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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

IMPROVING THE WAY DEMOCRATS DISCUSS POLITICAL STRATEGY

LET'S FACE IT. ALL TOO OFTEN DEMOCRATS END UP JUST YELLING AT EACH OTHER WHEN THEY TRY TO DISCUSS LONG-TERM POLITICAL STRATEGY — WITH THE CHALLENGES THAT CONFRONT US, IT'S URGENT THAT WE FIGURE OUT HOW TO DO BETTER.

BY *JAMES VEGA*

A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:***Improving the Way Democrats Discuss Political Strategy***

It's no secret that the groups that compose the Democratic coalition have dramatically different perspectives on many issues. But on one key topic they do agree. Democrats—whether in the Obama administration, Congress or the nation—recognize that they face an unparalleled set of strategic challenges today. As a result, they urgently need to develop more productive ways to debate political strategy within the Democratic coalition.

The challenge is to figure out how to conduct intra-Democratic debates in a way that doesn't end up in a shouting match but rather clarifies the points of contention and achieves the maximum degree of collaboration and cooperation. Productive debates between Democrats should accomplish three objectives (1) identify the areas of agreement and common action (2) identify the issues that can be clarified or settled with data and (3) agree on ways to work together in a spirit of mutual respect in areas where there are fundamental disagreements on matters of principle.

Today, debates among Dems often accomplish none of these goals. Instead, the participants end up talking across purposes and conclude in frustrated mutual incomprehension.

There is one basic, underlying problem that is often at the root of this failure. Debates among Dems frequently do not distinguish disagreements over political principles from disagreements over political **strategy**. The result is arguments that do not genuinely engage with each other in a meaningful way.

The controversy over Rick Warren provides a good example:

On the one hand, opponents of Warren's participation in the inauguration tend to argue that his invitation is unacceptable as a matter of fundamental political principle. One of the most widely read expressions of this point of view was a [Washington Post commentary](#) by the usually rather conservative Richard Cohen.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/22/AR2008122201848.html>

...what we do not hold in common [with Warren] is the categorization of a civil rights issue—the rights of gays to be treated equally—as some sort of cranky cultural difference. For that we need moral leadership, which, on this occasion, Obama has failed to provide.

For many of these critics, Obama's choice represents a betrayal—a totally unprincipled betrayal—of the people who supported him. Here is playwright Harvey Fierstein, for example, writing in the Huffington Post.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/harvey-fierstein/throw-another-faggot-on-t_b_153155.html

President Elect Obama, your victory was made possible in no small part to the votes and wallets of the gay and lesbian community along with our supporters. Turning your back on us does not make you more mainstream American. It just makes you a coward.

In contrast, many of the most widely read defenses of Obama's choice—commentaries by Andrew Sullivan of The Atlantic and singer Melissa Etheridge, for example—do not actually disagree at all about the basic political principle involved—they fully support the right to gay marriage. Instead, their arguments in favor of allowing Warren to participate in the inauguration are based entirely on considerations of political strategy.

Here is Sullivan:

http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2008/12/taking-yes-for.html

In our hurt, we may be pushing away from a real opportunity to engage and win hearts and minds.... I think Obama is different. I think the earnestness and sincerity of his campaign, and its generational force, have given us a chance for something new, and I fear that in responding too viscerally to the Warren choice, we may be throwing something very valuable away far too prematurely.

And here is Etheridge:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-etheridge/the-choice-is-ours-now_b_152947.html

Sure, there are plenty of hateful people who will always hold on to their bigotry like a child to a blanket. But there are also good people out there, Christian and otherwise that are beginning to listen. They don't hate us, they fear change. Maybe in our anger, as we consider marches and boycotts, perhaps we can consider stretching out our hands.

Each side does briefly acknowledge that the other side is arguing on fundamentally different grounds, but only in a one or two sentence throw-away mention that is quickly dismissed. Here is Cohen:

I can understand Obama's desire to embrace constituencies that have rejected him. Evangelicals are in that category and Warren is an important evangelical leader.... [Obama says we can] "focus on those things that we hold in common as Americans". Sounds nice. But what we do not "hold in common" is the dehumanization of homosexuals. What we do not hold in common is the belief that gays are perverts who have chosen their sexual orientation on some sort of whim...

And here is Fierstein:

He can call the placing of a hate monger like Rick Warren on the world dais political healing or inclusiveness or any other nicety he'd like, but I call it pandering to the lowest instinct of the worst kind of politics.

In similar fashion, the supporters of Obama's choice generally begin by saying something along the lines of ...“I do deeply and sincerely understand the anger and frustration that the GLBT community is feeling right now”...but this is quickly followed by a “But at the same time...” followed by a discussion of political strategy.

The result is a “debate” in which neither side really “debates” the other. Neither ever directly analyzes and critically evaluates the central arguments the other is offering on its own terms. The two points of view sail passed each other with barely any contact. It is, as the cliché says, like a “dialog of the deaf.”

And the problem will only get worse. In the coming period debates of this kind will multiply because many elements of Democratic coalition—peace advocates, Latinos, young Blacks, Women, Union members—can all correctly claim that a fundamental political principle underlies their demands and that they provided significant support for Obama and therefore deserve his support in return.

What the Democrats need is a common, coherent framework for discussing these issues—a way of distinguishing arguments over the moral and political principles underlying an issue from the choice of the appropriate political strategy.

