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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.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

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THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

ON "ENDING THE CULTURE WARS"

THE "CULTURE WARS" WILL NEVER DIE IN THE FEVER SWAMPS OF THE RIGHT WHERE THEY WERE NOURISHED IF NOT CONCEIVED... BUT THE CRITICAL PLURALITY OF AMERICANS ARE HAPPY TO DECLARE A TRUCE IN THE CULTURE WARS SO LONG AS PROGRESSIVES DON'T BEHAVE LIKE CONQUERING SECULARIST RADICALS.

BY ED KILGORE

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In an [article by Peter Beinart](#), he argues that Obama might be presiding over an end to—or at least a pause in—the culture wars of the last couple of decades.

This is actually a proposition that merits its own discussion. Has the Cultural Right begun to run out of steam? Will the economic crisis radically reduce the salience of issues like gay marriage or abortion or church-state separation? Is there something about Barack Obama's style and substance that tends to calm the cultural waters? And what if any accommodations should Obama or progressives generally make to neutralized culture-based opposition?

The first three questions are rather speculative and also perhaps premature, but I'd answer them "some," "some," and "a little." The last question is the real kicker, and the key thing here is to define who, exactly, we are talking about neutralizing or persuading.

There are millions of Americans who think any form of legalized abortion is incredibly abhorrent, with some consciously comparing it to the Holocaust, which implies an active obligation for resistance. There is no imaginable accommodation, compromise, or gesture compatible with a basic pro-choice position that will ever, ever satisfy these people. Even if they were offered a "compromise" that eliminated what they are always screaming about as an outrageous extension of the original *Roe v. Wade* holding—the "health of the mother" exception to the general permissibility of prohibitions on post-viability abortions—serious right-to-lifers don't really care when an abortion is performed, after the moment of conception, so they'd pocket the concession and start moving the goal posts towards a total abortion ban of the sort that most Republican pols already support.

But millions of other Americans, however they choose to identify themselves on the abortion issue, are discomfited by the idea of "abortion on demand," particularly late in pregnancy, and these folks might well be assuaged by accommodations to "pro-life conscience" and to scruples about "partial-birth abortion," or by "abortion reduction" strategies that involve expanded contraception availability and better health and economic options for women. Every progressive will have to decide for him or herself whether such accommodations or compromises are worth any sacrifice of pro-choice principles, but it's equally clear that (a) they may well have a payoff in the mushy middle of abortion opinion, and (b) they won't have any real effect on the hard-core Right-to-Life constituency, or its clerical leadership.

Let's bring this sort of calculation to bear on an immediate decision that Obama and progressives will soon have to make: the perennially pending Freedom of Choice Act, which

Obama has cosponsored, and has promised to sign if Congress passes it. FOCA has become the central base-motivator for anti-abortionists who consider it the final, fatal step towards abortion-on-demand, with no wiggle room for late-term abortion restrictions or the sort of waiting-period or parental notification requirements or harassment of abortion providers that have represented the small but symbolic trophies of the Right to Life movement in recent years. The very estimable Damon Linker, a mighty warrior against the theocons of America, [suggested earlier this week](#) that enactment of FOCA would produce a dangerous radicalization of the Cultural Right, and perpetuate the culture wars for another generation.

But as I noted yesterday, the odds that Congress will send Barack Obama a FOCA bill that abrogates existing law on late-term abortions or the most frequent state harassing tactics are extremely slim. Much more likely, if FOCA advances at all (not a good bet) is a bill that really does just codify *Roe v. Wade* and ensure that in the remote event it is ever overturned, there will be a federal law in place that preempts state efforts to actually ban pre-viability abortions. Would such a FOCA anger the hard-core right-to-lifers? Sure, but they will be angry at anything other than a radical restriction of abortion rights. Would it galvanize the mushy middle on abortion? Hardly, since big majorities of Americans favor a basic policy of legalized abortion prior to fetal viability with a health exception for abortions after that stage of pregnancy—the fundamental thrust of any FOCA likely to ever become law in the foreseeable future.

Shifting from abortion policy to same-sex marriage and GLBT rights, you might initially think that this is the strongest ground for the Cultural Right, and certainly a tempting issue to “take off the table” for progressives who want to tamp down the culture wars, particularly in the South, the Midwest, and the Interior West. After all, every poll shows (in sharp contrast to the data on abortion) unmistakable demographic trends that virtually guarantee a future defeat for the Cultural Right on every issue related to this subject. But that’s in the future, and the single biggest difference between the abortion and same-sex-marriage issues is that the status quo, and thus inaction, is basically benign on the former and malign on the latter from a progressive point of view.

And that in turn is why the passage of Proposition 8 in California last year was such a big and tragically avoidable disaster. For the first time in the recent history of anti-gay-marriage ballot initiatives, Prop 8 overturned established same-sex marriage rights, however brief. Reversing that setback in California or elsewhere is important not just for the people directly affected, but in terms of the dynamics of the issue. Unlike abortion, same-sex marriage does not command active and perpetual resistance from those who strongly disapprove of it on religious grounds. Even if you think same-sex marriage represents the

triumphal return of Sodom and Gomorrah, that's fundamentally different from the Holocaust that Right-to-Lifers see in legalized abortion. Once same-sex-marriage proponents learn how to decisively refute the specious but potent arguments that letting gay folk enjoy equal rights will impinge on the free-speech rights or religious prerogatives of traditionalists, and once same-sex marriage becomes—as legalized abortion has become—part of the landscape, this issue should rapidly lose political salience.

The third big culture-war issue, church-state separation, is one on which Barack Obama can probably make the most direct and immediate progress. Remember that this is the same man who has strongly supported a continuation of federal "faith-based organization" policies, has reached out to all sorts of religious folk in his campaign and his inaugural events, and who also gave a shout-out to "nonbelievers" in his inaugural address. He's a pretty good validator—as Bill Clinton might have been if not for the furor over his sexual behavior—of the very old and once invincible idea that believers can and should be comfortable with a continuation of the ancient American tradition of church-state separation as a protection of, not a threat to, religious liberty.

The bottom line on this vast and complicated subject is that the "culture wars" will never die in the fever swamps of the Right where they were nourished if not conceived, particularly on the abortion issues; that protecting the cultural status quo is a vastly more powerful position that progressives should aspire to occupy; and that the critical plurality of Americans are happy to declare a truce in the culture wars so long as progressives don't behave like conquering secularist radicals.

I'm basically with [TAPPED's Tim Frenholz](#):

Unlike some liberals, I think people who feel differently deserve a certain amount of respect. But they don't deserve to have a veto over other people's rights. If that makes the religious right angry, well, that's what happens in a liberal democracy.

To use two biblical metaphors, it's time for cultural progressives to separate the wheat from the chaff, and the sheep from the goats. The Cultural Right as we know it has to be defeated, even as its troops are offered consolation in the form of convincing refutations of their more lurid assumptions about the motives that we, their enemies, actually harbor. But the vast cultural middle of the American electorate, which is neither fish nor fowl, nor is hot nor cold, on hot-button issues can be convinced that Barack Obama and the progressive coalition he represents are faithful to the American values they embrace.