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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.

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A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

**PROGRESSIVES: OBAMA'S RECENT
CRITICISMS SEEMED DEEPLY UNFAIR
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BY
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A TDS STRATEGY MEMO: PROGRESSIVES: OBAMA’S RECENT CRITICISMS SEEMED DEEPLY UNFAIR BUT COULD TURN OUT TO BE THE MOST HELPFUL THING HE COULD POSSIBLY HAVE DONE FOR US—IF IT MAKES US FINALLY TAKE SERIOUSLY THE JOB OF BUILDING AN INDEPENDENT GRASS-ROOTS PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT.

By JAMES VEGA

It is understandable that progressives had a deeply emotional reaction to Obama’s recent press conference in which he forcefully asserted his commitment to seeking compromise and used the adjectives “sanctimonious” and “purist” to describe inflexible positions on issues like the public option and the deal on the tax cut extension. Aside from the substantive issues, his attitude itself seemed fundamentally unfair—seeming to criticize his most loyal supporters rather than his most bitter opponents and using language that seemed almost deliberately provocative. Coming after months of vicious and utterly dishonest attacks by Republicans, progressives found his words a harsh and demoralizing blow.

Yet, at the same time, Obama’s criticisms could ironically also be most helpful thing he could possibly have done to help American progressives. To understand why this might be so, it is necessary to think clearly about what roles the president and the progressive movement can most usefully play.

Last week **TDS published an analysis**¹ that carefully delineated the very different political roles of activist, moral leader and legislator. As the author, political scientist Andrew Sabl noted: “all three contribute crucial things to democratic politics—but very different things, normally best performed by very different kinds of people... the same person is unlikely to be able to play more than one of these roles well...”

In one sense this seems entirely obvious but it has very important implications for current progressive strategy that have been largely ignored. In the eras of previous social movements there was a very clear separation between the role of the president and the leaders of the progressive mass movements of the time. John L. Lewis and the other organizers of the industrial trade unions in the 1930’s focused their main efforts on union organizing, not influencing congress or President Roosevelt. Martin Luther King and the other civil rights leaders devoted most of their efforts to building a powerful mass movement and relatively little time to working with John Kennedy on the crafting of the Civil Rights Act. It would quite literally never have occurred to any of the activists and organizers in either of these independent grass-roots mass movements that exerting “inside the beltway” pressure on the president should be their primary task, rather than grass-roots organizing. In the social movements of the 1930’s and 1960’s, influencing the detailed shape of legislation in Washington was considered a very—very—secondary activity.

Beginning in the 1970’s, however, independent mass movements built by grass roots organizing began to sharply decline, By the 1980’s many of the major progressive movements like the environmental movement had become more and more deeply involved in lobbying and oversight of legislation and less and less committed to grass roots organizing.

¹http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2010/12/obama_cannot_be_an_activist_an.php

The rise of the internet and the Web in the late 1990's and early 2000's powerfully reinforced this trend. While the internet made fundraising, letter writing or petition campaigns much easier—allowing, for example, the development of new online organizations like MoveOn—at the same time they made face-to-face grass-roots organizing even more difficult because they undermined the progressive commitment to traditional means of struggle like demonstrations, rallies and door-to-door organizing campaigns. The explosive growth of the web strongly encouraged the belief that new online organizations could largely replace traditional real-world organizations and the notion of “the netroots” as a modern equivalent of the traditional “grassroots” became popular. The expectation grew that organizing could now be done electronically rather than face to face. The growth of giant online communities like MoveOn, Kos and others seemed proof that this was indeed feasible.

But the rapid growth of these online organizations obscured a fundamental difference between them and traditional progressive organizing: online organizing only “organizes” those people who are already convinced of progressive ideas and already committed to progressive action. Unless supplemented by traditional grass-roots organizing, online organizing cannot effectively reach out, make a connection with, convince and recruit new people who are currently indifferent to progressive issues or unaware of progressive causes. Nor can it dramatize problems and expose injustices in the way that nonviolent protests and mass demonstrations do. In a very large number of cases online communication is not only limited to “preaching to the choir” but also to “organizing the already organized.” Online organizations can efficiently raise money, collect signatures, and coordinate the actions of people already committed to an objective, but they cannot build new relationships and gradually change the attitudes of people who are not already committed to a goal. Traditional grass-roots organizing, on the other hand, can.

Jane McAlevey, an innovative union organizer for the SIEU, carefully distinguishes² between modern, electronic approaches and traditional “organizing”:

By “organizing,” I mean an approach that has at its core a day-to-day, direct relationship with the base.... There are simply no shortcuts to this. We know this because we have spent the past twenty years looking for one and have not found it. Right now, the fashionable shortcut is using the Internet. Ten years ago it was direct mail, robo phones, phone banks, opinion research, and “sophisticated media.” None of this is bad; of course it is a good thing to poll and message and phone and communicate in better ways. All of this is important, and all of it adds up to more wins and a stronger movement. But none of this can replace organizing. It must be in addition to it.

