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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

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IT'S TIME TO STOP RECITING THOSE  
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BY  
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**A TDS STRATEGY MEMO: PROGRESSIVES, LET'S FACE THE FACT: THE "BULLY PULPIT" IS NOT A MAGIC WAND. IT'S TIME TO STOP RECITING THOSE TWO WORDS AS IF THEY WERE A MAGICAL INCANTATION THAT CAN TRANSFORM PUBLIC OPINION.**

By JAMES VEGA

As progressive frustration with Obama has mounted in the aftermath of the debt ceiling debate, the plaintive assertion that *"If Obama had just used the "bully pulpit" of the presidency he could have transformed the national debate"* has become one of the most widely repeated criticisms of his administration. In hundreds of op-ed pieces, articles, blog posts, comment threads and e-mail letters to the editor his failure to use the bully pulpit to dominate the airwaves with a full-throated progressive position on issue after issue is cited as the major and indeed single most important reason for the increased influence of Republican views.

What is particularly striking about this view is the way it is stated as if it were an entirely self-evident truth, one whose validity is so obvious that it does not need any empirical support or confirmation. In virtually every case, it is presented as a proposition whose certainty is simply beyond any serious question.

In fact, however, there is actually very little evidence in either the historical record or public opinion research to support the view that the bully pulpit can create major attitude change. Even such famous examples of presidential rhetoric as Lyndon Johnson's *"We shall overcome"* speech supporting the Civil Rights Bill or Ronald Reagan's often quoted speech asserting that *"government is the problem not the solution"* did not produce any major epiphany-like transformations of attitudes that opinion polls could detect. The hundreds of more routine presidential speeches over the last 40 years have had even less effect. History and data suggest that the bully pulpit has a real (and to some degree quantifiable) but ultimately limited influence on public opinion. It cannot, by itself, produce major attitude change.

The tremendous appeal of the general *"If Obama had just used the bully pulpit he could have transformed the national debate about X"* notion is rooted in the fact that it provides a one sentence, all-purpose, completely evidence-free—and therefore entirely irrefutable—argument against any aspect of Obama's political strategy and tactics that one desires. It is an emotional argument based on feeling and not a logical argument based on evidence.

Let's be clear: presidential rhetoric does indeed have a specific, identifiable degree of influence on public opinion. In recent months there have been two relatively clear examples of this—Obama's speech criticizing Paul Ryan's Medicare proposal and his call for public pressure on Congress in support of a compromise on the debt ceiling. In the first case Obama's remarks clearly served as a focal point that helped crystallized public opposition to the Ryan plan and his call for pressure on Congress produced a wave of phone calls that overloaded the congressional switchboard.

But these same two examples also suggest the very clear limitations that exist on the influence of presidential rhetoric. Such rhetoric can help to focus attention on and rally public support for

a position that already commands strong and widespread popularity or it can mobilize action among dedicated partisans. But there are no solid examples—either recently or in the last several decades—of presidential speeches ever actually producing major transformations of deeply held public attitudes.

When this is suggested to proponents of the *“if only Obama had used the bully pulpit he could have transformed the national debate”* view, however, they will emphatically deny that it is true. On the contrary, proponents generally launch into what a skeptical listener cannot help but perceive as a series of after-the-fact rationalizations designed to continually protect the dubious notion that any Democratic president who genuinely wants to can indeed use the bully pulpit to dominate and control the national debate on any issue.

### **What Did Obama Really Say About Jobs?**

In the case of Obama’s failure to use the bully pulpit to force the national conversation to focus on jobs rather than deficits, for example, the “bully pulpit” critics do not acknowledge that Obama actually did argue the case for job creation in his 2011 State of the Union address (and in a number of subsequent speeches) but that—despite his control of the bully pulpit—he was unable to keep the national debate focused on that issue. Rather a cascade of alternative arguments is presented, one after another, to argue that the fault was entirely Obama’s own.

*1. Obama did not energetically advocate for job creation at all. He embraced Republican concerns about the deficit instead.*

The problem with this argument is that it quite clearly disagrees with what liberals and progressives actually said about Obama’s State of the Union speech at the time. Most progressives wished that Obama had been even more assertive than he was, but none claimed anything resembling the statement above.

