

CO-EDITORS:



William Galston



Stan Greenberg



Ruy Teixeira

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 MEMO

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BY
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By ANDREW LEVISON

The Republican primary campaign has provided a foretaste of the bitter and divisive super-PAC driven media tactics that will be used against Obama in the fall. The fundamental and inescapable fact is that Democrats will be on the receiving end of a propaganda campaign of a scope and ferocity unparalleled in American history. Democrats must begin planning now how they will respond.

The attack will be three pronged:

First, there will be a “high road” attack directly sponsored by the Republican presidential candidate—now almost certainly Romney—and the RNC. It will be based on sanctimoniously accusing Obama of having “failed”—that he has not fulfilled his campaign promises and that his policies have proved ineffective. The media has already reported on this planned campaign and how it will reduce the need for Romney to attack Obama personally by using Obama’s own words against him.

This part of the three-pronged approach does not represent any major departure from the practices of past campaigns. Where it will significantly differ is in the use of bogus “facts” and statistics on a scale that would have been previously unacceptable. Years ago statements such as “the stimulus did not create any jobs” and “unemployment has risen under Obama” would have been dismissed as simply false by the media as soon as “mainstream” economists objected. In the modern “post-truth” *Fox News* world, on the other hand, even the most unambiguously false charges will be described as “debatable” rather than nonsense.

The second prong of the strategy will be a feverish invocation of the culture war narrative—one that will far excel Sarah Palin’s sneering and divisive “*we’re the real, the good America; they are the degenerate coastal elites*” framework that she used in the 2008 campaign.

The ads—which will come from Super-PAC’s more than official sources—will be ugly and distasteful: they will portray Obama as deeply “un-American”—foreign and alien to the heartland values and daily life of the “real” America. Romney and the Republicans have already made this the centerpiece of their “hardball” attack. Obama “*goes around the world apologizing for America.*” “*He wants to turn America into France.*” “*He is a socialist who hates free enterprise.*” The third-party ads will repeat these same accusations but with an overt appeal to prejudices that will be more accurately described as xenophobic rather than racial. The ads will identify Obama not with ghetto hoodlums or Black Panthers but rather with foreign ideas and ethnicities—“commies”, “America-hating Muslims” and “illegal aliens and foreigners,” all of whom support his goal of undermining America.

The most important and destructive change in 2012, however, will be in the vastly expanded dissemination of a third, flagrantly dishonest and utterly propagandistic “low road” attack—one that will be conducted both above and below the radar.

In 2008 the low road attack on Obama was conducted largely outside the official candidate and Republican party media or the major PAC’s (one clumsy ad by the McCain campaign that attempted to make a “dog-whistle” suggestion that Obama was the anti-Christ was a notable exception). Most of the 2008 low road attacks circulated under the radar—through distribution to informal e-mail lists and comment threads, through micro-targeted direct mail, through robo-calls and through phone banks run by shadowy outside firms. Within these closed communication channels the claims were widely circulated that Obama was a secret Muslim, a radical/communist, a sympathizer with domestic terrorist bombers, and that he was behind a range of “Birtherist” and other conspiracies. Media Matters for America made pioneering attempts to map these “below the radar” attacks during the 2008 campaign and to outline how they were circulated and amplified within the various conservative communication networks, but the study was discontinued after the elections.

Observers were at first uncertain how important these sub-rosa attacks would be in the 2008 election but the absolutely pivotal role they played became very clear as the passion and enthusiasm of the Republican base became largely driven by these “disreputable” views rather than the more policy-based attack made by McCain himself. The real energy of the Republican base in 2008 was reflected in the almost fanatical Sarah Palin supporters whose enthusiasm vastly exceeded any support for McCain himself and whose signs and shouted slogans reflected the “disreputable” rumor-based views rather than opposition to Obama’s actual platform or priorities.

(The influence of the rumor-based attacks reached a dramatic climax when McCain—in the most honorable single action of his campaign—explicitly rejected the claim of a woman who asked why he didn’t tell voters “the truth”—that Obama was a Muslim terrorist and a traitor during one rally in September. McCain tried to reason with the woman, arguing that Obama was not a terrorist but simply an American with whom he disagreed but the crowd howled its fierce disapproval of his conciliatory remarks.)

Democrats should not assume that Romney will behave as honorably in 2012 as did McCain in 2008. While Romney will hold himself personally aloof, there is little or no chance that he will explicitly disavow the massive low road campaign that will be launched on his behalf.

