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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.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

**A**  
**DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST**  
**STRATEGY BULLETIN**

**WATCH OUT DEMOCRATS:  
THE EXPOSURE OF THE DISHONEST  
MANIPULATION OF VIDEOS SHOWN  
ON ANDREW BREITBART'S  
WEBSITES WILL NOT MODERATE  
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**BY JAMES VEGA**

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**TDS STRATEGY BULLETIN – WATCH OUT DEMOCRATS: THE EXPOSURE OF THE DISHONEST MANIPULATION OF VIDEOS SHOWN ON ANDREW BREITBART’S WEBSITES WILL NOT MODERATE ATTACKS BY CONSERVATIVE EXTREMISTS. ON THE CONTRARY, IT WILL INTENSIFY THE SEARCH FOR NEW AND EVEN MORE AGGRESSIVE TACTICS TO EMPLOY.**

*By James Vega*

The exposure of the dishonest manipulation of videos first released on Andrew Breitbart’s websites has been widely and properly applauded as a major setback for the hard right. In the future it is extremely unlikely that the mainstream media will again blindly publicize heavily edited video clips without demanding to see the complete video behind them. Even conservative commentators – who were deeply humiliated by having to publically apologize for having committed legally actionable defamation of character on national TV – will hesitate before trusting Breitbart’s propaganda materials again.

But Democrats should have absolutely no illusions that this setback will lead to any overall moderation of the fierce and bitter attacks that have been directed at Obama and the Democratic Party since last spring. Quite the contrary, Dems should seriously prepare for the possibility that even more intense and dangerous tactics will now be employed.

The reason is that the deliberate editing of video to create a false impression is actually just one specific tactic in a larger arsenal of methods that political extremists believe to be entirely justified. As an April, 2009 **TDS strategy memo**<sup>1</sup> noted, the defining feature of modern political extremism is the vision of politics as literally a form of “warfare” and political opponents as actual “*enemies*” who must be crushed. Although many political commentators routinely use these terms as metaphors in writing about political affairs, for political extremists they are seen as entirely literal statements of fact.

From this point of view many tactics that most Americans consider utterly unacceptable and indeed essentially criminal come to be seen as entirely logical measures that are required by the urgent demands of the bitter political “war”. The exposure of any one particular tactic does not challenge this underlying perspective. On the contrary it simply increases the urgency for developing alternative tactics that the evil “enemy” does not yet anticipate.

As a result, Democrats should be seriously prepared for the possibility that they will soon encounter tactics such as the following:

1. Staged events – there is a disturbingly thin line that separates wildly exaggerating the influence of tiny fringe groups like the New Black Panthers – as the conservative media has done in recent weeks – and directly encouraging or financially rewarding fringe groups to engage in offensive or illegal acts that can then be filmed and presented as spontaneous. Covert subsidies to radical fringe groups were employed in the 1960’s to disrupt and discredit Civil Rights demonstrations and in the 1930’s

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_Vega\\_right.pdf](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Vega_right.pdf)

specialized anti-union firms commonly employed undercover agents to masquerade as union supporters and then create violence during strikes in order to provide the justification for sending in state troopers or the National Guard. A chilling echo of this tactic was recently hinted by a professional conservative activist in a *Playboy magazine article*<sup>2</sup> when he noted that “*creating mayhem is not limited to dealing with the press. We’ve quietly acquired Service Employees International Union shirts to wear at tea party rallies...*” The potential threat is obvious.

2. Burglary or criminal trespass to obtain documents or other information – this tactic also has a long history, including the famous 1972 Watergate burglary of Democratic Party headquarters by Nixon’s “dirty tricks” squad and the recent abortive attempt of Breitbart’s protégé James McKeefe to install wiretapping devices in the office of LA Sen. Mary Landrieu. Most major foundations and non-profit organizations as well as political candidates and organizations have substantial amounts of information whose privacy they are legally and morally obligated to protect and whose disclosure can substantially cripple their operations. Any such information presents an extremely tempting target.
3. The sabotage, destruction, misuse or theft of valuable political files such as voter contact lists and contributor lists – there are actually three different varieties of this tactic (1) the complete destruction of files (2) the misuse of files (for example, by mailing false messages that provoke discord between political allies) and (3) the subtle corruption of files to render them useless or largely ineffective.
4. Physical intimidation – there is an important distinction between protests that use civil disobedience based on the principles of non-violence and actions that are aimed at physically threatening and intimidating political opponents. In the 1980’s, for example, many anti-abortion protests carefully confined themselves to non-violent methods while other groups clearly planned their protests to physically threaten and terrify both clients and health care workers in the clinics they targeted.

There is an entirely understandable tendency for many Democrats to want to minimize the danger posed by threats along these lines. Even for extremely partisan Democratic political activists, these tactics seem so self-evidently appalling and unacceptable that they therefore also seem unlikely to occur. For political extremists, however, these tactics do not seem either appalling or unacceptable because they follow logically from the underlying premise that politics is essentially a form of warfare. Once one accepts that notion as a starting point, all of these measures seem justified and entirely legitimate.

(Note: an important part of the problem is that since the 1950’s our vocabulary for discussing political extremism has become impoverished. In the 1950’s, terms like “*propaganda*”, “*big lie*” *techniques*”, “*goon squads*” (whether of the left or right) and many other similar terms were widely used and the people who employed tactics of this kind were viewed with utter contempt because of the clear connection of these tactics with fascism and communism. Today, the terms for many of these methods have been replaced by much milder euphemisms—“dirty tricks”, “hardball politics”, “extreme partisanship” and so on. These euphemisms allow mainstream writers and commentators to avoid saying the obvious – that these tactics are

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.playboy.com/articles/rogues-of-k-street/index.html?page=1>

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defining characteristics of modern political extremism and that the people who employ them are not part of mainstream American conservatism or traditional Republicanism but are rather dangerous and unacceptable political “extremists”)

For Democrats, however, the main conclusion that must be drawn is straightforward. Democrats need to take concrete and specific steps to protect themselves from these potential threats.

As it happens, simple preparedness can have a major effect. The success of the four tactics described above very often depends on the intended victim being entirely unsuspecting and unprepared. Adequate office and computer security measures, careful planning to insure the presence of observers and photographers at polling places and public meetings and the rapid and aggressive use of civil lawsuits – particularly in future cases of libel and defamation – can in combination significantly reduce the potential danger.

In between now and November political extremists who perceive politics as warfare will be urgently seeking every possible tactic to attack their political “enemies”. Democrats cannot prevent this but they can and should make every possible effort to be mentally and organizationally prepared.