Obama's unique presidential campaign obscured this crucial point because Obama ran his campaign like the moral leader of a traditional social movement. He used soaring oratory and offered inspirational goals that were backed up by an army of genuine grass-roots organizers and advocates. The Obama campaign used online tools to schedule meetings, solicit contributions and coordinate campaigning but it actually built its base of supporters using traditional face-to-face persuasion and small group activity.

³<http://janemcalevey.com>

In the process, however, the campaign also created a totally new expectation—that Obama would be able to continue to play the role of inspirational moral leader once he entered office. In retrospect, it was comparable to imagining Martin Luther King running for president, being elected and then trying to continue to lead the civil rights movement from the oval office.

As Andrew Sabl argued in the analysis noted above, this was an inherently contradictory and ultimately untenable mixture of roles, one that could not be permanently maintained. But while Obama's supporters recognized that to some extent this was probably true, there was still the hope and expectation that Obama might somehow be able to successfully “square the circle”—juggle the contradictory roles and continue to inspire and drive a visionary progressive agenda even as he simultaneously fulfilled his responsibilities as president.

It was as a result of this conception that from the earliest days of the administration progressive organizations began to increasingly define their central organizational task as waging a “battle for president's soul”. As Obama began to make decisions progressives perceived as excessively centrist, they quickly became convinced that their most important job was to maintain as much pressure as possible on him from the left. The entire success or failure of the progressive movement became increasingly identified with how far they could move Obama to the left in this bureaucratic tug of war.

The idea of building an independent progressive movement and engaging in long term grass roots organizing to build support for progressive goals, on the other hand, became increasingly sidelined. Even as progressives began to clearly see that OFA not going to play this role, until the spring 2010 meeting of the Campaign for America's future there was stunningly little discussion and planning for building an independent progressive alternative. All attention was focused on winning the tug of war inside the administration.

This had two major and profoundly negative consequences:

First, the Tea party movement powerfully and decisively out-organized progressives. Strikingly, their success was largely based on the use of the traditional techniques of progressive mass movements—marches, rallies and demonstrations and only secondarily on high-tech tools. When the traditional progressive social movement groups, led by the unions and civil rights organizations, did pull together an impressively wide coalition of traditional social organizations for the “One Nation Working Together” march this October, the striking weakness that was revealed was the complete absence of any organized presence by the major “netroots” organizations. Online organizations with hundreds of thousands or even millions of names in their e-mail databases and vast numbers of visitors to their websites failed to mobilize even a few hundred of their followers to participate in the march under a banner with the organization's name. In a single moment, the idea that online organizations could actually replace grass-roots organizing as a means to achieve traditional mass mobilization and movement building was dramatically revealed as fundamentally hollow.

Second, the progressive organizations mounted no major attempts to organize the groups who were suffering economically and were the natural base for new progressive movements. In the 1930's there were marches of the unemployed, protests over bank foreclosures by farmers, and rallies and demonstrations by debtors and veterans. In 2009, although there were local grass-roots attempts at organizing, the major progressive groups made no major effort to organize the unemployed, the victims of the housing crisis, or the sick who had lost

their health insurance. The opponents of health care reform filled the summer town meetings with frightened seniors; progressives did not respond by organizing the sick and uninsured.

There is no guarantee that a massive progressive commitment to traditional organizing would have worked in 2009, but the simple fact is that it wasn't tried. There was no serious discussion of the possibility that as much or more effort should be devoted to grass-roots organizing than to lobbying the administration.

The reason that there was no such consideration is easy to find. Progressives overwhelmingly blamed Obama rather than the lack of an independent mass movement for the setbacks to the progressive agenda. They blamed Obama for betraying his campaign promises and his progressive supporters because he failed to be the inspiring moral leader who would—by himself—win the battle for public opinion using the bully pulpit of the oval office and who would bend congress to his will using the power and prestige of the presidency. It was not the lack of an independent progressive movement that was the problem; the problem was Obama's failure to enact the full progressive agenda without one.

The result was a vicious cycle—the more progressives defined their success by how far they could push Obama to the left, the more disappointed they became when the lack of a powerful mass movement prevented them from being able to force the adoption of their proposals and demands. This then produced more intense frustration with Obama and more strident cries of betrayal. Rather than look to grass-roots organizing as an alternative method for achieving social change, they redoubled their efforts to win victories by exerting even more intense pressure on the administration.

