

Downside UP

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A Progressive Platform: Reader Responses

As promised, this issue is devoted to reader responses to the challenge of defining a progressive agenda for American politics.

As much as possible, I have left everything in the words of the writers, whom I have not identified by name. I have created inevitably artificial and overlapping categories to organize the responses, and, where a reader has written about more than one subject, divided her or his comments into those categories. I have corrected obvious email-type grammar and spelling errors. I have cut out comments about what I have written except as they relate to the principles and proposals of a progressive agenda. I have cut some words and paragraphs to eliminate repetition and make reader ideas more concise or just less long.

Otherwise, I have resisted all temptations to argue with or refute (or praise) what people have said. At most, I have organized a couple of comments for contrast and, to highlight the issue, cited one widely-read progressive article in striking disagreement with one reader's perspective. My only substantive contribution is to point out topics for which there were no proposals. Finally, I did create a special category for proposals that did not fit elsewhere and seem (sadly) so unlikely to make it into any serious discussion within the mainstream of American politics that I have called them "Off the Charts." By this I am in no way suggesting that they are not proposals progressives should be addressing. To the contrary, they are some of the most interesting.

My comments are in this font. Reader comments are in the next paragraph's font.

Justice

I don't really believe that most Americans support the Bush assault on civil liberties nor are they "pro-life." I think a focus on domestic fairness and social justice deserves the most attention.

We should talk about the new have/have not society. I would love to see my own hard-working children able to afford to buy a home in either Boston or Lake Placid. I think we need to challenge on all sides, not only the money lenders in the temple who are crippling our society but the ones who silently pretend that it's not their problem.

Minimum Wage

1. We need a minimum wage that someone could actually live on. It should be enough to support at least one person at slightly above the poverty level. That would still require a lot of two-parent families to work to support their kids, and I

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can't figure how to make adjustments for single parent families. Maybe other benefits like greater tax deductions for child care and education expenses could complement a minimum living wage.

2. We should ensure that every American willing to work has a minimum \$10 an hour full time job. This is a no-brainer in a country where an economic system permits one person to amass a personal fortune of \$35 billion (thirty-five thousand million dollars). If there are insufficient jobs in the private sector, the public sector should provide the jobs. This used to be a central plank of the Democratic Party platform.

Class Warfare by the Rich on the Poor

1. If it were I, I'd focus primarily on the corporate profiteers, especially the influential big oil giants who, behind the scenes, consistently control ever-emerging policies relating to the war in Iraq. The real question is this: Who owns George W. Bush?

2. It's time to attack the rich with the same vigor as FDR for creating a 19th century British class system: Yes, on estate taxes, yes on progressive income tax, yes on redistribution to the states who have a far better idea of social service administration, raise the minimum wage, etc.

3. Restore a progressive tax system in the United States. When the top 1 per cent of the population has roughly 40 percent of national wealth and perhaps .1 per cent has 25 per cent, the economic system is neither just nor democratic. The Clinton prosperity in the 90's, when the marginal tax rate on the wealthy was raised, buried the bogus arguments of the conservatives that tax increases on the rich undercut economic growth.

4. How about penalties for companies like Wal-Mart that have a majority of their employees part-time (you could set a percentage) so that they don't have to pay benefits -- and then those same people need our tax money for food stamps and welfare? Maybe not workable.

A Social Contract and Safety Net

Move from the social security (crisis/no crisis) debate to a larger vision of security and useful lives for older people that includes income security, long term care, Medicare, opportunities for volunteerism, intergenerational collaboration, and recognition that people can be usefully employed into their seventies. I agree, of course, with AARP's opposition to Bush on social security, but generally speaking I think the AARP is a negative force in American life today. They totally fail to address the fact that it is children and the working poor that are screwed the worst in our country today. I would call it "the intergenerational charter."

Health Care

1. It's time to be bold again on a single-payer system for health care. The Canadian system is sellable and the recent proposal of using the Federal Reserve districts (not insurance companies) as administrative entities to oversee the system sounds appealing to me. The nice political part of this proposal is that the business community is hurting from the health insurance debacle as well as millions of ordinary folks.

