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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

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BY JAMES VEGA

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It has taken several days for the full implications of Obama's budget and message to sink in among conservatives and Republicans, but now the surprise has passed and the gloves are coming off.

The conservative hope that Obama might actually be the timid, dithering, "split the difference" centrist that some progressives feared he was has now evaporated. On the contrary, the scope of his ambition to be a solidly progressive Roosevelt-style president makes him appear as a genuine threat—not just for committed Republicans, but to a substantial group beyond. For many, this threat is so grave that insuring the defeat of Obama's political program now takes priority over what might be best for the economy.

The larger group beyond the usual Republican base that finds Obama's program threatening is essentially comprised of the substantial number of relatively un-ideological Middle Americans—small businesspeople, managers and office park voters among others—who—deep down—simply don't accept a Keynesian view of economics or understand the need for significant, ongoing government intervention in the economy. On survey questions they will often support certain specific and appealing government programs but then will simultaneously reject "deficit spending", "big government" and "regulations" as unambiguous evils. If you asked many of these Americans to choose between, on the one hand, a "lost decade of growth" like Japan suffered as well as continuing crises in health care, energy and the environment and, on the other hand, the unknown long-term political consequences of a wildly successful and deeply progressive Democratic Presidency, many will hem and haw for a moment but finally opt for "the devil they know"—recession and stagnation—rather than the uncharted waters of an energetically progressive future.

The result is that Democrats can't rely on Obama's tremendous advantage in personal popularity right now to keep the Republicans on the defensive. On the contrary, Democrats must begin preparing to defend themselves against a massive, well-financed and coordinated, three pronged offensive.

Prong Number 1 – The Official Party Line – The most familiar and visible of the three prongs of this offensive is the official Republican Party—represented by the Congressional Republicans and the Republican National Committee. By now virtually every politically

involved American has heard the official Republican position. The battle against Obama is a direct clash between socialism and the free market, between liberalism gone completely berserk and the traditional American Way. Buried in the byzantine twists and turns of Rush Limbaugh's epic, Fidel Castro-length, *pronunciamento* to the Conservative Political Action Conference last week lie a collection of virtually every one of his "oldies but goodies" and "greatest hits" drawn from his radio show.

By itself, however, this official Republican message will not be sufficient. It needs to be reinforced by two additional forces to successfully challenge Obama's coalition. It needs (1) "responsible" apologists to give it intellectual cover with more moderate voters and (2) "Black Ops' boys" to do the political "wet work"—the stuff too ugly to display in public.

Prong Number 2 – The "Responsible" Apologists – The "Responsible" conservatives actually do know that policies like progressive taxation, government regulation of business and federal protection of the environment are more accurately traced back to Theodore Roosevelt than to Lenin and Mao Tse-tung. But, in their columns, the basic RNC charge of "socialism" is repeated while carefully avoiding the use of the actual word.

Charles Krauthammer describes Obama's "big bang agenda to *federalize or socialize*" the "commanding heights of the post industrial economy" and calls it the "most radical agenda of social transformation seen in our lifetime."

Michael Gerson calls the budget "ideologically ambitious, politically ruthless and radical to its core....This is not merely the rejection of "trickle-down economics," it is a weakening of the theoretical basis for capitalism—that free individuals are generally more rational and efficient in making investment decisions than are government planners."

David Brooks (who has since stepped back from this approach) says America [is] "skeptical of top-down planning" and "has never been a society riven by class resentment." Obama's administration, on the other hand, is: "swept up in its own revolutionary fervor", "caught up in the self-flattering belief that history has called upon it", is "a social-engineering experiment that is entirely new", "expands state intervention", is "predicated on a class divide."

Notice the roundabout way that this process works. On the one hand the columnists can argue with technical accuracy that they are not directly calling Obama a socialist—and from one point of view they are quite right. The quite evident purpose of their attacks are to not smear Obama's personal reputation but rather to demonize the basic ideas of progressive taxation and a robust public sector as policies that should be outside the pale of civilized discourse—ideas that can only be justified by un-American ideologies.

