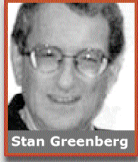


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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

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THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

THE "MOVEMENT" ROOTS OF OBAMA'S POLITICAL STRATEGY — MARTIN LUTHER KING'S CAMPAIGNS IN BIRMINGHAM AND CHICAGO AND THE CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGNS OF KING'S TOP AIDE ANDREW YOUNG.

BY *ANDREW LEVISON*

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By Andrew Levison

Obama’s ambitious budget has profoundly reassured many Democrats that he is indeed the progressive he appeared to be during the 2008 campaign. But there is still widespread concern about his continued desire to achieve some degree of “bipartisanship.”

For many progressives, Barack Obama’s notion of “bipartisanship” reflects a political strategy rooted in a timid, overly weak and compliant variety of 1990’s centrism—a political strategy that the Democratic Party finally rejected after the 2004 election, leading to the gains in the elections of 2006 and 2008. In this view, Obama’s attempts to negotiate with congressional Republicans over his stimulus and budget programs and his continuing expressions of a desire to win the support of moderate Republican legislators for his health and energy plans represent a serious threat to compromise and dilute the progressive vision reflected in his budget.

The progressive alternative to Obama’s strategy that this critical view suggests seems obvious: a much more consistently combative, fiercely partisan and unyieldingly progressive approach, one that seeks to maximize Democratic victories and reject any unnecessary compromise. As Digby, for example argued:¹ “Only in the beltway bubble is there some expectation that everyone is going to agree. The rest of us would prefer that our politicians stand up for what they believe in and try to do what they promised”.

This approach was developed and championed by the Democratic grassroots and netroots during the Bush years and it is also often suggested that it is also the modern version of the political strategy that underlay the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s.

The Civil Rights Movement was indeed militant and confrontational in many of its tactics such as sit-ins, freedom rides and street demonstrations. But, in the particular approach developed and employed by Martin Luther King and SCLC, the broader, long-term strategy the movement followed was actually a good deal more complex. In fact, Obama’s seemingly unique political strategy did not appear out of thin air in 2008. Its roots actually lie in one particular perspective that emerged out of the civil rights movement and that drew heavily upon the lessons the movement learned during the Birmingham and Chicago campaigns.

Andrew Levison is the author of two books and numerous articles on the social and political attitudes of blue collar workers and other ordinary Americans.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to emphasize one key fact. Recognizing that Obama's political strategy has its roots in strategies developed by King and SCLC does not imply that progressives and the progressive movement today are obliged to support and employ the same approach Obama chooses for his Presidential political strategy. Quite the contrary, Martin Luther King's strategy in relation to both John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson suggests precisely the opposite—that King felt he and the movement had to always maintain a separate and explicitly progressive political role and identity, in contrast to even a relatively liberal President who King understood would often have to make compromises and respond to other political imperatives. But what this interpretation of Obama's strategy does require is a substantial revision of the notion that Obama's approach can be dismissed as simply a warmed-over version of 1990's centrism.

In 1971, at a meeting of the Institute on Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, all of Martin Luther King's main strategists—including top aides Jessie Jackson and Andrew Young, Walter Fauntroy, Coretta King and a number of King's other close collaborators—gathered to discuss the topic "*The Lessons of the Movement for Non-Violent Strategy.*" Agreeing that there was more than adequate information already available about the specific tactics that had been used in organizing local sit-in's and demonstrations and that there were also a wide variety of written manuals available that taught non-violent training techniques, the group focused on the important question "*What important facts are not well understood about the movement's strategy?*" There were two major answers that emerged:

The first was that, while the sit-in's and demonstrations were indeed indispensable, the most powerful lever for change was the relatively less well known consumer boycotts that underlay them.

Here is how King's top aide Andrew Young explained the relationship in his autobiography, *An Easy Burden*:

While the direct actions, demonstrations and sit-ins were effective primarily in dramatizing our cause outside of Birmingham, the economic boycott was what finally brought the campaign home to the local seats of power...The downtown boycott was almost totally effective. For nearly two months, Black citizens had purchased very little but food and medicine. The lack of retail sales during the Easter season was visibly hurting our targeted stores, just as we had hoped.