2. Provide comprehensive, affordable medical coverage for every American.
3. How about single-payer health care for all children? I'd pay \$4000 more a year in taxes to the state government, rather than an insurance company for universal health care for everyone in a heartbeat, but is that too progressive?
4. I was reading my Newsweek and one of the economic people (Alan Sloan I think) had a really irate article about the travesty of the new bankruptcy law. He wrote that the fundamental issue is lack of adequate health care--or affordable health care--and that a significant percentage of bankruptcies are due to that.

National Service, War, and the World

1. I still believe wholeheartedly in two years of national service for everyone at 18 -- military, cities, schools, whatever. Higher education will benefit and those who fall out of the public education system will be better served than by a pile of new tests in high school.
2. If the united states engages in a war, police action or equivalent military campaign where forces are at significant risk, a "no deferment" draft for both men and women should be instituted until hostilities have ceased. There is no way the Iraq invasion would have happened if such a law were in effect. Jessica Lynch signed up to earn the money to go to college and become a kindergarten teacher while Jenna and Barbara Bush went to college and partied on weekends in Manhattan.
3. Conduct an American foreign policy consistent with human rights and democratic values. Jimmy Carter's foreign policy is the best model in recent decades.
4. Internationally, take the lead in creating the same checks on corporate power that the Progressives and the New Deal sought to deal with concentrations of wealth and power in the U.S. There is no one minding the store internationally; free trade is fine if it is not used simply to weaken poor nations and enrich the largest corporations.

Practicing Democracy

1. Make the concept of "one person one vote" a reality by achieving full campaign finance reform through public financing of elections and other sweeping measures.
2. End corporate and crony capitalism's stranglehold on federal government agencies and regulatory bodies. Use federal government institutions to foster economic competition and serve the public interest.

Energy and the Environment

1. People do care about the environment, maybe Republicans even more than Democrats. Teddy Roosevelt had it right: leave more resources to the next generation than you enjoyed in your time. I can't believe that this subject was not even mentioned in the debates.

2. Implement a "Marshall plan" alternate energy program to eliminate American dependence on foreign oil and to clean up the environment.

Education

1. Seek national equality of educational opportunity in fulfillment of the 14th Amendment. Historically and at present, the children who need the most resources get the least, and the children who need the least resources get the most. Jonathan Kozol's "Savage Inequalities" is the only book written in the past few decades that actually addresses educational reform where it counts.

2. Fully fund Head-Start and other early learning programs. They make a HUGE difference. I have seen it on Indian reservations, for example.

3. Education--how about giving control of education back to the states? How about laws creating mandatory small class sizes, not tests, and fully fund them, of course!

Off The Charts

Modeling Alternatives

I want to mention an essay I found positively inspiring in an anthology (What We Do Now) by Jamin Raskin, a professor of constitutional law and the First Amendment at American University. He asks why the Democratic Party ought not to return to its roots in the sense of offering some actual answers -- not just thinking-- to those whose "crying social needs" get no attention elsewhere. For instance, why should the Party not organize a private national health insurance plan for uninsured people "who cannot afford to wait for the next Democratic sweep of Congress." He proposes initially capitalizing this via a percent, perhaps 15%, of party contributions. Since a major concern in this era of blockading upward mobility is how to educate your kids, something similar could fund a Democratic Party Scholarship & Loan fund for young Democrats' college tuition. You can think about this in many ways -- a Democratic Strike Fund for families, etc. "The point," he says, "is that we have to stop replicating a model of the Democratic Party as an empty vessel for fundraising that takes hundreds of millions of dollars from Progressive people and unions at election time to give to broadcast corporations and millionaire political consultants." But beyond that, imagine how the party might build if people's lives were touched in REAL ways, with SOLUTIONS to some of their pressing problems, and a message that resonated in fulfilling promises.

A progressive agenda that STARTS with framing the issues but also moves forward into offering real answers--wow.

End the massacre on American highways.