Here’s what David Corn said at the time in [Mother Jones](#)<sup>1</sup>:

Is President Barack Obama a fierce down-sizer of government, or an ardent champion of boosting government investment in the economy? Well, he’s both.

In his second State of the Union speech, delivered Tuesday night, Obama trotted the tight wire. To show he’s a mighty crusader against deficits, he declared he would impose a five-year freeze on non-security discretionary spending. And to show he’s (still) the rescuer of the US economy, he proclaimed he wants to spend billions on—that is, invest in—innovative technology (such as clean energy), infrastructure (including high-speed rail and high-speed Internet) and education (including 100,000 additional science, technology, engineering, and math teachers within the next eight years), all so the United States can “win the future,” as it competes with China and other economic superpowers...

...Obama emphasized a program of innovation and investment geared toward the future—more so than job-creating programs that will boost employment today. Certainly, Obama’s aim is to invest in endeavors that produce good jobs. And these

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<sup>1</sup><http://motherjones.com/print/96666>

projects have a progressive bent: ending tax subsidies for fossil fuels in order to finance a 33-percent hike in federal funding for clean energy technology (though he's still pushing nuclear energy and clean coal); placing 1 million advanced technology vehicles on US roads by 2015; launching a National Wireless Initiative to bring high-speed Internet to 98 percent of the United States; and repairing crumbling roads, bridges, and transit systems.

But the context in which he offered all this was not jobs-jobs-jobs. Instead, the message was, if the nation doesn't get its act together, its old, wind-up clock will be cleaned by the Chinese and others.

This is certainly less than progressives would have liked, but it cannot be dismissed as in any sense "ignoring jobs."

Ruth Conniff at [The Progressive](#)<sup>2</sup> offered a similar *"the speech could have been better, but..."* evaluation. Here's what she said:

On the economy, Obama hit on the theme of competitiveness relentlessly. He barely mentioned the unemployed themselves. But he did plug investing in infrastructure, expanding access to health care...

And here's John Nichols in the *Nation*:

Most progressives thought Obama erred at least a bit too far toward the right in a speech that was laden with talk about deficit reduction and spending cuts.... But there was still enough talk about saving Social Security, investing in infrastructure and education and caring for the vulnerable to [alarm conservatives].

### **Did Obama's Speech fail to convince independent voters?**

Proponents of the bully pulpit notion, however, dismiss the fact that Obama did support job creation in his SOTU speech as essentially a technicality. They offer several different arguments for why it made no real difference:

*2. Devoting the speech to both job creation and also deficit reduction completely destroyed its effectiveness. Obama needed to devote the speech entirely to jobs and categorically reject deficit reduction in order to change the minds of independent voters.*

The problem with this view is that Obama actually did very well in winning over previously skeptical independents to his proposals on jobs. [Democracy Corps ran several dial tests](#)<sup>3</sup> and focus groups at the time. The audience they selected was deliberately slanted toward people who generally disapproved of both the job Obama was doing and had unfavorable views of him on a personal level.

Nonetheless, Obama made major changes in opinion. Before the speech only 24% described themselves as confident of his ability to create new jobs. After the speech, 52% did. So, in fact, Obama's message on jobs was quite effective among independents who actually watched the speech.

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.progressive.org/rc012611.html>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/SOTU-2011-Dial-Report-FINAL.pdf>

The fundamental problem that Obama or any other progressive president must face today is that in the modern fragmented media environment—with *Fox News* acting as a de-facto propaganda arm of the Republican party and most other outlets tied to a format of rigidly “balancing” critics and supporters—the ability of a Democratic president to get his message before the American people is now very severely limited.

Only a small minority of Americans actually watch a presidential address. The vast majority sees only a few short sound bites and then hear back and forth arguments between on-screen commentators that tend to cancel each other out. In the past a Presidential State of the Union address was framed by the media as a shared national moment of pride with a great deal of “pomp and circumstance” given to the solemnity of the occasion. Now it is portrayed as the presentation of just one point of view in an ongoing partisan shouting match.

