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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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BUT NOT BECAUSE OBAMA
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BY JAMES VEGA

TDS STRATEGY MEMO – PROGRESSIVES NEED AN INDEPENDENT MOVEMENT, BUT NOT BECAUSE OBAMA “FAILED” OR “BETRAYED” THEM. PROGRESS ALWAYS REQUIRES AN ACTIVE GRASS-ROOTS MOVEMENT AND THE LACK OF ONE FOR THE LAST 30 YEARS IS THE KEY CAUSE OF PROGRESSIVE “FAILURES” AND “DEFEATS”

By James Vega

In recent days an important discussion has emerged among progressives about the proper strategy for the progressive movement. As Bill Scher, the Online Campaign Manager of the Campaign for America’s Future described it:

“The progressive community is somewhat divided between the folks who think Obama is doing everything he can against a broken political system and the folks that think he’s not doing enough, and that we need an independent force to push him....Are we the wingman of the Obama Administration or an outside pressure force?”

This question was expected to generate a spirited debate among progressives at the America’s Future Now conference held in Washington this week but, interestingly, the anticipated conflict did not materialize. Instead, there was a widespread consensus that—regardless of their specific evaluation of Obama—progressives were agreed on the need to build an independent movement capable of both supporting or challenging the administration as any particular case required.

As AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka put it, progressives need to be a “troublesome ally” of Obama. Campaign for America’s future co-director Robert Borosage described it as being willing to go “off the reservation” and organize independently.

The general agreement on the urgent need to build a vastly strengthened, independent progressive movement—regardless of one’s precise view of the Obama administration—reflected an extremely wide general consensus among progressive bloggers, organizational leaders and grass-roots activists across the country. Even progressives who are very firm and enthusiastic supporters of Obama did not see support for an enhanced, independent progressive movement as representing a conflict with their generally positive assessment of the Administration.

Yet, although this support for an independent progressive movement would appear to represent a distancing of progressives from Obama, in two critical respects the movement remains excessively defined—and limited—by the way it relates to him and his administration. The progressive discussion is based on two underlying assumptions—both of which need to be re-examined:

The first assumption is that, in some sense, it is the weaknesses or failures of the Obama administration that have created the urgent need for progressives to build an independent progressive movement. In many commentaries a substantial list of disappointments or compromises by the Administration are offered as the primary evidence that an independent movement is necessary.

There are two problems with this way of framing the issue. First, taken to its logical conclusion, this kind of argument suggests that an independent progressive movement might in some circumstances actually be unnecessary—if Obama had just kept a sufficient number of his campaign promises, progressives would be able to wholeheartedly support him and an independent progressive movement would not be required. Second, it leads both Obama and progressives to become perceived and defined as failures—Obama for not living up to his campaign rhetoric and progressives for not being able to make him do so.

The second assumption is that the agenda of the progressive movement will continue to be defined primarily in relation to Obama's political and legislative objectives. The progressive position will represent a challenge from the left, but it will still be framed as a response to the administration's initiatives rather than presented on its own terms and in relation to its own long-range objectives.

This is too narrow an agenda for an independent mass movement—a social movement needs a set of objectives larger than the goals and initiatives of any single administration.

These two assumptions will impede and limit the effectiveness of the effort to build an independent progressive movement. They need to be reconsidered and revised.

It is the absence of an energized grass-roots mass movement—and not Barack Obama—that has profoundly weakened progressivism.

A striking feature of the “Obama as a disappointment to progressives” commentaries is that, in the vast majority of cases, they do not include a recognition of an absolutely fundamental political reality—the fact that for the last three or four decades there has not been a broad national grass-roots social movement underlying the efforts of progressive candidates and progressive lobbyists in D.C. and that this itself has been one of the major sources of progressive weakness.

To visualize how absolutely crucial the absence of a major grass-roots social movement has been, try a simple thought experiment: imagine that there had not been a successful trade union movement in the 1930's or Civil Rights Movement in the 60's. Imagine that, although industrial workers and African-Americans had remained profoundly discontented, these discontents did not successfully develop into effective national mass movements.

Had this occurred, there is no doubt that individual progressives would still have tried to struggle for social reforms. Some would have joined any Democratic administration, trying to achieve change from within. Others would have sought a more independent stance, working outside Democratic presidential administrations or the Democratic Party as a whole. But regardless of their strategy or the success of their efforts, several consequences would have been inevitable:

- Without a mass social movement, there would have been no grass-roots organizers, no community level involvement in struggles and no national waves of strikes and demonstrations in towns and cities across the country. Without these dramatic conflicts which vividly symbolized the issues at stake and defined the injustice that was being challenged, the struggle for progressive reforms would have been almost entirely conducted in Washington and focused on the struggle over complex legislative bills and proposals that appeared mysterious and to a large degree abstract and remote from the daily life of most Americans.

