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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".

## THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

**THE STRATEGIC FAILURES THIS SUMMER WERE THE COMBINED RESULT OF THREE DIFFERENT MISTAKES, NOT JUST ONE. THEY INVOLVE MORE THAN JUST THE HEALTH CARE CAMPAIGN AND REQUIRE A COHERENT, MULTI-PRONGED DEMOCRATIC STRATEGY TO CORRECT.**

*BY JAMES VEGA*

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*By James Vega*

Three of the critical mistakes that led to the setbacks in the campaign for health care reform this summer actually preceded the launch of the health care campaign itself and were not the direct result of the specific legislative and political strategies the administration employed. They were rooted in decisions made in the first month or two after Obama took office.

They were:

1. A failure to create a clearly defined “core” message expressing Obama’s basic agenda and general philosophy of government.
2. A failure to immediately begin organizing an effective mass mobilization for that agenda
3. A failure to begin building ongoing social and cultural community institutions to support that agenda

There were understandable reasons why these failures of strategy occurred and why they were in significant measure unavoidable — Obama took office in the most chaotic economic circumstances of any president since the Great Depression. The point is not to assign blame but rather to accurately identify the critical tasks that have still not been accomplished and to develop a strategy for achieving them

## **Introduction**

On inauguration day, Obama began his term amid the most dramatic expression of grass roots enthusiasm for a president in living memory — an unprecedented groundswell of support not just from African-Americans but from an extremely broad coalition of the young, the urban, the educated and other groups. The masses of people who traveled to Washington on January 20th or who gathered in other places across the country to celebrate Obama’s inauguration reflected a popular energy and degree of identification with a political figure and a political campaign that had not been previously exhibited since the Roosevelt era.

Within a short time, however, the widely shared feeling that the Obama campaign had not just been a standard political campaign but rather the dramatic beginning of a dynamic mass social movement began to sharply decline. By the time the April 15<sup>th</sup> “tea parties” rolled around there was barely any sign of spontaneous and energetic grass roots activity among Democrats — there was no nationwide outpouring of local community social activities like “support Obama” rock concerts, street parties, theme evenings at restaurants and clubs or special events to draw people together on an ongoing informal basis. There was no wide viral promotion of new post-election symbols like buttons, tea shirts or bumper stickers carrying forward the “Yes We Can” spirit and linking it to an emerging social movement organized around an agenda

for change. There were no tables at shopping centers, people handing out leaflets on street corners or new post-election pro-Obama signs on lawns or lampposts or bulletin boards.

As long time grass-roots organizer Marshall Gans and Peter Drier noted in a *Washington Post* op-ed<sup>1</sup>:

Once in office, the President moved quickly, announcing one ambitious legislative objective after another. But instead of launching a parallel strategy to mobilize supporters, most progressive organizations and Organizing for America — the group created to organize Obama’s former campaign volunteers — failed to keep up.... Organizing for America, for example, encouraged Obama’s supporters to work on local community service projects, such as helping homeless shelters and tutoring children. That’s fine, but it’s not the way to pass reform legislation...

Meanwhile, as the President’s agenda emerged, his former campaign volunteers and the advocacy groups turned to politics as usual: the insider tactics of e-mails, phone calls and meetings with members of Congress. Some groups — hoping to go toe-to-toe with the well-funded business-backed opposition — launched expensive TV and radio ad campaigns in key states to pressure conservative Democrats. Lobbying and advertising are necessary, but they have never been sufficient to defeat powerful corporate interests.

The DNC did send out letters. Organizing for America did invite its members to meet in small groups and gatherings and reminded the people on its e-mail lists to visit the OFA website. But the energy and scale of these efforts were deliberately low-key. The DNC letters were in essence standard fundraising appeals and the OFA events were quite specifically designed as “insider” activities for loyal supporters and not as energetic outreach to the general public.

The conservative opposition to Obama’s agenda, on the other hand, created a unique public event in the April 15<sup>th</sup> Tea Parties, developed a new nationwide set of internet-based social networks and widely popularized a broad ideological framework and perspective with which to attack the entire Obama agenda and administration — the notion that the individual elements of the Obama agenda were actually part of a general movement toward “a government takeover”, “socialism” or “fascism” and represented an aggressive attack on traditional American values and institutions.

