 50% approval rating. The vote count gave him a plurality (9), but mostly as a wartime president who would protect us from terrorism. The economy, while statistically booming, has not spread its gains widely. Our moral leadership has collapsed in the reality of unilateral military action, lying about weapons of mass destruction, name-calling, and torture of prisoners. Some 1500 American soldiers have died in Iraq and ten times that number have been wounded. (10) For all the presidential rhetoric about spreading freedom and democracy, it is hard for a lot of Americans to really feel good about themselves, to be really "proud to be an American" as so many bumper stickers announce. The Bush regime hasn't even done terribly well for its core constituency at the top of the economic heap: taxes are down but the Dow Jones Industrials index is still a thousand points below its January, 2000, peak of 11,750.

If Democrats were to hold the five states Kerry won by 5% or less, and win the five he lost by 5% or less, Democrats would win the Presidency, control the House, and be down only 52-48 in the Senate. We must remember that Bill Clinton, just eight years ago, won by far more electoral votes (379-159) than Bush even though Clinton also lost most of the South (all but Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Kentucky). The argument on the other side is precisely that Clinton did so well because he ran for the center, but Kerry actually got more of the popular vote. It is far from clear to me that progressives could not do just as well by articulating and developing our traditional values and contrasting them with the simplistic one-liners that pass for values under today's regime. It is no time for progressives to pack their bags and go home to sulk.

Writing a Progressive Platform

So, I invite all of you to respond to this article by telling me what you think about the major issues facing our country today. Tell me the topics, questions, and ideas for a progressive platform in the United States. Taxes, social programs, social security, abortion, foreign policy, terrorism, Iraq, regulation, the workplace, the environment, the deficit, national parks, privatization, "free trade," education, civil liberties, transportation, energy, reforming the election system, racism, farm policy, foreign

aid, the morals/values debate. Be politically pragmatic or wildly idealistic. Talk about one issue or 15. Tell me on which issues we must move to the "center" and which not, or if we should hold ground on every issue.

I will receive and think about your ideas. I will report on the results, perhaps with a summary issue, and, over an indeterminate future, write about your topics as if "planks" in a progressive platform for the United States. I will talk about your ideas and mine and come to some conclusions. I am continually influenced by the comments you already send me. Many of you write often. Many make suggestions and propose topics. I want MANY MORE OF YOU TO WRITE ME NOW.

Ron

Footnotes

1. I cannot think of any party in the United States which has ever before run for office on a platform designed primarily to obscure its real goals. It has been common to promise far more than could be delivered – and in that sense deceive the public -- but not to promise one thing when you really plan the opposite. As I have pointed out many times, the Radical Republicans goal has always been to destroy social and environmental programs but they have run on a platform of tax cuts. If they had run on a platform of cutting taxes on the rich at the expense of the unrich and gutting social programs, if they had run on a platform of reducing environmental protection, they would never have been elected.
2. I go back to the early 20th century for this term to describe the Democrats and Republicans who, as "progressives," together advocated restraints on the excesses of corporate capitalism, good government, and more equal opportunity for all Americans: an income tax, child labor laws, railroad regulation, anti-trust legislation, food inspection, direct election of senators, establishment of a Federal Trade Commission, and professional management of local government. Republican Theodore Roosevelt and Democrat Woodrow Wilson are the most well-remembered, if not the most important, leaders of what historians call the "Progressive Era."
3. Not unlike how many progressives view George Bush for betraying their values of freedom, justice, democracy, and the common good.
4. You can understand the New, or Radical, Republican Party much better when you get past the rhetoric of "free markets." No business – or country -- in a position to dominate a market has ever supported "free enterprise" or "free markets." Only those on the outs who wanted in.
5. In the furor over former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's praise of Strom Thurmond's run for president in 1948, I never saw it explained that the key plank in the Democratic platform leading Thurmond and his Southern colleagues to walk out of the Democratic Convention was an anti-lynching law. Not the right to vote or eat at a lunch counter but the right not to be hung and your body burned because you allegedly stared at a white woman. Research now suggests that the primary victims of such accusations and executions were "uppity" African Americans who owned too much land or had too successful a business.
6. When I was in college – and long after – college texts would constantly complain about the lack of "party discipline" and "ideological coherence." Well, we have now what they wanted then! I am conflicted between how the Dixiecrat dominance of the Democratic Party blocked civil rights legislation for 70 years and the fact that many of those same segregationists were essential to Congressional votes to pass progressive economic and social legislation limiting the abuses of corporate capitalism.
7. Donna Brazile, frequently quoted Democratic "political adviser," is still out there advocating, as she has for years, the necessity of Democrats winning the South in order to win the country. The new anti-choice, conservative Senate minority leader from Nevada, Harry Reid, has somehow convinced New York Senator Chuck Schumer, to take over the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and lead the party toward the center. I am far from convinced. To the degree the official tallies are correct, Kerry lost every Southern state by at least 5% and all but Florida (5.1%), Missouri (7.3%), Virginia (8.3%), and Arkansas (9.6%) by more than 14%.
8. The fact is that most Biblical references quoted by evangelicals do not come from Jesus, their supposed Lord and prophet. They come heavily from the Old/Hebrew Testament/Bible, whose teaching were extended and reinterpreted by Jesus, and from others who claimed to follow Jesus but whose authority can be questioned.

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9. The media report Bush's presidential vote as a majority but in doing so, they ignore votes "lost" by registration problems and so-called "spoiled ballots." (See the January/February issue of Downside Up.)
10. Rare is the news report that even mentions the number of Iraqis who have died in the war for "freedom and democracy." It is clearly well over 100,000.

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Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous. The web spinner's name is also best left anonymous.

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