While the loss of 3,000 people in the 9/11 Attack was a tragedy, the United States still tolerates a self-inflicted massacre of 3,500 people on her highways EVERY MONTH, YEAR AFTER YEAR, DECADE AFTER DECADE, most of whom are innocent men, women and children. Former Governor Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut proved in the 1950's that the death toll could be reduced by government initiative and at great political benefit. In effect, the United States EVERY YEAR suffers a slaughter roughly

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equivalent to 2/3 of the 58,000 American soldiers killed in the Vietnam War. If we truly value human life, why do we ignore this fixable problem?

Getting Serious About Families

Child care credits for full-time parents the same as parents who work get [the earned income credit]. As it stands now, if you pay for child care you get to deduct the money from your taxes, but there should be a chart or some sort of standard credit for full-time parents too. In one of my futuristic books, they have a status of "professional mother" or "professional father" where you actually get a stipend from the government.

Also, in Europe, full-time mothers get automatic social security payments, put in by the government, for their retirement. What a pipe dream that is!

While we are dreaming: six months paid maternity leave with some sort of paid paternity leave as well. That is what _____ got in England. Ha! She didn't even have to go back to work afterwards and is now a full-time mom.

Prison Reform

Some 30 years ago, the Texas prison system fell under the enlightened guidance of an administrator, John Beto, who had earned a PhD in Medieval Art, and, by some unlikely means, blessedly ended up being appointed head of the Texas penal system.

He instituted numerous reforms, among which were the following: an educational system to train all prisoners [at all levels from basic skill to university] so that they would have a means of earning an honest living once they had served their terms, and returned to society. Not only did these classes teach skills to the prisoners, but they also kept peace in the prisons, as the inmates were too busy and interested to have fights.

Each prisoner was given medical and dental care, including being fitted for eye-glasses and dentures.

He persuaded the CEOs of several top industries to give the prisoners who were soon to be released training in how to groom themselves in order to make the best impression on a prospective employer, and how to write a resume. Best of all, he persuaded these business tycoons to hire these prisoners after their release from prison, because an "ex-con" finds it almost impossible to get a job.

Thanks to his reforms, he reduced a recidivism rate that had been between 70 to 80%, down to 17%!

Needless to say, Texas went back to the old way of punishing their prisoners, instead of 'correcting' them, and the recidivism rate has returned to over 70%! This is not only costing tax-payers much more money, but is also inflicting danger on Society when unregenerate criminals (probably even more dangerous than when they were first sent to prison) are turned loose.

There are more than two million men and women in the nation's state and federal prisons. An anthropologist pointed out that the reason proportionately more Blacks and other Minorities are incarcerated than Whites, is because more of them are also poor. As Mahatma Gandhi said "Poverty is the worst form of violence."

The Platform: Politics, Personality, and Morality

From A Brother

All my gut is with you and I don't think there is a case for anything but being progressive. As I reflect on the election, I remember Kerry just trying to be as tough as Bush on Iraq; otherwise I can't recall any domestic agenda that was bold other than roll back the tax cuts for the rich so that social programs could be preserved.

From a University Reader

...Come to think of it, I'm railing against greed. Unfortunately, it's the same greed that causes everybody to secretly want to be rich. Sheesh! No wonder the Republicans always win. They're like the folks who run the lottery -- they make everybody believe THEY can be rich too. Remember Pogo?

My biggest concern, however, IS the media. They own us--but they in turn appear to be owned by even far more sinister (or mindless) forces. I recently read how the famous scream at the Iowa Caucus was carefully manipulated by the networks to make Howard Dean appear to be a raving maniac. Evidently, in the context of a crowded auditorium with thousands of folks milling about in front of him, what Howard Dean did was quite normal. It was obvious that he was having fun. In short, this incredible incident is now being utilized by mass media academics as a supreme negative example that demonstrates the excesses and illegitimate powers now resting in the hands of the corporate megapowers. And to top it off, we were inundated by this character assassination, day in day out, for nearly two weeks. NBC, for instance, aired it more than 700 times.

I would suggest going easy on spouting from the Bible. There are many other literary sources that won't trigger autonomic responses on the part of some. Personally, I don't mind, but many folks who identify closely with the separation of church and state might. Instead, I would concentrate on other social reformers like Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Eleanor Roosevelt. I can think of many others. I do agree with you that Democrats and Progressives should be concentrating on ethical behavior...