Democrats responded to this threat with an uncoordinated mixture of sputtering outrage, bemused ridicule and point by point refutation of more specific accusations. The charge of “socialism” seemed so absurd that a thoughtful attempt to refute it seemed unnecessary. There was no serious national communications strategy devised to clearly answer the simple but vital question “OK, if the Democratic agenda is not socialism or “government takeover” then exactly what is it?”

This underlying Democratic weakness at the levels of both communications strategy and grass roots organizing led directly to the near-total breakdown during August. The opponents of health care reform were mobilized, organized, armed with basic talking points and backed by professional communications and PR firms. Grass-roots Democrats were looking around in vain for someone to offer leadership and direction.

By late in the third week of August the Democrats had cobbled together a sufficient response to meet the conservative offensive and slow the media narrative of massive public opposition to Democratic plans. But the substantial slide in Obama's job approval left the campaign for health care reform substantially weaker than it had been in the spring.

At this point, the urgent need is not only for short-term organizing to regain the initiative on health care reform but also for longer range efforts to build a nationwide movement that revives the "Yes We Can" spirit of Jan 20th and transforms it into a sustained and active social movement to support the overall Democratic agenda. To do this Dems need to do three things.

1. Develop one simple, standardized "core" message that clearly defines the basic goals — as well as the limits — of Obama's agenda.
2. Develop a deeply committed and highly organized group of volunteers specifically dedicated to advocating that core message in meetings and discussions wherever they occur.
3. Develop local activities that can mature into enduring local community social and cultural institutions — institutions that can support a renewed "Yes We Can" movement and allow it to grow.

## **1. Dems must develop a "core" message about Obama's agenda**

At this point there is no clearly defined set of short "official" statements that explicitly list the major reforms Obama seeks and that express his basic philosophy of government. The opposition has exploited the absence of such materials to assert whatever it pleases about the "real" Obama agenda without having to debate a specific set of documents formally outlining Obama's actual positions.

This material can be packaged in a set of one page statements that assert Obama's three signature reforms — health care, energy independence and a 21<sup>st</sup> century educational system — and then clearly distinguish his agenda from "socialism," "communism" or "fascism" by asserting a series of basic principles he has expressed about his philosophy of government.

1. The administration does not seek or desire to accumulate or permanently hold ownership stakes in private companies. The government will divest itself of the ownership stakes it was compelled to take in private sector firms during the recent crisis as promptly as it is practical to do so.
2. Regulation of Wall Street and the financial system has only two purposes — to protect consumers and investors from fraud and abuse and to prevent future economic crises like the one that occurred last year. There are no other political objectives behind financial regulation.
3. The level of taxes and the federal deficit will be set with the aim of returning both to the levels that existed during the Clinton administration, when real economic growth was highest and most stable.
4. Public sector programs will not be proposed unless the private sector is unable to provide a necessary service or in cases where there is insufficient competition to protect the public interest (such as with a public option for health care).

The exact language, format and presentation of these "core" materials can be crafted by media professionals and can use any of a variety of familiar political formats, from a "Bill of Rights" to

a “Statement of Philosophy” or a “Contract with America” and so on. The fundamental requirement is that these core statements must be brief and simple enough to be read out loud in a town-hall meeting as a direct and coherent response to the charge of “socialism” or “government takeover of everything”. The statements should allow supporters to hold them up and say simply:

*“This is what we Democrats actually support — it is not socialism, it is not fascism and it is not a ‘government takeover’. It is simply a common-sense series of reforms to fix important problems and make a better America.”*

Conservative opponents, of course will simply dismiss such materials as nothing more than “a pack of lies”, but conservatives are emphatically not the intended audience. On the contrary, the target audiences for the core materials are the following:

1. The media itself — in today’s “he said-she said” media coverage of meetings and protests, accusations of “socialism”, fascism” or “big government takeover” can only be effectively balanced if pro-Obama forces are equally united around a single, brief, agreed-upon sound-bite — such as promoting “The Democratic agenda for Sensible Reform” , “The Democratic Philosophy of Government” or some other tagline — one that obliges the media to report the existence of a core message around which the pro-Obama forces are united. To fit the rigid “he said-she said” format most mainstream news reporting now follows, reporters will have to film and interview advocates of reform referring to and reciting key phrases from the core documents in order to balance the assertions of the opponents. This is important because, from the perspective of media strategy, one of the key problems the Democrats had this summer was that the opponents of reform had clear 10 second anti-reform “sound-bites” ready for the cameras while the Democrats had 50 page position papers and several versions of a 1,000 page bill.
2. The Unconvinced: there is large group of non-ideological but profoundly suspicious and skeptical voters — not only regarding the need for health care reform but of all of Obama’s agenda. In a *Washington Post* column, E.J. Dionne<sup>2</sup> noted how important this largely ignored middle group was in the health care town halls:

“Rep. Tom Perriello divided the crowds at the 17 town halls he had held to that point in his largely rural Virginia district into three groups: conservatives, for whom the health-care battle is “about big government, socialism and all that”; the left, for whom “it’s about corporate accountability”; and a “middle” for whom “it’s about health care costs” and the problems with their coverage.” Rep. Mary Jo Kilroy, whose district includes Columbus, Ohio said, “I got serious questions, I got hostile questions, I got questions about how this would work, I got questions about how much it will cost. I also got a lot of comments from people who said it’s important for their families and businesses to get health-care reform.”

This critical middle group is strongly influenced by what they observe in the flow of the debate. This was illustrated by the significant changes in attitude that were reflected in the focus groups conducted by D-Corps after *President Obama’s speech*.<sup>3</sup> For this group of voters the absence of a specifically defined (and therefore limited rather than unbounded) set of reforms and a clear philosophy of government to balance the conservative accusations is inherently troubling. A set of core documents

will not by itself convince these voters, but will establish that there is indeed a coherent Democratic answer to the broad challenges of the conservative critics. Without this, to unconvinced voters, the debate often appears to be a contest between wonky Democrats defending specific programs and policies on the one side and Republicans offering broad expressions of concern and skepticism about the proper role of government, spending, deficits and social programs on the other. This leaves the undecided voters confronted with incompatible arguments and therefore unable to reach a firm conclusion.

Without a core message, Democrats will continually be at a disadvantage in debates with conservative critics. With such a message, they will at least be debating on a level playing field.

## **2. Dems must develop a deeply committed and highly organized group of volunteers specifically dedicated to representing and advocating the core message.**

Democrats must face the unpleasant reality that from now on any significant local or national political meeting anywhere in America is going to be attended by conservative activists who are mobilized and directed there through a pyramid of online social networks. At the apex of this pyramid is Freedomworks and directly below it is a second tier of a dozen other lobbying organizations.

Immediately after the April 15<sup>th</sup> Tea Parties it appeared that the local activists who had been mobilized might attempt to form permanent “bottom-up” grass-roots committees in communities across the country. Instead, the rather different framework that has emerged is a kind of permanent “on-call” cadre of activists across the country — individuals who are willing to download talking points and slogans from the online social networks and be directed to local meetings in their area or to national protests in Washington D.C.

The simple but unpleasant fact is that in every one of these local political town halls or other community meetings that is not contested, the conservative point of view will dominate. Therefore, Democrats have no choice but to build their own version of this kind of online social organization — a “Democratic Activist Corps” or corps of “Democratic Minutemen” — dedicated activists with a similar “on-call” capability.

At first glance this would appear to be the responsibility of Organizing for America, but in fact, for two reasons, that organization is actually not well suited to manage this task.

First, Organizing for America cannot avoid following a very broad, “big tent” approach because of the huge, extremely heterogeneous group of people in its database. In order to avoid schisms and conflict among its members, it must stick to the most elementary and widely shared views. This is reflected in the rather bland slogans it recommends e.g. “Health Insurance Reform Now: Let’s Get It Done!”, “Stand up for Reform”, “Standing Together for Health Insurance Reform.”

Second, because it is directly connected to the DNC and the Obama administration, OFA has to conduct itself in a way that does not reflect negatively on Obama. This makes it necessarily very cautious and highly averse to direct conflict and confrontation. This is reflected in its preference for organizing what are essentially non-confrontational “pep rallies” of its supporters rather than directing them to directly engage and challenge opponents of reform.

Given the huge, ten million member e-mail base of OFA, these choices are not necessarily wrong. OFA is metaphorically speaking a political oil tanker, able to move and turn only very gradually and cautiously. But as a result of these two characteristics it is impractical to expect an organization like OFA to be able to successfully direct a Democratic counterpart to a fierce and combative organization like Freedomworks that has complete freedom of action. It is therefore preferable to organize a “Democratic Activist” or “Democratic Minutemen” network outside the formal structure of government or the DNC, just as Freedomworks and the other conservative online activist groups have done.