If Obama has made one fundamental error in his relationship with progressives, it has been that, until his recent press conference, he continued to keep the ambiguity about his role alive. But that press conference marked a dramatically new stage. For the first time Obama explicitly and categorically rejected the idea that he could continue to play the role of moral leader and president at the same time. He clearly asserted that, as president, he viewed his main job and his overarching responsibility as president to be acting as a compromiser and negotiator, not as an inspirational figure who could or would try to lead the progressive movement from the oval office.

The immediate sense of insult progressives felt regarding Obama's remarks at his press conference has prevented thoughtful consideration of the significance of this change but the long-term implications are profound.

Obama's stance means that neither new accusations of "betrayal" nor continuing calls to live up to his campaign promises will substantially change the kinds of compromises he will seek as president. His remarks made it clear that he is prepared to accept whatever loss of progressive support his new stance entails. His statement indicates that he is entirely willing to accept the inevitable emergence of a group of disillusioned supporters who will feel impelled to organize a primary challenge to him because of his rejection of the role of moral leader and will trust that most progressives will nonetheless continue to support him as a consensus-seeking, moderate-progressive Democrat.

This forces progressives to face a central fact: to a large degree the “battle for the president’s soul” is no longer a viable model as the main focus and goal of progressive action. Instead, progressives need to build a more robust independent progressive movement, not to put short term pressure exclusively on Obama but more long-term pressure on the political system as a whole.

There are three starting points for such a new approach.

First, the current split between the “One Nation” coalition of traditional grass-roots progressive groups and the netroots must be bridged. The One Nation coalition includes the NAACP, the National Council de La Raza, the major progressive trade unions and a wide range of other traditional progressive cause groups. These are the major, actually-in-existence organizations that try to represent and organize the “have-nots” of American society—the people that progressive social and economic reforms are designed to help. An internet-based, white, middle class progressive movement that has no genuine connection with the “have-nots” is profoundly isolated and is easily caricatured as a cabal of wealthy, elitist limousine liberals and frivolous college students. An online progressive movement that is directly and actively involved in working with the organizations closest to the struggles of the unemployed, the victims of the foreclosure crisis, the sick and the uninsured, on the other hand, is not so easily ignored.

Second, the progressive movement must reacquaint itself with the tactics of nonviolent direct action. There are **complex sociological reasons why organizing the unemployed**³ or the victims of foreclosure is difficult, but the coming year presents wide opportunities for organizing protests over the coming cutbacks in the services provided by state governments. Progressive action can not only seek to organize protests of the workers losing their jobs but also protests by the people losing vitally important services. The scale of these protests can be very modest—in the current 24 hour news cycle, simple demonstrations and protests by 15-30 people can get several minutes of coverage on local news; 50 protesters in 6 different cities can get the attention of CNN and MSNBC. Less than 1,000 militant protesters who are willing to be arrested, strategically distributed around the country, can force the recognition of a significant national trend.

Third, the progressive movement must create a multi-issue umbrella coalition to push back against the tea party, an umbrella coalition that embraces both the One Nation coalition as well as the supporters of Jon Stewart’s *Rally for Sanity*. This umbrella coalition can be built around two core demands (1) defend the social safety net and (2) support social tolerance rather than intolerance. The next two years will see a broad Republican offensive to privatize Social Security, eliminate Unemployment Insurance, weaken Medicare, eliminate protection against tainted food and arsenic in imported toys along with a host of other retrograde policies. In isolation, the opposition to each of these steps will be weak and divided. Combined, such opposition can be strong.

Finally, as it develops, a renewed progressive focus on grass-roots organizing should set the goal of bringing 250,000 people (real people, as measured by aerial photography, not inflated PR claims) who are genuinely representative of all regions and sectors of

³<http://www.thenation.com/article/157292/mobilizing-jobless>

America to Washington to show their support for a progressive agenda. This should not be an isolated, stand alone event but the carefully structured culmination of a locally based, ongoing campaign to revitalize the grass-roots progressive infrastructure. The national demonstration should be designed to symbolize the success of that nationwide campaign and to galvanize further action.

A renewed focus on building an independent progressive movement does not mean reducing or abandoning progressive pressure on Obama and the administration. The tactics of progressive groups like MoveOn and the Progressive Change Campaign to pressure the administration from the left remain as relevant as before. What it does imply, however, is a more balanced allocation of progressive resources and energy with greatly increased attention given to organizing an independent movement that will stand up to the conservative attack and create progressive pressure on the political system as a whole. After all, it was fundamentally the indirect pressure of dynamic mass movements and not direct “inside the beltway” pressure on the president that impelled the passage of the Wagner act in the 1930’s and the Civil Rights Act in 1963.

Progressives need to return to fundamentals. **The basic job of progressives is not to pressure the president to move to the left; it is to move the country itself to the left and let the president follow.** This is a central principle that has been too long ignored. This is not an easy path; on the contrary it is excruciatingly hard. But it is the method that has produced all the major progressive victories in American history.