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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 MEMO**

**DEMOCRATS: PRESIDENT OBAMA'S
RECENT SPEECHES PROVIDE
A COHERENT DEMOCRATIC
MESSAGE FOR THE FALL.
THEY ARE CLEAR, SERVICEABLE
AND READY TO BE PUT TO USE.**

BY JAMES VEGA

TDS STRATEGY MEMO – DEMOCRATS: PRESIDENT OBAMA’S RECENT SPEECHES PROVIDE A COHERENT DEMOCRATIC MESSAGE FOR THE FALL. THEY ARE CLEAR, SERVICEABLE AND READY TO BE PUT TO USE.

By James Vega

In the aftermath of the elections of 2000, 2002 and 2004 Dems widely bewailed the superior “message discipline” of the Republicans. The GOP was credited with successfully guiding its members to focus on a small number of clear slogans and themes while Democrats tied themselves in knots.

In consequence, one key theme of [a recent strategy meeting about the coming elections](#)¹ between Senate Democrats and senior staff and the Obama White House was that “there will be intense emphasis on keeping all candidates, offices and parties coordinated on the same message”.

To reinforce this, wallet cards with the core Democratic message were distributed:

Democrats are on the side of the middle class. We are fighting to cut taxes for small businesses and middle-class Americans, end tax cuts for CEOs who ship American jobs overseas, and create clean energy jobs that can’t be outsourced.

Republicans are on the side of Wall Street bankers and CEOs. They support tax cuts for corporations who ship jobs overseas. But their economic policies failed under President Bush. Millions of people lost their jobs, the deficit exploded and the middle class got hammered. Now they want to return to the same failed policies of the past. We can’t afford to go back.

While most democrats would agree with these statements, however, the simple fact is that they do not constitute a message campaign – they are, at best, an executive summary or thumbnail statement of a message campaign. Even when supplemented with bullet point descriptions of key Democratic policies (“*end tax breaks for shipping jobs overseas*”, “*defend social security*”) they still have almost none of the personal engagement or emotional power that a properly designed message campaign is expected to contain.

A serious political message campaign has to have at least four key elements – a narrative, a metaphor, a “case” and a rallying cry.

- The narrative tells a story that defines the “good guys” and “bad guys”
- The metaphor creates a vivid, visual image
- The “case” presents the core argument
- The rallying cry delivers the call to action

¹http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/06/senate-dems-messina-chart_n_673796.html

Let's look at this year's Republican message campaign to see how these four elements are handled:

- **The Narrative** – Barack Obama is a radical with a mysterious past. He was elected by a fluke and quickly began attacking basic American values and institutions. His actions have generated a vast grass-roots rebellion of ordinary Americans.
- **The Metaphor** – organized around the metaphor of the “tea party”. This highly visual symbolism pictures conservative Republicans as the modern embodiment of the original colonial patriots and contrasts them with an image of Obama as a would-be dictator like Hitler or Stalin.
- **The Case** – the struggle over Health Care Reform -- both the conservative interpretation of the provisions of the act and their perception of the process by which it was passed -- provide the overarching “proof” of the crypto-totalitarian and anti-democratic nature of the Administration's agenda.
- **The Rallying Cry** – *“this election will be the epic, decisive battle that stops the liberal/ socialist juggernaut in its tracks”*.

Most Dems first reaction to this outline will be a sense of frustration that they have been offered nothing comparably compact and organized as an alternative Democratic message campaign. Quite the contrary, in the major pro-Democratic political magazines, websites and forums, the majority of the commentary has revolved around a heated debate over the narrative of progressive “disappointment” or even “betrayal” by the Obama administration.

But, in fact, there is actually a very solid and workable Democratic message campaign, one that is “hiding in plain sight” as it were. It is being presented in the partisan speeches Obama has begun to deliver across the country. Those speeches contain all four of the key elements of a political message campaign that are described above.