Although the issue agenda of such an organization will be the same as the official Democratic organizations, to be effective its ethos must more closely resemble that of a passionate social movement and its staff must be composed of people with the background and perspective of union or civil rights organizers — men and women with both the passion and the experience to tackle a bitter, well-financed and determined adversary.

Freedomworks has a 14 person Washington staff, six full-time field coordinators or state directors and an annual budget of 8 million dollars. Its economic model is based on obtaining contributions from the industries that derive benefits from its grass-roots organizing activities. To effectively compete with this, Democratic organizations like unions, environmental and other social issue groups, professional associations and similar pro-democratic forces will need to contribute substantial in-kind resources — of staff time, office space, supplies and technical support — to a Democratic Activist Corps of this kind. Even with significant in-kind support, however, a core of paid, full-time employees and a significant operating budget will still be needed.

The key demographic target for an “on call” activist network of this kind will be mid-sized, second and third tier cities and towns. The major American cities and urban areas already have more than sufficient pro-democratic organizations and social networks to mobilize activists when necessary for meetings, marches, demonstrations and so on. At the other end of the spectrum, modern conservatism is disproportionately concentrated in small towns, urban fringes and rural areas — so much so that in many cases any effective competition is simply impractical. It is in the mid-sized cities and towns across America where significant numbers of Democrats live but where there are relatively weak pro-Democratic organizations and institutions that an online social network of committed Democratic activists could make a substantial difference.

The April 15<sup>th</sup> tea party movement claimed that they held events in over 1,000 cities and towns and Nate Silver documented events in around six or eight hundred. Because of the more concentrated geographic distribution of the Democratic coalition this project can aim to achieve lower numerical targets. The project should, however, set clear timetables for creating “on-call” networks in first 50, then 100, and ultimately about 200 smaller U.S. cities and medium-sized towns. If possible, at least the first two and preferably all three of these goals should be achieved before the 2010 elections.

Also, by next spring, some of these Democratic minutemen will also need to receive a certain amount of training in non-violent methods because by that time it is virtually certain that there will be young right-wing “skinheads” and other quasi-military groups openly participating in anti-Obama demonstrations. The strategy of intimidation and physical aggression employed by such groups can best be defeated by disciplined non-violent tactics)

### 3. Develop local activities that can evolve into enduring local community social and cultural institutions.

Immediately after Obama's inauguration, there was a widespread sigh of relief and a collapse into exhaustion among huge number of Obama's supporters. Responding to this sentiment, and occupied with the transition, the DNC and OFA made relatively few attempts to organize directly "political" activities and events or to build a formal network of "real-world" local organizations in the first several months of the Obama administration. The general view was that "everyone needs a break."

This, however, reflects a severely limited definition of what constitutes "political" activity. In democratic countries around the world many political parties routinely support a wide range of grass-roots community activities that are not explicitly "political" but which play a significant role in maintaining their political support. They sponsor local soccer teams, hold street fairs, run youth clubs, manage pool halls, arrange holiday trips and organize hobby groups. Small businesses that support the parties put permanent banners in their windows and build their customer base around a sense of community cultural loyalty to the political party.

During 2008, the Obama campaign began to evolve in this direction. The "Yes We Can" campaign took on characteristics of a social movement rather than just a traditional political campaign. The explosion of creativity expressed in music, art, videos and other media were inspired by Obama but reflected more than simply a campaign to elect an individual candidate. There was a clear feeling that Obama represented a cultural movement of the young rather than the old, of the urban, hip and educated rather than the small town and traditional. The Obama campaign became a broad social movement united by a common outlook, sensibility and identity. The Republicans were the past and the Democrats were the future.

It is now vital that Democrats reignite this spirit and energy and find the ways to carry it into daily community life. To be specific the Democratic community needs to launch a renewed "Yes We Can" movement — not a narrowly "political" campaign to support Obama's specific proposals, but a broad cultural response to the negativity, nihilism and divisive "real America" chauvinism of the Republicans. It must express an outlook and perspective that is based on hope for the future and openness to change.

There are two different sub-groups to whom this must be addressed — Obama's natural constituencies and the broader group of "persuadable" voters who are open to his message. Each requires a distinct approach.