But at the same time, their comments unavoidably and unmistakably tend to imply and reinforce more extreme accusations. With Rush Limbaugh bellowing that Obama is a “socialist” and other Republican figures like Mike Huckabee, and Alan Keyes and leading conservative writers and bloggers calling him a “Leninist” and a “communist”, it is simply impossible not to recognize that politically loaded terms of the kind the leading conservative columnists are using do seem to suggest some degree of sympathy for more extremist claims. The result is that the extremists feel a sense of partial “wink and a nudge” vindication while moderates and middle of the road voters perceive a kind of broad conservative consensus that Obama and his advisors actually are following a secret radical program to which they do not publically admit.

As a result, Democrats should look for each and every one of the venerable anti-socialist clichés trotted out by Krauthammer, Gerson, Brooks and others to start showing up in editorial pages, business magazine commentaries and so on all across the country. There are a very large group of moderate Republicans and conservative Democrats who would be embarrassed to turn purple while screaming “socialist” or “communist” like the red-meat conservatives at a Sarah Palin rally. They will, however, be quite happy to gravely knit their brows and purse their lips in theatrical displays of preoccupation while muttering ominously about their concern over “extreme” and “irresponsible” measures.

Prong Number 3. – The “Black Ops’ boys” – The final weeks of the 2008 campaign showed that the “sub-rosa” smear campaigns describing Obama as a secret Moslem, a Black militant and left-wing terrorist were not sufficient to sink his campaign. But careful observers were quick to note that the biggest multi-million dollar independent conservative propaganda organizations like Freedom Watch had held back for various reasons, including their profoundly ambivalent feelings toward John McCain. But now, faced with what they perceive as a vastly more terrifying threat than Bill Clinton ever was, they are going to come roaring back like the proverbial bat out of hell.

The new “Black Ops’ attacks” will be of three basic kinds:

First, they will organize and subsidize phony grass roots movements and protests. The most dramatic recent example of this is CNBC newscaster Rick Santelli’s “tea party” diatribe. As several sources cited by [Paul Rosenberg in Open Left](#) noted:

What hasn’t been reported until now is evidence linking Santelli’s “tea party” rant with some very familiar names in the Republican rightwing machine, from PR operatives who specialize in imitation-grassroots PR campaigns

(called “astroturfing”) to bigwig politicians and notorious billionaire funders.... Namely, the Koch family, the multibillionaire owners of the largest private corporation in America, and funders of scores of rightwing think tanks and advocacy groups, from the Cato Institute and *Reason Magazine* to Freedom Works ... a powerful PR organization headed by former Republican House Majority leader Dick Armey and funded by Koch money...

Within hours of Santelli's rant, a website called ChicagoTeaParty.com sprang to life. Essentially inactive until that day, it now featured a YouTube video of Santelli's “tea party” rant and billed itself as the official home of the Chicago Tea Party. The domain was registered in August, 2008 by Zack Christenson, a dweeby Twitter Republican and producer for a popular Chicago rightwing radio host Milt Rosenberg—a familiar name to Obama campaign people.... It's as if they held this “Chicago tea party” campaign in reserve, like a sleeper-site. Which is exactly what it was.... On the same day as Santelli's rant, February 19, another site called Officialchicagoteaparty.com went live. This site was registered to Eric Odom, who turned out to be a veteran Republican new media operative specializing in imitation-grassroots PR campaigns.

Second, the Black Ops forces will underwrite campaigns that are known to be false but which provide particularly provocative and inflammatory issues for grass-roots consumption. The most significant current example of this is the lawsuits over Barack Obama's birth certificate. As an [article in Politico](#) noted:

Out of the gaze of the mainstream and even the conservative media is a flourishing culture of advocates, theorists and lawyers, all devoted to proving that Barack Obama isn't eligible to be president of the United States....The risk, of course, is the growth of a segment of the population, however small, that views the president as illegitimate.

“Some individuals and groups who are opposed to Obama's presidency want an ‘acceptable’ reason to cite to convince other individuals and groups who might be on the fence to join in their way of thinking,” said Patricia Turner, who studies rumors at the University of California, Davis. “The notion that his presidency is actually in violation of the Constitution has a fundamentally patriotic appeal.”...

The particular utility of issues like this is that they provide the rationalization for dismissing the government as illegitimate and thus to justify extreme and even violent resistance to authority. In the 1990's it was this kind of “the Clinton government is illegitimate” and “Zionist Occupation Government” propaganda that justified the pitched gun battles with police, AFT and FBI officers that occurred at Ruby Ridge and Waco, Texas and the terrorist bombings at the Atlanta Olympics and Oklahoma City. The same kind of apocalyptic rhetoric is now evolving around the birth certificate controversy:

One of the lead anti-Obama lawyers, Orly Taitz... has called on her blog's readers to "fight these communist Nazi thugs and hoodlums that took over our government," and told POLITICO that the wide refusal to take her case seriously is "totalitarian."