The second poorly understood fact—one intimately related to the first—was that negotiations with the power structure were an inherent and indispensable part of the movement's strategy.

Young, who was Dr. King's chief negotiator in Birmingham, notes that "in Gandhian theory, negotiations are as important a part of the process as demonstrations" but he also points out that they had a more practical function:

The boycott was designed to pressure the business community to reach a settlement but someone had to talk with them to elicit that settlement...

Negotiations, in short, were necessary to hammer-out the agreements that codified and guaranteed the gains of the campaign. Negotiations were not tantamount to supplication or surrender. On the contrary, they were an inherent and necessary part of any successful social movement.

Young also noted that, because of their economic vulnerability, "It was actually easier to impact the business community than the elected officials in the government who were secure unless we persuaded more than 50 percent of the registered voters to turn them out." Based on this insight, Young encouraged the development of a separate "Committee of 100" leading businessmen who would negotiate directly with King and the movement, thus simultaneously increasing and taking advantage of the division between the business community and the political establishment.

Young's autobiography details the complex set of negotiations by which the agreement between the movement and the Birmingham power structure was eventually concluded. That agreement, while apparently modest, essentially set the pattern for the collapse of Southern segregation.

But if Birmingham taught the movement positive lessons, however, Chicago taught it negative ones. As Young says:

If I had to choose the march I would most like to forget it would be the one through Chicago's Gage Park on August 5 1966. About 10,000 screaming people showed up to harass, curse and throw debris on us that Sunday... thirty years later, seeing some of that film footage still frightens me...it was worse and more frightening than what we had encountered in St. Augustine [where Young himself was almost beaten to death] or Mississippi...it was a surprise and an ominous sign.

For Young and Dr. King's other associates, even more disturbing than the physical threat was their dismay that the strategy that had proven so successful in the South seemed suddenly and totally ineffective and even counter-productive. It only gradually sunk in that Birmingham and Chicago were fundamentally different situations.

In the South, integration meant a change in the public social relations between people who were already in close and frequent daily contact (During the 1957 Montgomery Bus

Boycott it was ironically noted that many of the white men and women who supposedly could not tolerate the physical proximity required to sit next to Blacks on city busses had been raised, held and coddled by Black nannies as children and were going home to eat meals prepared and served by Black cooks and maids). It was public social conduct that had to change as a result of desegregation, not the amount of association between individuals who were already in daily contact and who generally perceived each other as individuals.

In the working class ethnic neighborhoods and communities of the North, in contrast, Blacks seemed like a distant, menacing and profoundly alien force. All-white areas were segregated even among themselves into rigid ethnic neighborhoods and many whites had literally never seen a single Black person in their local community. With ghetto riots in the national headlines and no personal contact with Blacks as individuals, the Black civil rights demonstrators marching through Cicero appeared to these ethnic whites like a dangerous, indistinct mob and the marches themselves like a brazen foreign invasion.

Dr. King, Andrew Young and the other organizers were far too knowledgeable about grass-roots community organizing not to quickly perceive the ironic consequence that began to emerge—the Chicago campaign began to generate an awesome wave of authentically “bottom-up” community organizing—but not by the civil rights movement. New local citizens groups began appearing and existing neighborhood organizations began organizing in white neighborhoods—not just in Chicago but in Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, and other cities. These groups saw themselves as defending their ethnic communities against what the movement considered legitimate demands for integration but the residents perceived as a dangerous and hostile outside invasion.

By the early 1970's this phenomenon would come to be called the “white backlash” and it would dominate the racial politics of the rest of the decade. A number of excellent studies by historians and sociologists have mapped the contours of this social trend—including Jonathan Reider's *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism*, Ronald Formisano's *Boston Against Busing* and Kenneth Durr's *Behind the Backlash*.

In 1968, two years after the Chicago campaign, the white backlash entered national politics with the rise of George Wallace. In February of 1968, reports began to reach King that there was a huge wave of support for Wallace's third party presidential campaign developing in UAW locals in Michigan and Wisconsin, despite all-out efforts by the union locals. The news was stunning. Of all the major industrial unions, the UAW was considered the most progressive and the one most respected by its membership. If

the UAW staffers and shop stewards were no longer able to influence their members, probably no union could be relied on to deliver blue collar votes any longer.