- Without an active social movement, there would have been no “movement spirit” (e.g. songs like “Which Side Are You On” and “We Shall Overcome”), no movement “culture” (e.g. union papers and Sunday civil rights sermons in Black churches), no movement institutions (e.g. local union halls and civil rights freedom schools,), no movement traditions (e.g. labor day rallies and stories of victories and defeats recited and recounted in speeches and lectures) and, in general, no larger transformation of political consciousness.
- In election years, there would have been no door to door “get out the vote” canvassing by union and civil rights workers and no union locals or Black churches donating money and otherwise supporting progressive candidates for office.

The absence of all these underpinnings would have profoundly weakened the Democratic Party and the position of progressives in Washington. It might have prevented the election of Democrats like Harry Truman in 1948 and John Kennedy in 1960 and would have sharply reduced the scope of any social reforms that might have been enacted during the New Deal and Great Society.

In reality, of course, the trade union and civil rights movements did indeed succeed and go on to play a vital role in supporting the Democratic Party and progressive legislation in the New Deal and Kennedy/Johnson eras. But for the last three or four decades, in contrast, progressive Democrats have not been undergirded by any major mass social movements. As a result, progressive groups have become more and more oriented toward Washington and lobbying rather than grass-roots organizing. They have done their best under the circumstances, but the lack of a major mass social movement beneath them has inevitably made their efforts far less powerful and effective than they would otherwise have been. From the time of the Carter Administration, progressive Democrats have been widely and successfully caricatured as a minority group of “limousine liberals”, educated radicals/feminists/environmentalists from Harvard and Hollywood, supported only by a hard core of consistently Democratic Black and trade union voters left over from the previous eras of successful social struggle.

This is an underlying social reality that is absolutely unrelated to Barack Obama as an individual or his particular political strategy. The problem would have been as bad—or worse—had Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, John Kerry or Howard Dean been elected instead.

In fact, to a significant degree the current progressive tendency to see Obama as the source of progressives’ weakness is rooted in the fact that for a brief period during the 2008 campaign Obama seemed to dramatically transcend this fundamental limitation. His presidential campaign was organized more like a social movement than a traditional political campaign. He ran as a progressive leader mobilizing a mass movement of young, urban, diverse voters rather than as a conventional candidate for office. He offered visionary goals—a “Yes We Can” movement and a long term view. He championed a basic change in outlook and philosophy. For a moment, his campaign was a social movement more than a candidacy.

Yet upon becoming president, he immediately switched to an approach that all sides in the current debate would agree can be described as “cautious”, “centrist”, “consensus-building” or “moderate”—in both procedural and substantive terms.

Obama's defenders quite correctly note that this is exactly what he said he would do. At many points in the campaign he clearly asserted that, if elected, he would govern as a consensus-seeking, cautious reformer and not as a militant, crusading progressive firebrand.

But this is scant comfort to the many progressives who were attracted by the social movement character of his presidential campaign. They now acutely feel they have been marginalized or even "defeated" or "betrayed" in the struggle to influence Obama's agenda in a truly progressive direction. They are deeply disappointed because Obama is not governing as the robust progressive leader of the 2008 campaign.

On one level progressives do clearly recognize that Obama could not realistically continue to play exactly the same campaign role of visionary movement leader once he took office and was faced with the practical challenges of governing. But despite this, the current debate remains basically locked in the "progressives betrayed and "defeated" mindset and political framing that emerged almost immediately after his election.

This narrative generates a destructive "lose-lose" scenario—one that serves the interests of neither progressives nor beltway centrists. Because Obama cannot champion a progressive agenda robust and comprehensive enough to live up to his campaign image, he becomes defined as "betraying" progressives. At the same time progressives end up defining themselves as "defeated" in their attempts to push him to the left. The result is a progressive sense of failure and disappointment and a media image of Obama as under attack from his left as well as his right. It is this combination that seems to help explain and justify the current "enthusiasm gap" among Obama's 2008 supporters.

How can progressives escape this vicious cycle?

A new approach must start with realization that Obama cannot play the role of the de-facto leader of the progressive movement that he temporarily assumed during the 2008 campaign. Had Obama lost his campaign for the presidency, it is conceivable that he might have chosen to return to this role. As president, it is impossible.

One possibility is for progressives to seek a different national figure to become the new standard-bearer for the progressive movement, an individual who could play Martin Luther King to Obama's Lyndon Johnson or John L. Lewis to Obama's Roosevelt. This is a powerfully appealing idea because it seems to offer the quickest and most dramatic way to create a compelling progressive alternative to the "inside the beltway" Washington consensus.

An independent progressive movement needs an agenda even more than a leader

But this omits a crucial step. A mass movement does not necessarily need a single leader but it always needs a vision and agenda clear and coherent enough to mobilize a national following. A successful progressive movement should not be built around any one individual—and particularly not any active political candidate -- but rather around the movement's core objectives. A progressive movement needs at its heart a broad and visionary "progressive agenda" focused on long-term (10-20 year) progressive goals.

