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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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A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
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DEMOCRATS: IT'S TIME TO CHANGE HOW WE DEAL WITH MAINSTREAM POLITICAL COMMENTATORS: IT'S NOT JUST "FALSE EQUIVALENCE" ANY MORE. THEY ARE IN DEEP DENIAL ABOUT THE REALITY OF THE GOP'S DANGEROUS EXTREMISM AND ARE INCREASINGLY DISPLAYING SYMPTOMS THAT RESEMBLE STOCKHOLM SYNDROME.

BY
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In general, analyses that attempt to apply psychological diagnoses to the views of political opponents simply produce a sophisticated kind of ad hominem insult. But on certain occasions such analyses can be genuinely useful if they suggest a productive change in Democratic political messaging and strategy.

Progressives and Democrats—and particularly progressive and Democratic political commentators—face a situation like this in dealing with mainstream political commentators' extraordinary and appalling refusal to honestly come to terms with the dangerous growth of GOP extremism. The painful fact is that mainstream political commentators' refusal to forcefully challenge this trend is now playing a central role in reinforcing and enabling the extremist behavior of the Republican Party.

This failure of mainstream political commentators to speak out is a major departure from the past. In previous eras when the GOP lurched toward extremism—such as the McCarthy period in the 1950's or the era of the Nixon administration's assault on democratic institutions—a critical moment came when mainstream TV commentators like Edgar R. Murrow or leading columnists in the New York Times, Time and the Washington Post firmly put their foot down and drew a clear "line in the sand." In contrast, while liberal and progressive commentators today vehemently protest the extremist trend, many of the self-anointed "non-partisan, middle of the road" political commentators either ignore or minimize Republican extremism. Without their support, criticism from liberals and progressives is insufficient to modify the GOP's behavior.

The mainstream political commentators' weak and tepid response to the dramatic increase in GOP extremism has passed through two distinct phases.

During the first phase, which extends roughly from Obama's inauguration to late 2011, mainstream political commentators overwhelmingly directed their criticism at entirely vague targets like "Washington" or "Congress" or "partisan polarization" rather than directly at the GOP. These deliberately evasive euphemisms not only allowed them to avoid directly blaming the GOP's growing extremism for creating problems like the inability of congress to pass needed legislation or maintain necessary government operations but also let them effectively accuse Democrats of being equally at fault without directly saying so.

The challenge progressives and liberals mounted to this dishonest rhetorical maneuver was the accusation of "false equivalency," a critique that expanded from progressive bloggers to leading liberal commentators like Greg Sargent, Paul Krugman and E.J. Dionne at the

Washington Post and *New York Times*. The “false equivalency” critique then decisively moved toward the mainstream when leading congressional scholars Tom Mann and Norm Ornstein published their April 2012 article, “*Let’s Just Say it, the GOP is the problem.*”

Mann and Ornstein’s powerful condemnation of the GOP as “*ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition*” should have been sufficient to embolden other mainstream political commentators to follow suit. Instead, however, it led to only minor change. Some mainstream commentators began to acknowledge the basic truth of Mann and Ornstein’s criticism with a single, very carefully muted “*to be sure*” sentence or clause somewhere in their commentary. A commentary filled with criticism of “Congress”, or “Washington” for example, would now contain a single, carefully hedged clause such as “*to be sure, the GOP is more at fault for this impasse but....*” or “*granted, the GOP’s position does pose the central obstacle but....*” but then immediately return to criticism of Congress or the political system in general.

This represented a very small but still discernible concession. At same time, however, since January this approach has been joined and substantially supplanted by a new evasive maneuver. Recent mainstream commentary not only ignores the GOP’s role or dismisses it with a single “*to be sure*” sentence but also places essentially the entire fault for failing to solve the problem on Obama.

This is done in four distinct ways:

- a. Obama is the president—it is his responsibility to solve the nation’s problems.
- b. Obama should make even greater efforts at compromise than he already has, even to the extent of completely capitulating to the GOP’s basic demands.
- c. Obama is too cold and aloof. He fails to engage in the kind of personal diplomacy that is necessary to secure agreement.
- d. Obama is too timid and hesitant and unwilling to “twist arms” like Lyndon Johnson in order to impose his will.

In all these criticisms, there is a clear unspoken assumption that it is entirely within Obama’s power to solve all political problems. If he fails to do so, the failure can be laid entirely at his feet. Somehow, the fact that GOP extremism is actually the central problem—a point that if mentioned at all is just briefly conceded—slips through the cracks as the commentaries proceed.

This massive failure of the mainstream political commentators poses a profound danger to America. Without the kind of broad “establishment” consensus firmly condemning right-wing political extremism that emerged in the 1950’s and 1970’s, America is now rapidly adjusting to GOP extremism as “the new normal.” Print and TV reporters now routinely say that a bill was “defeated” or a cabinet member “rejected” when in fact both were approved by majorities and only blocked by the GOP’s unprecedented abuse of the filibuster. By 2014, the permanent minority filibuster, routine blocking of all appointments and deliberate sabotage of routine government operations will be treated as entirely normal features of American democracy. Things that were once described as absolutely inconceivable will be accepted as routine.