The Wallace campaign marked the end of the comfortable assumption that, by virtue of unions on the job credibility with blue-collar workers, they had the ability to convince workers to vote Democratic and that, therefore, the job of keeping blue collar workers in the Democratic coalition could be simply “offloaded” or “subcontracted” onto the unions. It became clear that Liberal and progressive Democratic candidates who shared the ideals of King and the movement would have to figure out how to convince workers and white ethnics to support them on their own.

The first opportunity to try to figure out how to do this came in 1970, while America was still deep in the shadow of King’s assassination. When Atlanta movement leader Julian Bond decided not to run for congress in Atlanta’s 5th congressional district, Andrew Young decided to make the race. Although the district was majority white it seemed important to Young that some of King’s close associates carry the struggle into the political realm, to take the movement into that arena

Young had one fundamental premise—a premise that represented a direct response to Cicero and the white backlash. The movement, he felt, had turned white working class ethnics in Cicero against them because it had not tried to develop a strategy to represent them. Like any group, white working class ethnics needed political representatives who were authentically “on their side” and who would defend their legitimate interests. If progressives wouldn’t do it, conservatives and racists most certainly would.

This led Young to define three basic strategies for a “movement” progressive political campaign:

1. Young would campaign in every area and community. As he said: “I was determined to campaign in every part of the district”
2. He would try to honestly and authentically represent the needs of the people in all the neighborhoods and communities in his district. As he said, “In my neighborhood meetings I listened to voters concerns and responded to the issues they raised...I could never predict what issue might be a priority for a neighborhood.”
3. His campaign would be optimistic and “post-racial” and not be a referendum based on race. Young’s argument would be that he was the best man for the job and that he would better represent the people he spoke with than the other candidate. He would support integration, but an integration that would occur by free choice, not court order. As he said, “Throughout the campaign I tried to appeal to people’s hopes and

aspirations rather than to their fears. This had always been the challenge in SCLC's campaigns for social change"

In the poisonous atmosphere after the assassinations of King and Robert Kennedy, this was far from easy. But Young was fortunate to have the support of a number of authentic grass-roots leaders in the white community to help him. As Young says:

Thanks to Teamster lawyer Tony Zivlich I had good relations with Atlanta's labor unions. Zivlich was a Croatian-American from Chicago who came to Atlanta to work as a Teamster organizer... [He] never wore a tie and talked like a truck driver. [When Zivlich asked Young to help him by speaking to striking workers at one point in the mid-60's]... I drove to the union hall in South Fulton County, an area I thought of as Klan territory. I had recently been involved with the movement in St. Augustine, where working class whites who looked a lot like the guys sitting around this union hall drinking beer had thrown rocks and bottles at women and old people. I was not sure what to say but I spoke anyway [and found that] they were glad to hear from someone who cared about their situation...When I asked Tony about running for congress he was very encouraging. Based on my experience with the Teamsters, I thought I could convince white workers to support my candidacy"

Zivlich and other local union leaders stood beside Young as he shook hands in front of factory gates, at VFW halls, in strip-mall shopping centers, working class bars and cheap luncheonettes. The amount of time he spent in those communities was totally wasted from a political campaign manager's point of view. Few of those people were going to vote for him in any case. But it had a larger message that was not lost on the voters or the media. He was making a clear statement that a "movement" progressive candidate was a person who was serious about representing all of his constituents, and not just his core Black supporters. The main piece of campaign literature had profiles of three men—one Black, one a white from the affluent North side of Atlanta and one an auto worker from the South. The text read: "Andrew Young is running to represent everyone in Atlanta's 5th district—everyone—because that's what a congressman is supposed to do."

Young and his supporters knew his candidacy was the longest of long shots, but, in an early echo of the Obama campaign, students and youth from across the country came to Atlanta to volunteer and Young earned respect and was widely praised for the unifying theme of his campaign, even by those who opposed him. In 1970, he lost, but then, two years later, after redistricting produced a more balanced but still majority-white district, Young was elected, making him the first Southern Black congressman since reconstruction.