Note: On the same day I received the above email questioning my (excessive) use of Biblical references, I received the following email expressing a quite different perspective. In fairness to the above reader, when I told him what the reader below had said, explained that I believe that the best of American values are largely derived from Biblical sources, and argued that we ought to throw a true understanding of Christianity back into the evangelicals' faces, he accepted my point. -- RGW

From the Daughter of Church Friends

I have decided in my own life, I am going to be more -- not vocal, honest --about how my faith life impacts decisions I make in the voting booth. And it would surprise you how receptive people are to that. It's true, I do live in what we lovingly refer to as The Peoples Republic of Vermont, a place where Gov. Dean was considered conservative, so this may not seem like a very courageous move. But living in a politically liberal state means "Politically Correct" is the watch word in all things. Discussing faith is a social taboo. You might offend a wiccan or something -- heaven forbid! So when I'm at a social function and talk turns to political issues, I am upfront about how my faith structure informs my arguments -- being careful to

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explain that "all people of the book" as our Muslim brothers and sisters call us -- have the same 10 Commandments. And not one of them is "Thou shalt give tax cuts to the rich and glorify greed."

I have found that people I would least expect to hear from respond with their own "testimony," and express gratitude for "permission" to talk about it. As Progressives, this is what we have to do. We cannot allow bad theology to direct the conversation. Call them on it. Hate is not a biblical or a family value. Greed is not a Beatitude. The Risen Christ who appeared first to a woman would be horrified to discover the way women are treated worldwide. Real Christianity, Judaism, Islam are based on love and acceptance, not divisiveness.

From Another University Reader

Liberals are, of course, now in one fine mess. In the current DU, you equate "liberals" with "progressives." Yikes! Here is the situation you probably found yourself in immediately after the elections of last November. You said to yourself: "O my God!! This is awful! My pro-war, would-have-invaded-Iraq-even-if-I-had-known-in-advance-that-there-were-no-WMDs-there, anti-redistributionist, anti-Keynesian, anti-single-payer health plan, pro-Israeli, to-the-right-of-Nixon-on-many-important-issues candidate has *lost*!! Oh how I wish my pro-war, would-have-invaded-Iraq-even-if-I-had-known-in-advance-that-there-were-no-WMDs-there, anti-redistributionist, anti-Keynesian, anti-single-payer health plan, pro-Israeli, to-the-right-of-Nixon-on-many-important-issues candidate had....*won*." This is what liberals have come to in these times. Would that DU would address this issue, and the alternatives-to-capitalism issue, head on. How about: "What do you think, as a Christian, about a system about which we can say this: that whether a person can find a job, and thereby have access to the means of life, depends on whether *someone else*, perhaps a total stranger and almost always much wealthier, can make a profit by hiring the job seeker? Because that's the system we've got. Does it sound reasonable to you? Does it sound ethical to you?"

I don't want my jibes to obscure the fact that DU is really a magnificent project, and I read it with pleasure. Of course one of the pleasures is the guilty one of knowing that I'm on the mark re the limitations of left-liberal analysis. But that's only *one* of *many* pleasures.

From a Wonderful 79 Year-Old Radical & Community Activist

If only our Democrats could summon up the courage to give us a truly PROGRESSIVE platform, rather than "Republican-Lite." When I think of the several friends who 'sat on their hands' during the last election, because they were so disgusted with Kerry and Edwards for having voted in support of the war in Iraq, along with their timid platform and caving to concede without questioning the fraud. I believe that the Democrats could win, if they followed Walter Cronkite's advice and prided themselves on being Liberals, rather than letting the Republicans con them into denying it.!