(It is worth remembering that when progressive commentators first suggested that the GOP would be willing to damage the economic recovery for electoral gain, mainstream commentators savagely attacked them as quite literally “defaming” or “slandering” the GOP. Today the fact that Republicans did indeed consider the economy “a *hostage worth ransoming*” (in Mitch McConnell’s memorable words) is calmly accepted by these very same commentators as no longer even worthy of mention.)

In order for progressives and Democrats to combat this trend, it is important for them to try and understand the reasons for its existence. In part, the failure of mainstream political commentators to condemn GOP extremism can be attributed to mundane and cynical factors—their desire to maintain good and cordial relations with their sources and contacts in the GOP and conservative organizations. But, when even the editorial pages of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* now firmly criticize key aspects of GOP extremism, this cannot be the complete answer. Nor can the problem be simply that criticizing GOP extremism poses a threat to mainstream commentators’ professional self-image. It is indeed true that firmly and consistently criticizing the GOP would deprive these commentators of their carefully crafted self-image as entirely “non-partisan”, “objective” and “above the fray” observers. But this did not deter previous generations of similarly “middle of the road” commentators who managed to take a firm and unequivocal stand when they saw that it had become essential.

As a result, it is necessary to consider quite seriously an alternative explanation: that the mainstream commentators are literally suffering from a socio-political version of the psychological process called the Stockholm Syndrome—the tendency of some captives to identify with and even defend their captors.

In order to decide if this extremely startling hypothesis is actually plausible and not merely a political metaphor, let us briefly review the basic psychodynamics of the Stockholm Syndrome as it is explained in the [FBI](#)¹, [law enforcement](#)² and [applied criminal psychology](#)³ literature.

In this literature the [classic definition of the syndrome](#)⁴ is given as follows:

“A nonvoluntary and unconscious positive bond between captive and captor that develops in response to the trauma of victimization. In a true manifestation of the phenomenon, hostages do not perceive the incongruity or irrationality of their feelings toward the hostage-takers in a self-critical or insightful way”

One of the [better popular summaries of the process by which the syndrome occurs](#)⁵ is presented below:

¹http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/fbi/stockholm_syndrome.pdf

²<http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/2007-pdfs/july07leb.pdf>

³http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display_arch&article_id=1697&issue_id=122008

⁴http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display_arch&article_id=1697&issue_id=122008

⁵<http://health.howstuffworks.com/mental-health/mental-disorders/stockholm-syndrome2.htm>

The Stockholm Syndrome Process

1. In a *traumatic* and extraordinarily stressful event a person finds himself or herself held captive by a person who threatens extreme physical harm to the captive if he or she disobeys the hostage-taker in any way. Escape is not an option. The prisoner's only chance at survival is acquiescence to the captor's demands.
2. As time goes on, obedience alone may not be sufficient to insure safety—a change in the captors' mood could mean harmful consequences to the prisoner. Figuring out what might set off the captor's violence so the prisoner can avoid those triggers becomes another survival strategy. In this way, the prisoner gets to know the captor.
3. A minor act of kindness on the part of the captor positions the captor as the prisoner's savior. In the traumatic circumstances in which the prisoner finds himself or herself, the slightest *act of kindness*—or simply the sudden absence of immediate threat—seems a sign of friendship in an otherwise hostile, terrifying world, and the prisoner clings to it for dear life.
4. The captor slowly comes to seem less threatening—more an instrument for survival and protection than one of harm. The prisoner undergoes what some call an act of self-delusion: In order to survive psychologically as well as physically—to lessen the unimaginable stress of the situation—the prisoner comes to truly believe that the captor is his or her friend, that in fact they can help each other “get out of this mess.”
5. The people on the outside trying to rescue the prisoner seem less like the prisoner's allies. They are going to hurt this person who is protecting the prisoner from harm. The fact that this person is also the source of that potential harm gets buried in the process of self-delusion.

The general pattern can be summarized as follows: the captive (1) attempts to deny the reality of total helplessness by propitiating the captor (2) attempts to avoid situations that might provoke the captors' anger (3) comes to blame themselves rather than the captor for the hostage situation (4) begins to defend the captor from criticism or attack (5) comes to see potential rescuers as threats rather than allies.

This kind of pattern is painfully familiar in cases of domestic violence. The abused person is fearful and tries to accommodate all of the spouses' demands. The abused individual adjusts his or her behavior to prevent explosions. They begin to blame themselves for the problem. They defend the spouse when police or social workers come to the house. They begin to see the friends who are trying to help them as threats.

But can this basic schematic outline of the way the Stockholm Syndrome develops actually be applied to mainstream political commentators?

Consider the following:

1. The sudden emergence of right-wing extremism after Obama's election was, in fact, genuinely frightening to many political commentators, especially those too young to have observed, much less participated in, the Civil Rights Movement and tested their courage against the fanatical fury of right-wing activists at close range.