In 2012 this low road attack—which will once again circulate in large part “under the radar” by e-mail, phone, mail and social media—will have three key characteristics:

First, the attacks will be literally apocalyptic in their depiction of the evil that threatens America. Obama (in cahoots with the UN) will be accused of seriously planning to physically confiscate guns from the homes of average Americans. Secret plans will be alleged that covert socialist training camps are being run in the guise of summer jobs programs. Hundreds of thousands of phony ballots will be said to be stockpiled and voting machines hacked to throw the election to Obama. Massive numbers of union “goons” and “thugs” will be said to be preparing to threaten ordinary Ameri-

cans. Taken as a whole, these messages will claim that the US is actually under the equivalent of a full-scale military attack from subversive domestic enemies threatening to literally destroy the American way of life. Movies depicting heroic resistance to Soviet invasion of America, like 1984's "Red Dawn," will be pointed to as very likely scenarios for the future if Obama is victorious.

Second, the low-road campaign will depict Obama as quite literally and self-consciously a diabolic subversive. He will be portrayed as a sinister and conspiratorial plotter—a Manchurian candidate—inspired by a Muslim Madrassa / Mau-Mau Kenyan world-view. He will not simply be portrayed as a "crazy liberal" or "far-leftist" comparable to a Michael Moore or Rachael Maddow. He will instead be described as genuinely and profoundly evil—a diabolic composite of Osama Bin Laden, Hitler and Stalin with elements of the anti-Christ narrative thrown in as well.

Third, the low-road campaign will be wildly and flamboyantly lurid—ads will feature storm clouds, dark alleys and evil suspicious faces. They will directly exploit the most appalling racial and social stereotypes—Latino muggers, African-American vote stealers, child-molesting homosexual teachers, dirty, sexually degenerate, heroin-addicted "Occupy" radicals. These stereotypes will not be implied—they will be explicitly and dramatically presented as "the truth" about the dark and menacing alien "*other*" against whom decent Americans must be ready to fight by any means necessary.

It may seem premature to predict an attack of this extraordinarily grotesque character but there are two reasons why a massive "low-road" campaign of this kind is quite literally inevitable.

First, by the fall of 2012 Republicans and conservatives will be literally desperate to increase turn-out among a conservative political base that is very ambivalent about Romney and which has extremely little enthusiasm for him or his country-club Republican persona. There is only so much that conventional TV advertising can do to create an artificial "real folks" image for a candidate who is as ostentatiously privileged and aloof as Romney. In order to turn-out the base on Election Day Republican strategists will agree that it will be necessary to create a climate of genuine mass hysteria about the horrors of a second Obama term.

Second, the sub-rosa rumors and extremist accusations against Obama will provide a critical narrative foundation to support the middle road and high road "Culture War" and "Failed Policy" attacks. For conservatives, a common weakness of both the latter narratives is that they do not have a compelling storyline that discredits Obama personally—a set of repugnant psychological motives that explain why he proposes failing policies and elitist goals. The low-road slanders provide this foundation. He supports bad policies and goals not because he is "sincere but misinformed" or simply "aloof and elitist"; he supports bad policies and goals because he is fundamentally evil.

There will be two major sources for this low road attack—secret-donor PAC'-s for niche TV and radio ads and a wide variety of conservative groups, companies and organizations that will use micro-targeting to promulgate this view through e-mail, direct mail, robo-calls, phone banks, web sites discussion groups and social media.

The low road will play a much larger role next year than in 2008. Because of the new Tea Party infrastructure, the “under the radar” communications channels are now far more influential than the mass media for vast numbers of conservative Americans. In 2008, only a small proportion of the Republican/PAC ad budget was devoted to this communication channel. This time, fifty to seventy-five million dollars or more could easily be allocated to low-road ads and communications through this network—ads and communications that will have relatively high production values and unprecedented micro-targeted mass distribution.

The most important goal of this low road campaign will be to create a fierce and widespread hysteria among the conservative base—enough to overcome their lack of enthusiasm for Romney and bring them out to vote in record numbers. But this campaign will also have a significant impact on non-conservative, relatively apolitical voters as it circulates via social media and face to face communication. Among the vast majority of average Americans today there are now informal social media networks (e-mail, Facebook, photo-sharing sites etc.) of 10-30 or more family and friends. Within these networks there are almost always a small group of passionate tea-party/Rush Limbaugh advocates—cantankerous cousin Buford who continually passes around all the latest e-mail rumors (“they’re gonna’ secretly implant chips with 666 on em’ into all the dogs when they go to get their vaccinations”) and bossy Aunt Louise who thinks that photoshopping Nancy Pelosi’s head onto a zombie or vampire photo or using the “funhouse mirror” tool on Obama is the absolute height of mordant satire. These individuals will be the conduit through which the massive low road campaign will circulate virally.