From a Friend Who Has Moved to France and Become a French Citizen

Note: Until very recently, my two most frequent and lengthy respondents have both been naturalized French citizens now living in France, one born English and one born in the United States. The greatest passion of the former, who has now been struck low by cancer, is the Palestinian cause. It is not hard to tell that the other, whom I quote here at length, retains his love of, and his despair for, the country of his birth. He writes:

I have lost all hope for America. America has lost its soul. “The center does not hold; things fall apart.” Regarding your own thoughts as expressed in recent issues of Downside Up, I first say the most essential element of a possible renewal of a liberal America seems totally absent: the candidate. The platform is easy enough to come by. It is clear, as you have also made it clear, that the liberal position on just about any issue is easy enough to define. All the issues share common beliefs and “core values.”

I. THE INFORMING MORAL PROBLEM

The current situation in America, as you describe it with your usual passion and clarity, may be called in political economy terms capitalism unleashed, out of control, run amuck. In terms of traditional moral philosophy, it is the sin Paul called the root of all sins, GREED.

The essential problems of America are neither political nor economic. They are moral. I am not talking about abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, capital punishment. I am talking about a fundamental moral issue that is inherent to all humankind, regardless of religion, nationality, sex or sexual orientation, etc., but particularly virulent in the West since the end of the Middle Ages: GREED.

The fundamental moral problem in America is greed, and greed is the inherent and defining moral problem of capitalism. Capitalism is greed realized, enshrined. Huizinga, in his now classic analysis of the great transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (The Waning of the Middle Ages), argued that the former was a feudal-hierarchical-chevalresque society, the latter a society defined by the desire for money. And not just money, but always more money, and more and more and more.

Of course, the greedy were also there in the Middle Ages. In Dante’s *Inferno*, they are, indeed, the most numerous of all those he encountered in hell. But in the Middle Ages, pride was the greatest of sins. With the advent of capitalism, greed replaced pride.

I have never been rich. Never longed to be rich. But during my fifteen years in Houston and six years in San Antonio, I frequented the rich and worked with the rich. I was invited to their country clubs, to their dinner parties, to their intimate boating parties. I was ever appalled by their callousness, their selfishness, their boundless greed. However much money they had, they never had enough. And they had scant concern for those with less. The poor deserve to be poor, they asserted with magnificent self-satisfaction.

My grandmother used to repeat to me Paul’s “Love of money (greed) is the root of all evil.” If she had read Augustine, she would have learned that there are two kinds of greed. “Particular greed is the love of money. General greed is the desire to have more money than necessary.” Contemporary America is consumed by both.

Church fathers also held that greed was a form of idolatry, something which the contemporary world might well ponder.

In the world of greed, there is no room for compassion, for concern for the other. We cannot be greedy and at the same time be our brother’s keeper.

II. THE PLATFORM

The problem is not the platform. The problem is to find a human being capable of articulating and embodying that platform. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was not the New Deal without Franklin Roosevelt. The New Deal was Franklin Roosevelt, and FDR was the New Deal. What would the British struggle have been without the heroic persona of Winston Churchill? We must hold ever before us Marshall McLuhan's dictum, "The medium is the message." This means that whatever the eventual "platform" should be, it will be bodied forth and transformed by the person, the human being, who carries it to the world.

Note: This view seems to contrast with former senator and presidential candidate Bill Bradley's March 30, Op-Ed piece in the New York Times describing how the Republicans have created a right-side up pyramid with core beliefs and proposals at its base. The Democrats, Bradley says, have an upside-down pyramid. They don't know what they think until they have a candidate. The Republicans, with their money and their think tanks, are campaigning all the time. The Democrats keep losing because they can't even start campaigning until they have a candidate. For the Republicans, it doesn't matter who the candidate is. In effect, any idiot will do. ("A Party Inverted," March 30, 2005) - RGW

Now, in spite of the dominance of greed, many human beings continue to respond to calls for selflessness, for reaching out to the other in need. That's why Kennedy's "Ask not..." became his signature statement and inspired a generation. Many of us want to care for the other, but in a world consumed by greed, it is a difficult task.

Whatever particulars the platform may propose, it should be informed by a general rejection of a society of greed in favor of a society of caring and generosity. This, I would also argue, is an essentially Christian, New Testament, vision. I think it is time for Progressives to reclaim their Christian roots, or at least, their Christian affinities.

This would mean above all:

Medical care, including preventive medical care, available to all.