Take for example [Obama's speech to Democratic supporters](#)² which he delivered in Atlanta on August 2nd. Obama began his speech with a clear narrative:

- *When I took office 18 months ago, the economic policies of the Bush Administration had led to a crisis. 750,000 jobs were lost the month I was inaugurated. 600,000 jobs were lost the month after that.*
- *This was not an accident. It was the result of eight years of Republican rule during which wall street, big business and wealthy could write own ticket and play by their own rules. The Republicans cut taxes for millionaires, cut regulations for business, and cut working people loose without any support.*
- *My administration came with a new plan – a “new accountability” – that said that big business and the wealthy had to play by the same rules as small businesses do.*

² <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/294860-3>

- *Recovery will take time but after eighteen months at least we are moving in the right direction. We've created jobs in the private sector in each of the last six months and the overall economy is at least growing rather than contracting.*
- *It's not fast enough – not nearly fast enough – and public sector layoffs that could have been avoided have undermined our progress. But every single initiative we have proposed to create jobs this year has been filibustered by the Republicans.*
- *Now it would be one thing if the Republicans had seen the error of their ways, if they had taken some time to re-think their approach and come up with some new ideas. But that's not what has happened. They have not come up with a single, solitary new idea that is any different from the policies of George W. Bush.*
- *The truth is that they are betting on amnesia – that Americans won't remember how we got into the situation we are in today. But the last thing we could possibly want to do right now is to go back to doing the things that got us into this mess in the first place.*

It was only at this point, after establishing the Democratic story line – the core narrative – that Obama presented a visual metaphor:

- *The Republicans drove so recklessly and irresponsibly when they were in control that they drove the car into a ditch.*
- *The Democrats put on their boots and climbed down into the mud to get the car out. Inch by inch they pushed it back up.*
- *The Republicans refused to help. They stood on the side of the road and criticized "You're not pushing hard enough", "Don't do it that way", "You got mud on the car."*
- *Democrats said: OK, if you won't help we'll do it without you. We'll get it done by ourselves."*
- *Now that the car is finally coming out of the ditch, the Republicans are suddenly turning around and saying "Hey, we want the keys back."*

At this point in the speech Obama leaned back, chuckled and paused for effect. He did not project anger or frustration but rather seemed both bemused by the foolishness of the Republican request and simultaneously fully confident and in control. After several seconds he spoke directly and forcefully to the imaginary Republicans in the audience:

- *Well the answer is no, you can't have the keys back – because you don't know how to drive.*

Now sure, in one sense this is just an easy applause line. Sure, in one sense the metaphor is simplistic. But that does not make it any less clear and powerful. Conservatives will disagree with it, moderates will not be convinced by it and ordinary voters will not immediately agree with it. But – particularly when it is preceded by the core narrative – all of these groups will immediately grasp the central message it is intended to vividly convey – that Republicans do not deserve election because of the irresponsible way they have behaved.

Obama followed this with the third section of his speech – a more direct statement of his “case”. It is in essence an implicit reply to the accusations that he is pursuing an extreme liberal or even socialist agenda. Obama’s response is that, on the contrary, everything he has done has been a matter of basic common sense.

He began with a clear statement of his philosophy. *“Small business is the lifeblood of this economy. The job of the government is not to run businesses but to make sure there are fair, common sense rules of the road so every person and every company gets to compete on a level playing field. That level playing field is what a genuine free market is supposed to be about.”*

He then reviewed a whole series of the measures he had taken:

- After a nearly complete lack of regulation of Wall Street and Banking led to a financial crisis, setting rules to prevent a recurrence was not part of some long-range liberal or socialist agenda but a matter of simple common sense.
- Introducing a bill in the senate to encourage hiring by small business (a bill that even the Chamber of Commerce supported and that did not add to the deficit) was not part of some long-range liberal or socialist agenda but was a matter of simple common sense.
- Eliminating the middlemen who were making millions in fees on government guaranteed college loans while not running the slightest economic risk was not part of a long-range liberal or socialist agenda but was a matter of simple common sense.
- Insuring that major oil companies had to set aside adequate reserves to compensate citizens and small businesses for the costs of oil spills was not part of a long-range liberal or socialist agenda but was a matter of simple common sense.

Even his most ambitious initiative – health care reform – had at its core a series of common sense objectives – making sure people with pre-existing conditions could get insurance, allowing young people to be covered by their parents policy up to age 26. These were practical responses to real problems, not ideologically driven social engineering.

Yet, Obama continued, the Republicans opposed even these measures – as well as many others. They opposed them not because they were wrong but for pure politics – to deprive the administration of any political “victories”.

Obama concluded his “case” as follows: *“The Republicans have been playing politics. They are more interested in the next election than the next generation – and that’s why they can’t have the keys back.”*

Obama then presented the final part of his speech –the rallying cry and call to action.