Although the many apolitical members of these informal social circles will not embrace these views, they will nonetheless be influenced by the fact that some of their friends and family are so strongly opposed. A kind of “*where there’s smoke there’s probably fire*” point of view will take hold and significantly influence their voting decisions.

The low road attacks are uniquely pernicious. They will poison the American political atmosphere even more than it is today—if that is even possible to imagine. An open debate between Democratic policies and the big-business conservatism of Romney will actually be healthy for America even if Obama is defeated. A low road campaign that will rival the worst “big lie” propaganda of totalitarian societies, on the other hand, will deeply damage and wound the USA and intensify a polarization that is already deeply and dangerously toxic.

How should Dems respond to this danger that is now on the horizon? For many Dems the immediate reaction will be to “fight fire with fire”—to attack Romney as a soulless corporate vampire who destroys human lives and condemns millions to poverty and to do so with just as much force and savagery as the attacks on Obama. Recent opinion polling which suggests strong majority support for many “populist” propositions and policies will be offered as proof that this is the best way to go.

There is no question that a populist stance will appeal to a very substantial number of ordinary Americans and will significantly energize and mobilize the progressive base. There are, however, two limitations to how far a “fight fire with fire” approach can be taken before it reaches the limits of its effectiveness.

First, neither the conservative base nor many of the relatively apolitical, low-information voters will vote for Obama under any circumstances. While a sector of the latter group will be

sympathetically inclined toward a populist appeal, their profound distrust of Dems and their deep cynicism about government will stop them from actually deciding to vote for Democrats.

As a result, for both these groups, neither pro-Obama nor anti-Romney ads, no matter how dramatic or effective, will actually alter their vote on Election Day. With these groups the only realistic goal for Dems will be to lower their turnout by reducing their low road-induced hysteria and convincing them that there really is no urgent need to get out of bed to vote for a candidate they really don't like very much on Election Day.

Second, with the vast sums of money that will now be directed into campaign advertising almost all available communications channels will be utterly and completely saturated. Additional advertising beyond this point will be subject to almost exponentially diminishing returns. Voters in swing states will be certain to see enough pro-Obama and anti-Romney advertising to swing their vote to the Dems if it is humanly possible to do so.

What this suggests is that rather than devoting all available resources to "fighting fire with fire," there is an additional line of attack for Dems—one that springs directly from the central imperative of the Romney campaign.

Romney's major challenge will be to segregate his messages so that he can present himself as a moderate to some voters and a conservative to others. He absolutely has to pull this off to be elected. As a consequence, being able to simultaneously run parallel but separate high road, middle road and low road campaigns will be absolutely vital to his success.

This suggests that what Dems should do is devote substantial resources to a distinct communications campaign that aggressively attacks the low road slanders from a relatively "middle of the road", moderate perspective and which puts pressure on Romney to either embrace or repudiate them. Successfully executed, such a strategy would continually place Romney on the "horns of a dilemma," forced to choose between alienating his conservative or moderate supporters.

The kinds of messages that would achieve this goal would come from "middle of the road" spokesmen and actors and run along the lines of the following:

- *"You know, I don't agree with Obama about a lot of things, but it really bothers me to see people saying he's the anti-Christ or Stalin or Hitler. That's just wrong."*
- *"This election should be an honest debate and not a smear campaign using secret money"*
- *"Rumors and lies are the wrong way to win an election. The candidates should call out the ads that spread them by name and say flat out that they stink"*
- *"Honest debate strengthens America—rumors and lies damage our country."*
- *"Oh come on. Get real. I'm sick of hearing lies every day on my TV and telephone."*
- *"Americans ought to be able to disagree with each other without demonizing each other."*

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- *“This tidal wave of dirty politics is political pornography and the people who spread it are as dirty as the degenerates who sell porn.”*

The unifying slogan for all these kinds of messages should be *“The candidates should stand up and disavow dirty political ads. Americans should refuse to vote for any candidate who doesn’t have the character to do that.”*

Republicans will attempt to draw a false equivalency between progressive advertisements attacking Romney’s “vulture capitalist” history and the low road propaganda of their own side. But this is an argument in which Romney will be on vastly weaker ground. Even from the perspective of low-information, relatively nonpolitical voters, the level of dishonesty in the attacks on Obama will clearly be vastly greater than any exaggeration in corresponding anti-Republican messages. Moreover, Romney’s slightest appearance of disavowing either his conservative or his moderate supporters will elicit an explosive reaction.

Just to be very clear, this approach is emphatically not proposed as an alternative to pro-Obama and anti-Romney messages but as a complement to them. To the extent that it can reduce conservative base enthusiasm for Romney and sew doubts among moderates about his independence from the extremist right, it can play a clear and important positive role within the overall campaign strategy for Obama’s re-election.