Education through the college level available to all. (In this regard, all older persons in your audience will recall the extraordinary achievement of the G.I. Bill of Rights.)

Protection of the environment, which affects all of us and belongs to all of us. Caring for the environment is a way of caring for our neighbors.

Promoting universal well-being. I hearken back to that great surge of American generosity following World War II: The Marshall Plan, in which we learned that in doing good for others, we do good for ourselves. Altruism as enlightened selfishness. America's higher responsibility, to herself and to the world, is to alleviate the miseries of our time.

All this should be inserted passionately in the inspiring historical tradition of Progressives, the New Deal and The Great Society.

The Progressive Platform must be a **grand prophetic voice**, calling on us to **reclaim** our best instincts. Our clarion call: **RECLAIM AMERICA!** "Become who we are."

III. EMBODYING THE PLATFORM

As I have argued before, I argue again: the platform is nothing until it is bodied forth by a living human being, by someone who can not only articulate the Progressive values but who also in his/her essential being embodies them, radiates them, and shows them forth. The search must be on NOW for that person. We run the risk, I fear, of emphasizing platforms at the risk of not finding that human being who can present them convincingly to an eager world. You can't have a winning platform without a winning candidate.

And Left Out?

For all these wonderful ideas and proposals, I am truly pleased. It has been fun receiving them, thinking about them, and pulling them together into this issue of Downside Up. I am sure I will write about many or all of the topics in more detail some time. I am sure too that the list could go on and on, but some topics stand out to me as missing, for whatever reasons. For example, no one talked about economic policy: how to stimulate the economy to provide jobs and work towards justice by some other means than taxes. Our emphasis on taxes gives legitimacy to the Republican accusation that all Democrats want to do is raise taxes. What better basis for a progressive platform could there be than prosperity? Democrats need to build on the fact that economic issues are back on the top of voters' concerns (not “moral values”) and Democrats clearly score better on that issue.

Also missing are related issues of so-called free trade, outsourcing jobs abroad, privatization, and contracting out. I suspect that many readers shy away from such economic issues and would rather have me take a shot at them.

I have my own “off the charts” topic: drug policy. We could save billions of dollars and million of lives by legalizing and controlling drugs the way we do the most dangerous of all drugs, alcohol. This ties into the “off the charts” proposals on highway deaths and prison reform.

Finally, there is a group of issues that stand out most to me as missing from reader responses: sexism, homophobia, and, most of all, racism. Civil liberties was barely mentioned and abortion only as not an issue a person was talking about. Racism is still endemic in our country. Institutionalized racism in our drug laws is responsible for massive numbers of people (like 25% of young African Americans and 70% of all prisoners) with felony records for non-violent crimes mostly against themselves. At the same time, I am sure that all Downside Up readers care about racial justice and, because the effects of current policies, laws, and practices are discriminatory, most of their proposals for justice in our society would disproportionately benefit minorities.

One reader writes the following, fully knowledgeable of what he is saying about himself and the sad state of our society:

Interestingly, one of the sadder things that has happened to me personally is that I no longer feel as much empathy towards blacks. I should and ought to. For instance, I found relief in what Bill Cosby said not too long ago about his brethren. I have simply lost my taste for the consistently ugly behavior of the NBA, and I wince at Koby Bryant, not to mention Michael Jackson. The black community requires new leadership. I'm sorry, but as much as I enjoy the Rev. Al Sharpton, he doesn't do much for the cause. It's time for a new spokesperson for the forgotten residents of Watts, who eat at McDonalds every day, roam about in gangs in the midst of a chaotic, lawless environment still shooting each other. What does it really mean to

leave no child behind? Perhaps we need a new Malcolm X or a Muhammad Ali to spend some time talking about the "white devils" and the crimes perpetrated on blacks by the twenty-first century slavers. Regrettably, baggy shorts and hip hop are negative stereotypes comfortably used by mainstream media to sweep with a wide broom and keep everyone distrustful of each other. Even *I* seem to be affected.

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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.

Woodbury has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history and economics from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL, where he continues to be active in church and community. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.