Now I knew very clearly that not all of the steps I took would be popular. It’s funny that commentators seem continually surprised by this and say “Gee, the President did stuff that was not popular.” But I knew many of the steps I had to take would be controversial. Come on. Do you really think I don’t have pollsters to tell me how people will react? But my job is to govern, and to make hard decisions.

And we made the right decisions. Just this week I've been going around to the auto companies we rescued when they were in danger of failing and that are now recovering and paying off the money they owe the taxpayers. That wasn't a popular decision, but it was the right one.

He then paused dramatically and said:

I didn't come to Washington to do what's popular – I'm here to do what's right. And that's why this November we're not going to go backward to the same policies that got us in this mess in the first place."

Obama ended the speech on this note.

It is easy to see that this speech actually contains the four key elements of a Democratic message campaign – a narrative that explains what is happening, a metaphor to make it vivid, a “case” for why what has been done was necessary and a rallying cry to provide motivation.

There are three important points to notice:

First, the narrative in this approach focuses on the story of Obama's presidency and not the laundry list of his legislative accomplishments. It presents the story of a man trying to do the right thing against cynical opposition rather than the recitation of bills past or promises made.

Liberals and progressives generally prefer to discuss policies and programs rather than biographies. But many voters, particularly those who are not firm partisans, see themselves as voting for a person not for a list of legislation. Liberal recitations of lists of policies and programs are often seen as proof of their aloof and professorial distance from ordinary Americans rather than as evidence of their concern for their well-being.

In contrast, for most Democrats – and many other open-minded Americans as well – even as support for many of Obama's specific policies have declined there remains a gut-feeling that Obama not only believes with total sincerity in the “do what's right” philosophy he states above but also that he is genuinely trying to “do the right thing”.

This is why his personal popularity remains at 50% with only 44% opposed, even as the approval of the more specific way he is handling of his job has declined to 44% while 50% disapprove. There is an important feeling, particularly among a critical swing group of people who do not necessarily approve of his actions, that he is nevertheless a fundamentally decent man trying his best to solve profoundly difficult problems.

It is of course true that many Democratic candidates will attempt to run on local issues and will try to avoid direct identification with the administration. It is nonetheless certain, however, that they will have to respond to Republican attacks tying them to Obama and when these circumstances arise the “*Obama as a decent man trying to do the right thing against irresponsible Republican opposition*” will be a more effective response than the simple recitation of the administration's accomplishments and promises.

Second, basing the “case” on the notion of “common sense” achieves two goals. It implicitly answers the accusations that Obama is following an extreme liberal/socialist agenda and also reframes the discussion away from broad conservative slogans (“free enterprise”, “big government is the problem”) to focus on specific measures and solving specific problems. As soon as Republicans are forced to argue on this basis, they suddenly find themselves forced to agree with many Democratic measures – insuring that people with pre-existing conditions can get health insurance being a clear example.

Third, this message campaign can be followed by Democrats regardless of how “betrayed” or “disappointed” they may personally feel about one or more actions of the administration. If they are at all serious about message discipline this is a message campaign they can embrace regardless of where they fall on that continuum.

(In this regard it is worth noting that there is a profound irony in the conservative accusation that liberal writers and commentators have been secretly conspiring to coordinate a pro-Obama message since well before the 2008 election. It requires the belief that these nefarious liberals systematically and carefully crafted the most wickedly demoralizing and destructive narrative imaginable – a lurid tale of Obama’s supporters having been “disappointed”, “betrayed”, “insulted”, “humiliated”, “ignored”, “stabbed in the back”, “thrown under a bus”, “slapped in the face”, “left out in the cold”, “treated like children”, “sold-out” and so on. All of these are terms that have repeatedly appeared in articles in the liberal/progressive media in the last year and a half. Why the diabolically devious liberal conspirators would think this brutal savaging of Obama was the best possible way to covertly support him is a mystery that even Glen Beck’s clinically delusional blackboard diagrams cannot begin to resolve).

But in any event, the overall conclusion is clear. The message in Obama’s speeches is a compact, organized and coherent alternative to “disappointment” narratives that Dems can unite around. It is lucid, serviceable and ready to be put to use.

On the other hand, of course, Democrats can also just stick with their traditional message disarray and begin preparing now for another round of whining and mutual recriminations about the Republican’s superior message discipline after the elections. This will offer little consolation for the resultant defeats, but it will certainly provide them with the comfort and solace of both nostalgia and familiarity.