### How Often Did Obama Talk About Jobs?

The proponents of the bully pulpit view, however, do not concede that this substantial reduction in the power and influence of presidential rhetoric has actually occurred. Instead they argue as follows:

*3. Giving just one speech about jobs—even a State of the Union speech—is totally inadequate. Obama should have kept hammering the issue incessantly day after day—saying “jobs jobs jobs” again and again.*

The problem with this argument is that this is, in fact, exactly what Obama’s has done ever since he was elected. People are largely unaware of his advocacy because the media does not report it.

Here is how the *Washington Post* describes it<sup>4</sup>:

With trips that began two months after he took office, President Obama has devoted more than half of his out-of-town private-business visits to promoting a single industry: clean technology, which the president says will lead the nation back to economic prosperity...

He praised workers for “helping to point the way” to a cleaner future while visiting a Charlotte company that makes an electric-car battery component. In Reno, NV, in April, he lauded a start-up for “growing by leaps and bounds” as it markets a machine that converts waste heat into electricity...

In all, Obama has visited 22 clean-tech projects on 19 separate trips, all emphasizing economic recovery and a \$90 billion stimulus program to promote energy independence. The president has underscored his support by singling out specific companies in speeches and White House radio addresses.

It is difficult to imagine a much more consistent and continued use of the “bully pulpit” and yet there has been virtually no visible change in the national discussion of clean energy. If the extended use of the “bully pulpit” actually had any solid, measurable level of influence on public opinion at all, there should have been some observable change.

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obamas-focus-on-visiting-clean-tech-companies-raises-questions/2011/06/24/AGSFu9kH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obamas-focus-on-visiting-clean-tech-companies-raises-questions/2011/06/24/AGSFu9kH_story.html)

Obama has, in fact, devoted a very substantial amount of time to saying “jobs, jobs, jobs” in speeches, radio addresses and so on but has been unable to force the media to give his actions significant coverage. It is hard to believe that devoting even more time to additional photo ops and speeches on the subject—all of them similarly ignored by the media—would have made any substantial difference in public opinion.

The problem that Obama or any progressive president now faces is that this lack of media coverage of the planned “photo ops” and media events presidents seek to use to communicate their message has in recent years become a firmly established feature of current American news. The media will generally devote one news cycle to reporting a new presidential address on a major national issue but they will then reduce their coverage to almost zero for a second or third repetition of the same message. Even local media will often ignore Presidential speeches in their area if the speeches simply repeat familiar talking points. The days when presidential ribbon-cuttings were front page news in local newspapers and top stories on local TV are now firmly part of the past.

### **Was 2011 Already Too Late?**

Proponents of the bully pulpit notion, however, do not generally take this into account. Rather, they argue the following:

*4. By 2011 it was already too late. Obama was completely discredited by his previous compromises of progressive goals. If Obama had started using the bully pulpit when he still had strong popular support, he could have successfully controlled the national debate.*

The problem with this argument is that even before the major progressive disenchantment with Obama occurred he still was not able to successfully use the bully pulpit to transform public opinion. One of the most dramatic presidential uses of the bully pulpit in recent memory, in fact, occurred in February 2010 when Obama called the Congressional Republicans to the White house to discuss their concerns about his health care bill. It was an extremely dramatic event, it showcased Obama as the key player, it was widely televised and discussed—and it had no significant long-lasting effect on public opinion. Within a few weeks after the meeting, **public opinion had settled down**<sup>5</sup> within a few percentage points of the level that it had been immediately before the meeting and at which it remains today.

### **Is Obama too Cool and Aloof?**

The proponents of the bully pulpit notion generally dismiss the obstacles presented by the way the media functions today as unimportant. Instead, they turn to the following:

*5. The fundamental problem with Obama is that he’s too cool and aloof—that’s why he can’t successfully use the bully pulpit to win support for progressive positions. A passionate, charismatic progressive, on the other hand, could win widespread popular support with ease.*

The problem with this argument is that for the last 40 years exactly the same thing has been said about every single Democratic candidate for President except Bill Clinton.