It is on this kind of basis—and not as a personality cult built around Obama or any other individual—that a solid progressive movement can be built, a progressive movement organized for the long haul of 10-20 years, spanning many candidates and multiple presidential administrations.

A successful progressive movement must be able to do the following:

- Recruit a constant stream of new people and continually inspire and motivate its followers,
- Create a permanently organized activist base, build community organizations and create traditions and institutions and culture.
- Build an organization that can mobilize and get out the vote and build a tradition of disciplined, strategic voting that looks beyond any single election or candidate to build the progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

This is not a utopian dream. Trade unions in the 50's and the civil rights movement in 60's had all these characteristics. It is only this kind of long term, agenda-focused rather than candidate-focused progressive movement that can recapture the “Yes We Can” spirit that briefly emerged during the 2008 campaign and transform it into an enduring political phenomenon—a progressive alternative to the success of the Tea Party movement in conservative America.

In fact, a comparison with the Tea Party movement is enlightening on two counts. First, the Tea Party movement has not been built around any single leader (although there were many conservatives who would have leaped to fill the role). Second, it is not based on any rigid program or agenda. Rather the Tea Party functions as a broad umbrella under which a variety of conservative organizations and individuals can cluster. Both these elements are key parts of a flexibility that has allowed the movement to grow in a way that a more centralized, ideologically rigid or personality-centered movement could not have.

The progressive alternative to the essentially reactionary “take back our country” perspective of the Tea Party movement is the optimistic “Yes We Can” vision of the 2008 campaign. This vision and sensibility can be tied to a broad and meaningful—but not ideologically rigid—set of progressive goals and agendas upon which a wide range of progressive organizations and individuals now generally agree.

A revitalized “Yes We Can” movement clearly rooted in a long range progressive agenda and independent of Obama, OFA and the DNC, is a very practical objective. There is no question that many within the core Obama coalition—youth, urban, minorities, the educated—as well as many outside the core—are potential recruits to a movement of this kind. Mass movements cannot be artificially decreed from above, but there is no sociological or practical reason why a broad progressive “Yes We Can” movement as large and energetic as the current conservative Tea Party movement could not be created in the next year or two if the existing progressive organizations and activists were willing to unite around the slogan as the foundation for a broad “umbrella” coalition.

Paradoxically, an independent progressive “Yes We Can” movement would also provide a new and healthier basis on which progressives could deal with Obama himself. An independent

long-term progressive movement would be able to consistently point out the severe limitations and negative compromises embedded in any particular legislation in comparison with a full-bodied, long term progressive agenda, but simultaneously be able to praise and support Obama in cases where he has made specific political choices that are clearly and objectively progressive rather than centrist—e.g. aligning himself with Nancy Pelosi rather than his other more cautious advisors on the final push for the health care reform bill.

Coming at the issue from an entirely different direction, Chris Bowers reaches a similar conclusion about the importance of detaching the progressive movement from constantly defining its agenda purely in relation to Obama. As he says:

Ostensibly, the stakes of the debate are as follows:

- 1. Those who think Obama is doing the best he can for progressive causes will seek to defend him in public at all turns, and to work with / within Democratic Party structures like Organizing for America.*
- 2. Those who think Obama is not doing enough for progressives will engage in public, left-wing pressure against the administration, and work to build coalitions independent of Democratic Party structures like Organizing for America.*

Now, this choice seems like it is about President Obama and the Obama administration, thus justifying the ongoing argument about whether Obama is sufficiently progressive....However, if you look closer, you can see that this debate actually isn't about Obama at all...

...There are going to be times when supporting the administration, and working in concert with it, is the best play. There are going to be times when working independently of the administration, or even taking an oppositional stance to it, is your best play.... There is no hard and fast rule, because this is about achieving certain political ends, not about a debate over the proper normative evaluation of the Obama administration's ideological outlook.

Defining a broad progressive agenda and building an independent “yes we can” movement to support it is the way to escape the vicious circle in which the progressive movement now finds itself—forced to constantly criticize Obama for not continuing to play the role of the progressive leader of a social movement that it is simply no longer in his power to play and then castigating itself as a failure for its inability to force him to do so. This is not the best way to build an independent progressive movement.

(Note: an independent progressive “Yes We Can” movement would not need to compete with or be in conflict with the Organizing for America organization that has now evolved into the grass-roots base for the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Party. OFA is narrowly and specifically focused on organizing support for Democratic candidates and the immediate Democratic agenda—which is a vital and legitimate function. A broad progressive “Yes We Can” movement, on the other hand, would be more explicitly progressive, more long-term oriented and more sharply focused on creating enduring community institutions and movement spirit. The two forces would overlap and collaborate on short-term goals (in the same way that AFL-CIO union political operations collaborated with local Democratic Party organizations during elections in the 1950's) while also operating separately and independently in other areas)