The first sub-group is Obama's natural constituencies and social environments:

- **College campuses and urban America** — Some key steps in building a revitalized "Yes We Can" movement include building rapport with rock bands and DJ's (e.g. by providing free items like specially developed high-quality designer clothing), sponsoring free rock concerts and art shows, Setting up special film screenings, book signings and neighborhood street fairs, engaging with the major social networks through art and music as well as narrowly "political" discussion and sponsoring sports teams in urban marathons, bicycle races, skateboarding and roller skating events.
- **Stores and businesses** (e.g. coffee houses, bicycle shops, environmentally friendly products stores, independent bookstores) — some key steps include encouraging

“Yes We Can” sales days, happy hours, special events and neighborhood parties and developing business-connected give-away “goodies” for display and distribution (coffee cups, chocolates, tire gauges, natural soaps).

- ***Ethnic, political, social and community organizations.*** Some key steps include piggybacking on existing events and activities, incorporating “Yes We Can” motifs into ongoing programs and participating in organization-sponsored volunteer activities under a “Yes We Can” umbrella.

The first step in this process is to organize a major, coordinated re-launch of the “Yes We Can” campaign. Such a re-launch could begin with a national competition to create a comprehensive set of new music, new graphics, new logos, new art, new videos new slogans, new t-shirts and posters for a renewed “Yes We Can” campaign. Such a contest can have dozens of awards for the best entries in specific genres (posters, videos, music etc.) and within specific states. The competition could be planned to culminate in a major live and online event with top stars, music and the awarding of serious prizes.

The success of a renewed “Yes We Can” campaign would ultimately depend on its generating ongoing “bottom-up” spontaneous grass-roots activity. There could be a closer ongoing connection with OFA and the DNC than would be advisable with the “Democratic Minutemen”, but the campaign should still not be administratively controlled by any official Democratic organization. Rather the renewed “Yes We Can” campaign should be loosely coordinated by a broad voluntary coalition of well-known figures in music and popular culture following the models of the “Live Aid”, “Farm Aid” and “We are the World” campaigns. In all of these cases a few well-known and passionately committed individuals took the lead in organizing their peers around a social issue campaign and stitched together an informal steering committee structure to make decisions.

The second sub-group a renewed “Yes We Can” campaign would need to target is the more open-minded, moderate voters in “red state” America

- Businessmen and women
- Blue-collar workers
- Religious voters
- Small town voters
- Southerners

Despite the media images and clichés, not all voters in these categories are conservative. On the contrary, depending on the specific issue as many as half or more may actually be relatively “moderate” and open to Democratic candidates and to messages that are framed in the language and concepts of their broad cultural perspective. The 2006 election demonstrated that there are substantial numbers of “red state” voters who can be won by “heartland Democrats.”

In the current situation — in which Obama is struggling against declining poll numbers and stiff opposition — imagining an outreach campaign to this group may seem totally impractical. But such a campaign cannot be ignored until late in 2011 if it is to have any chance of influencing the election in 2012.

## Conclusion

The predictable first reaction to a set of proposals of this kind is to argue that initiatives of this nature are important but must be postponed until the immediate challenge of passing a health care reform package is successfully completed.

This reaction is understandable but wrong. The setbacks to the health care campaign that occurred in August were in significant measure the result of the failure to begin systematic long-term organizing in January. By the time a health care reform package is passed this winter, new challenges will have already emerged that seem equally urgent and which seem to offer equally compelling reasons to delay long-term organizing once again. The result is a vicious cycle in which systematic long-term organizing never gets done.

Consider a simple and somewhat ironic fact: it is today much more difficult to launch a long-term campaign of this nature than it would have been in January when Obama's popularity was at its peak and grass-roots enthusiasm was still high. Equally, six or nine months from now, it will in all probability be harder to launch such a campaign than it is today. At that time, hindsight will clearly suggest that September 2009 would have been a much more propitious time to begin such a campaign than "now" — whenever "now" happens to be.

The major problems that emerged for the health care reform campaign in August were severe and require careful rethinking of Democratic strategy. But the problems are not limited to the specifics of health care as an issue or the legislative strategy that was chosen to enact a bill. The setbacks also exposed profound weaknesses in the basic Democratic message strategy and in the strategies for mobilizing mass support and for building long-term pro-Democratic community institutions.

These problems affect the foundation of every future legislative campaign and every future election. Democrats must begin now to remedy the weaknesses exposed by this summer's setbacks in the struggle for health care reform.

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1 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/28/AR2009082801817.html>

2 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/02/AR2009090202858.html>

3. <http://www.democracycorps.com/focus/2009/09/obama%E2%80%99s-speech-moves-swing-voters-to-support-reform/>