"[Obama] is spending hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars to keep this information from getting out," said Gary Kreep, the lawyer representing former presidential candidate Alan Keyes, who sued Obama in California to prevent the state from certifying its election results. Keyes recently called the citizenship issue "the greatest crisis this nation has ever seen" and warned of "chaos, confusion and civil war."

Finally, there is the vast range of utterly false but easily circulated rumors designed to create a general climate of doubt and suspicion. Here is one typical recent e-mail campaign:

Barack Obama has slipped in \$155 million in the so-called 'stimulus package' for a line item called 'Community Health Centers' but has been vague on the details.... One thing we do know about the plan is that it falls under the department of Health and Human Services, to be overseen by none other than the infamous Kansas governor Kathleen Sebelius, the supporter of the even more infamous Dr. Diller of Kansas who specializes in performing partial birth abortions! Ouch! One could only imagine what surgical procedures will likely be performed in the Obama Community 'Health' Centers. But don't bet your last tax dollar on seeing any live babies delivered in any of these centers.

Here is another, this time framed as a pass-along e-mail petition on social security:

If the government gives benefits to 'illegal' aliens who have never contributed, where does that leave those of us who have paid into Social Security all our working lives?.... As stated below, the Senate voted this week to allow 'illegal' aliens access to Social Security benefits. Attached is an opportunity to sign a petition that requires citizenship for eligibility to that social service.

The people in each of the three prongs of this coming offensive will sanctimoniously insist that they have absolutely nothing in common with each other. The "responsible" conservatives, for example, will insist they are entirely appalled by the tactics of the Black Op's boys.

But the campaign to impeach Bill Clinton in the 1990's clearly illustrated that it was precisely the parallel operation of several different levels of a multi-faceted anti-Clinton conspiracy that was required to provide the synergy necessary to bring the campaign to the brink of success. By itself, neither the sanctimonious "*perjury in the oval office cannot be tolerated*" argument of the Republican senators nor the "*Clinton murdered*

his business partner and smuggles drugs for the Colombian cartels” grass-roots right wing propaganda campaign could have succeeded alone. Only the simultaneous development of multiple strands of anti-Clinton propaganda for different audiences and social groups could mobilize sufficient popular support to bring the matter to actual impeachment proceedings.

But can this same kind of multi-pronged assault be made to work against Obama? To be sure, there is no question that it will be tried.

For one thing, the addition of the “responsible” conservatives to the anti-Obama chorus will help attract a wider circle of businessmen and middle-Americans to the roughly 40% Republican base. On a very parochial level, these voters will be influenced by the fact that many of their bonuses and perks have disappeared and blame Obama as a result. On a more abstract level, they will be influenced by the growing number of apparently “reasonable” commentators who solemnly intone that Obama has simply “gone too far.”

Moreover, the situation is ripe—no, absolutely ideal—for demagoguery. If Obama is forced to take over failing banks, he can be labeled a radical nationalizer. If, in deference to the bankers, he doles out funds without adequate oversight, he is at fault if the banks fail. If his fiscal stimulus is not sufficient, he can be damned for failing to cure unemployment. If it is, he can be damned for fiscal irresponsibility. In area after area he can be simultaneously criticized for doing too much and too little, for being too radical and too cautious, all at the same time and regardless of what outcome actually occurs.

In contrast, however, the Democrats have two advantages they have not had in the past.

First, conservative foundations and superrich individuals are no longer the only social force with massive funds at their disposal. Democrats can now also raise large sums of money to bankroll political communications and web-based organizing can rapidly mobilize citizen armies on a scale never before possible without massive financial investment.

Second, Democrats have the advantage of the extraordinary basic decency and integrity of Barack Obama and his family. Republicans can attack Obama’s policies, but they cannot convincingly impugn his character. Since the Republican narrative ultimately requires people to view Obama as in some sense a villain, they face a profound obstacle.

And finally, there’s one other thing that’s in the Dems favor this time, unlike in the Clinton era. This time Democrats have no illusions about the kind of people they are going to be dealing with or the kinds of tactics they are going to face. This time, right from the beginning, Democrats are going to be ready to fight.