This frightening change occurred on two different levels. On the one hand, there was the sudden explosion of images that portrayed Obama as Hitler or Stalin, not only on the posters of tea party marchers but on the TV shows of major right-wing celebrities with millions of viewers. When organized groups of protesters disrupted town meetings held by congressmen to discuss the health care reform bill and flooded the bill's supporters with thousands of ugly and even threatening e-mail messages, mainstream political commentators recognized that they themselves could easily become potential targets of right-wing rage if they provoked the protesters' irrational anger.

On a broader, national level, the growing extremist rhetoric and behavior of the GOP itself was in many respects even more disturbing. Right-wing extremists are perennial figures on the fringes of American politics but never before in modern American history had the bitter, "*politics as a form of warfare, political opponents as literal enemies*" perspective become so clearly championed and adopted by one of the two major American parties. In the previous cases of Joe McCarthy and Nixon, it was an individual or small group whose actions had to be challenged. In this case it was one of the two major American political parties. The rapid extremist transformation of the Republican Party deeply challenged the illusion that there were ironclad "rules of fair play" in American politics and an unshakable consensus about the limits within which the competition between the two parties was to be conducted. It was genuinely and deeply disturbing for mainstream commentators to have to seriously consider the possibility that one of America's major political parties was evolving in a direction recognizably similar to the extremist parties of Europe like the National Front in Post-War France.

2. The first reaction to this disquieting and indeed frightening possibility was denial. Column after column reassured readers that, "Don't worry, folks, this is just temporary. The "adults" in the GOP will quickly get back in control."
3. As the change persisted, however, mainstream political commentators began to describe the situation as essentially normal. The GOP's extremism wasn't something new but just the typical behavior of "Washington" or "congress" and the result of routine and long-standing "partisan polarization."
4. Gradually, mainstream political commentators began to lower their standards of acceptable behavior to accommodate the new reality: after a few columns or TV commentaries criticizing routine filibusters, unfilled judicial vacancies and legislative paralysis, all three rapidly became part of "*just the way things are these days*" and not a continuing source of vocal and angry outrage.
5. Since January, mainstream commentators have become increasingly strident and desperate in their demands that it is Obama who must make deeper and deeper compromises to avoid crisis, that he is the one who must avoid taking actions that might provoke conflict, that he must, in effect, accept political hostage-taking as the normal basis for governing. He should do this, they argue, "*for the greater good,*" "*in the nation's best interest*", "*to insure his legacy*", "*to be a great president*" and so on.

6. Most recently, mainstream political commentators have increasingly come to define Obama himself as the real “problem”—that his failure to accept GOP extremism as normal is the roadblock, not the extremism itself.

In short, it is extremely difficult to ignore just how closely this evolution of mainstream commentators’ attitudes essentially mirrors the psychodynamic process that the psychological law enforcement literature describes in actual cases of Stockholm Syndrome.

As suggested at the outset, to the degree that this interpretation of mainstream political commentators’ attitudes is correct, it suggests that a significant change is needed in progressives’ and Democrats’ political messaging strategy.

At this time Democrats and progressives are still responding to the mainstream political commentators by repeating the critique of “false equivalency.” But it is now over a year since Mann and Ornstein’s powerful analysis appeared and, realistically, virtually everyone in the political world is already fully aware of its thesis. Those who have not yet accepted its conclusions are unlikely to do so in the future. Many mainstream political commentators have rationalized their decision to ignore the false equivalency critique by considering it sufficiently answered by a simple “*to be sure*” clause in their commentary and will not depart from that stance in the future.

As a result Democrats and progressives need to press their critique to the next level. They need to firmly and explicitly assert that the mainstream political commentators are, in fact, in a state of profound psychological denial about the reality and depth of GOP extremism and are exhibiting symptoms that actually do mirror those of Stockholm syndrome.

The mainstream political commentators will sputter, fume and howl with self-righteous indignation that it is utterly outrageous for Democrats and progressives to psychoanalyze them in this way and to directly compare them to battered spouses making excuses for their tormentors. They will argue that it is, on the contrary, absolutely reasonable and rational for them to grant that GOP extremism is indeed the basic underlying problem but then to turn around and blame Obama for not accommodating it rather than insisting that the GOP change its behavior.

Most people (and most practicing mental health specialists, as well) will in contrast consider this very peculiar point of view to actually be very compelling evidence of seriously disordered cognitive processing on the part of mainstream political commentators, cognitive processing that is not unlike the thought patterns of victims of domestic abuse who refuse to criticize their abusive spouse and blame instead friends, relatives, doctors and police for creating the problem by not leaving the couple alone.

This will make for some heated and uncomfortable altercations between progressives and Democrats on the one hand and the mainstream political commentators on the other. But, it is a very necessary confrontation if America is not to meekly accept the extremist degradation of the nation’s democratic norms and institutions as a “new normal” rather than firmly condemning and opposing it as an outrageous violation of our most valued democratic traditions and values.