Although Young's victory was overshadowed on the national level by the re-election of Richard Nixon and the growing white backlash, his political strategy had a significant influence. It became the model for other movement activists and it help create a distinct, more optimistic and interracial "civil rights movement style" of Black politics—one that clearly contrasted with the more militant "black power" style campaigns that occurred in other, majority black elections around the country.

Young's most important influence, however, was on Hamilton Jordon, Jimmy Carter's chief campaign strategist, and on Carter himself. Carter saw his own brand of moderate Democratic liberalism as intimately rooted and entwined with the work and ideals of King, Young and the movement. He made Young his Ambassador to the UN and placed many other movement veterans in his administration.

During the 1980's Young was elected twice as mayor of Atlanta, and then, in 1990 began a long-shot campaign for Governor, although, once again, most of the voters he would have to win were white. As in 1970, Young's was motivated by the desire to challenge the growing polarization fostered by the Reagan years—a renewed polarization that would soon become symbolized by Newt Gingrich and the growing "militia" movement. Young again ran in all parts of the state and pitched his campaign to all groups and sectors of the electorate with a message based on hope and a post-racial appeal.

It is not hard to see that there are significant parallels between the style and strategy of Young's campaigns and the later campaigns of Barack Obama, but it is a reasonable question to ask how much did Martin Luther King's political strategy and Andrew Young's political campaigns actually and directly influence Obama himself.

There are, in fact, three pieces of evidence that make the relationship clear.

In the same early-90's time period that Young was running for Senate, Obama's main political strategist and advisor, David Axelrod, was managing the political campaigns of black candidates for mayor in a series of major American cities including Chicago, Cleveland, Houston, Philadelphia, Detroit and DC. As a political consultant specialized in Black candidates, he had to be as intimately aware of Andrew Young's 1990 gubernatorial campaign as he was with the campaigns of his own clients.

In this same early to mid-nineties time period, Obama was carefully reading Taylor Branch's vast and detailed biography of Martin Luther King. As a community organizer familiar with the explicitly formalized organizing strategy of Saul Alinsky, for Obama the sections of Branch's book that detailed Young's intricate negotiations with the Birmingham power structure and that described the debate over the failure of the Chicago campaign would have stood out as clearly as if they were underlined. **In fact, when Jerry**

Kellman², his mentor during his three years as a community organizer on the South Side said to him that he greatly admired Branch's book. Obama brightened and said, "Yes, it's my story.

Key elements of Obama's 2008 campaign strategy and tactics—including even his signature slogan "Yes We Can" ("Si Se Puede")—were **directly drawn from the organizing techniques of Cesar Chavez**³, the most successful exponent of King's strategy and methods in the Mexican-American community. Marshall Ganz, Chavez' chief field organizer, was an advisor to the Obama campaign and numerous key elements of the campaign's innovative field organizing strategy were directly based on models originally developed by Chavez' United Farm Workers.

It is important to reiterate that recognizing the very substantial "movement" roots of Obama's political strategy does not imply that progressives or the progressive movement should rigidly imitate or uncritically support Obama's specific political and legislative strategies. King believed profoundly that the leader of a mass movement had a primary and fundamental responsibility to the movement's rank and file supporters and to the ideals that inspired them. A progressive leader was therefore always bound to maintain the movement's political independence from individual presidents and political parties.

Howard Zinn expressed it as follows in an influential 1966 essay: "Non-violent Direct Action":

....What the civil rights movement has revealed is that it is necessary for people concerned with liberty, even if they live in an approximately democratic state, to create a political power which resides outside the regular political establishment. While outside, removed from the enticements of office and close to those sources of human distress which created it, this power can use a thousand different devices to persuade and pressure the official structure into recognizing its needs.

What the movement roots of Obama's political strategy does suggest, on the other hand, is that the view of Obama as simply an overly naïve and submissive political centrist is a fundamental misunderstanding of his outlook. There is no guarantee Obama's political strategy will ultimately succeed, but there is also no question that it can be traced back to—and is very profoundly in the traditions of—the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King.

¹ <http://digbysblog.blogspot.com/2009/04/polar-bores-by-digby-all-day-long.html>

² http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2009/02/02/090202taco_talk_remnick

³ <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2009/0903.frank.html>