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<sup>5</sup>[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/30/healthplan\\_n\\_725503.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/30/healthplan_n_725503.html)

Just look at the list: Eugene McCarthy (1968) George McGovern (1972) Jimmy Carter (1980) Walter Mondale (1984) Mike Dukakis (1988) Al Gore (2000) John Kerry (2004). Every single one of these candidates was described again and again in analyses as too cold and aloof to excite ordinary Americans. Every single one.

At the same time there has been the simultaneous failure of every full-throated, macho progressive populist of the last 40 years to win sufficient national support to win a presidential nomination. The reason is consistently described as being the result of each one having some absolutely unique, specific flaw that prevented them from becoming the progressive messiah. Again, look at the list: Fred Harris (1976), Edward Kennedy (1980), Jessie Jackson (1984-1988), Ralph Nader (1996-2000), Howard Dean (2004), John Edwards (2008). In each case some unique and idiosyncratic factor is presented (e.g. Chappaquiddick, racism, third party candidacy, “the scream”, looking too “slick”, etc.) for why none these individuals could win widespread public support for their uncompromising progressive message.

And it is exactly the same story with all of the solid progressives of today. Somehow Dennis Kucinich, Bernie Sanders, Alan Grayson and each of the 70 odd members of the progressive caucus are all somehow “just not quite the right candidate” to be able to successfully use the national bully pulpit provided by a presidential campaign to launch a full-throated, uncompromising progressive campaign.

At what point do we begin to accept that this is just an implausibly long string of bad luck—that almost every single Democratic candidate for last 40 years has turned out to be too cool and aloof to properly use the bully pulpit and every single potential progressive champion since the 1970’s has turned out to suffer from some utterly unique flaw that prevents him or her from using the smaller but still powerful bully pulpit of a presidential campaign to mobilize a progressive majority? At what point do we begin to accept that this line of argument really constitutes a series of after the fact rationalizations to protect the notion of an all-powerful bully pulpit and not a serious empirical analysis.

Yet the advocates of the bully pulpit view do not accept this. They invariably turn to pointing to inspirational leaders of the past such as John or Bobby Kennedy or the late Senator Paul Wellstone as proof that progressive leaders can indeed use the bully pulpit to transform public opinion.

It is not an accident that the leaders who are cited are invariably dead and, in the case of the three above, were struck down before they could fully demonstrate their abilities. Their tragically interrupted lives allow them to be used as the basis for entirely hypothetical arguments about what they might have been able to do if they had lived—arguments that can never be tested or disproved.

Instead of continuing with this essentially endless series of rationalizations, it is now time to simply admit that the bully pulpit is not a magic wand. When people say “*if Obama would just use the bully pulpit he could transform the national debate*” they are saying something that has no more empirical support than such alternatives as saying “*If Obama just did everything Paul Krugman told him to do he could transform the national debate*” or “*If Obama just hired a top drama coach to help him show more emotion he could transform the national debate*” or “*If Obama threatened to throw all the corporate presidents in jail if they*

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*did not create jobs immediately he could transform the national debate.”* All of these ideas are theoretically possible but none appears like a seriously plausible alternative. The bully pulpit notion is basically no different.

The truth is that the bully pulpit notion has become a convenient way to attribute all of the obstacles and problems progressives face to one single, simple cause—the fecklessness, cowardice or ideological centrism of the president and elected Democrats. The view is extremely popular among progressives because it reduces the complicated challenge of winning majority support for progressive views to a simple matter of waiting for the right individual to come along and wave the magic wand—and excoriating every existing president as a failure when he proves unable to do so.

But it is now time to face the fact: the statement that *“if Obama would just use the bully pulpit he could transform the national debate”* is not a conclusion based on data; it is an incantation based on magical thinking. To convince yourself of this, just replace the words *“the bully pulpit”* with *“Harry Potter’s magic wand”* and notice how sentence makes just as much grammatical sense—and has just as much concrete and specific empirical evidence in its support—as before.

The truth is that the “bully pulpit” is a significant but clearly limited tool of political persuasion. It is not a magic wand that can radically transform the national debate and break the hold of conservative ideology. It’s time for progressives to stop talking about it as if it were.