The way this can be done is by recognizing that arguments that pose “principles” against “strategy” within a political coalition can always be recast as debates between alternative political strategies. For example, in cases similar to the Rick Warren issue the two alternative political strategies underlying the debate can be defined as follows:

Strategy 1:

- a. The President's job is to represent and support the coalition that elected him.*
- b. In consequence, a strong objection by any member group of the President's electoral coalition should be sufficient to dissuade the President from including some outside person or group in a non-partisan coalition on some other specific issue.*

Strategy 2:

- a. The President's job is to build a sociologically stable majority coalition for his programs—if necessary, one that extends beyond the coalition that elected him.*
- b. In consequence, the President can and should try to build coalitions on particular issues with any individual or group that will support him on that particular issue.*

This approach redefines what appears at first to be unavoidably a vague and intractable debate between a matter of “principle” on the one hand and considerations of “strategy” on the other into a more practical and specific debate between two distinct political

strategies. The parties will still disagree, but their debate will be more narrowly and clearly focused on the practical differences between them.

One major advantage of this approach is that it allows the discussion to be conducted on a more general level than any one specific issue. Many of the same kinds of logical arguments arise over and over—for example in the demands of Democratic coalition members for Presidential support. By confronting the underlying strategic assumptions directly, any one debate helps to build a foundation for increased understanding and collaboration in future debates.

Beyond this, framing debates among Dems as representing choices between alternative political strategies has three important benefits.

1. It spurs the discussion to consider long term issues and consequences as well as more immediate ones.

One tremendous challenge Obama will face in the next four years is managing the conflicting demands of the many different groups that comprise the Democratic coalition. If all groups adopt a similar approach to the opponents of the Warren invitation, Obama will approach the 2010 and 2012 elections with a chorus of headlines declaring the anger and disappointment of group after group that supported his candidacy. Each group will perceive their own particular demands as justified, but, in combination, their challenges will create a media perception of Obama as widely unpopular and without support. This will undermine not only Obama, but the Democratic coalition in general.

2. It avoids dead-end narratives of betrayal and dependence.

There are indeed cases that can be accurately described as political betrayal—Zell Miller and Joe Lieberman’s treatment of the Democratic Party, for example. But in less extreme cases, narratives focused on the concept of “betrayal” usually represent a “lose-lose” strategy for both the President and the liberal-progressive forces. Both sides come out worse off than before. Charges of “betrayal” tend to communicate that Obama is either weak, vacillating or untrustworthy and simultaneously to suggest that liberal-progressives are isolated and unpopular failures who have been abandoned by the President.

The charge of “betrayal” is a rhetorical strategy that is used to define some particular step as totally unacceptable, but it has substantial negative long-term consequences that must be taken into consideration before unleashing it.

3. It focuses attention on the search for alternative strategies.

Political principles, by their nature, tend to be inflexible. They can be either

upheld or betrayed. Political strategies, on the other hand, are inherently flexible and always have alternatives.

A significant sector of the democratic coalition might wish that Obama embraced the first political strategy outlined above rather than the second, but once it is accepted that Obama's decision on the Rick Warren issue actually represented an application of the second political strategy it immediately suggests a variety of alternative progressive strategies that can work in tandem with Obama's chosen political approach rather than across purposes with it.

In fact, it is striking that, while advocates of gay marriage have widely asserted the analogy of their demands to the civil rights movement of the 1960's, there is stunningly little discussion of the actual strategy and tactics that the civil rights movement employed to achieve its victories—victories which were achieved without the support of the White House until the very final stages of passing legislation. The Rev. Mel White, in his 2006 book, *Religion Gone Bad*, devotes a chapter to applying the broad philosophic approach of Martin Luther King to the struggles of the GLBT community. But there has been almost no analysis of more detailed strategies (what military strategists call the "operational" and "tactical" levels of strategy) for achieving social change. In no small measure this is due to the failure to focus on political strategy rather than simply political principles.

For many grass-roots issue groups reconceptualizing key debates in this way—as choices between political strategies rather than as simply matters of right and wrong—requires an unfamiliar broadening of perspective—a supplementing of their current "front line" point of view with a longer-range strategic view as well.

It is true that a "front-line" point of view is the natural and indeed proper perspective for liberal-progressive groups dedicated to a social cause. It is source of their passion, their energy and their capacity for driving needed social progress. But in the extraordinarily complex current conditions the democratic coalition faces today, it is not by itself sufficient.

There is a rather striking military analogy that brings this more clearly into focus. Among military historians there is a common view that "military strategy" itself, as a distinct subject and body of knowledge, only really began when generals stopped leading their troops into battle from the front and remained instead in a command tent where they could direct and oversee the battle.

In traditional warfare generals were expected to charge at the head of their troops to set an example of bravery and complete confidence that the gods favored their victory. Failure to do so was seen as evidence of cowardice and uncertainty. But the downside was that a general thus engaged lost all control over the battle. From a vantage point above the battle, a general can order reserves to attack a weak point that appears in the enemy's lines, or reinforce a break in his own forces or order withdrawals quickly to prevent unnecessary losses.

By the Roman era, armies led in this way became so consistently superior to those still led from the front that they were routinely expected to be able to defeat forces two or three times their size, even as their opponents continued to deride their generals as cowards and vacillators.

Political strategy is profoundly different from military strategy but there is a relevant parallel. With the unprecedented challenges facing the Obama administration, the members of the Democratic coalition do not have the luxury of a narrow focus on only their own specific and immediate issues and demands. They must also consider the broader and longer-range implications of their actions and seek to coordinate their strategy with the rest of the Democratic coalition. In order to do this they must begin to visualize their intra-party differences as debates over long-term political strategy rather than simply as conflicts between specific issues of right and wrong.