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MANAGING EDITOR:**

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".

**A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO**

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THE GOP NO LONGER BEHAVES
LIKE A TRADITIONAL AMERICAN
POLITICAL PARTY.**

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Although it is only a few days since the 2012 election ended, the national media is already settling into a familiar political narrative regarding the GOP, a narrative that goes as follows: the Republican Party, having suffered major setbacks at the polls, is now “reassessing” its approach and seeking ways to “moderate” its image and positions.

This is a profoundly comfortable and comforting narrative—one that reflects a kind of ceremonial ritual in American politics. A political party, chastened by defeat, is widely praised by mainstream commentators as it moves back toward the center, re-establishing the basic “balance” and “moderation” of American political life.

But in this case there is one overwhelming problem with this narrative: it is profoundly and dangerously wrong.

Beginning last spring, a growing chorus of influential observers and commentators—political moderates and centrists rather than partisan progressive Democrats—began to express a very different view of the GOP—a view that the Republican Party was no longer operating as a traditional American political party. Rather, they argued, it had evolved into an extremist political party of a kind not previously seen in American political life.

During the presidential campaign this perspective was temporarily set aside as journalists and commentators tried to keep up with the almost daily twists and turns of Mitt Romney’s reinventions of himself as a conservative, a moderate and then a conservative once again. But now that the election is over, the underlying issue must be squarely faced.

The first major statement expressing the view that the Republican Party had embraced a dangerous extremism appeared in **a very influential Washington Post article**¹, “*Let’s just say it, the Republicans are the problem*” written by the well known and widely respected congressional scholars Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein. As the article’s key paragraph said:

In our past writings, we have criticized both parties when we believed it was warranted. Today, however, we have no choice but to acknowledge that the core of the problem lies with the Republican Party. The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; **unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science**;² and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition... [It has] all but declared war on the government....

¹http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lets-just-say-it-the-republicans-are-the-problem/2012/04/27/gIQAx-CVUIT_print.html

²http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/liberals-and-conservatives-dont-just-vote-differently-they-think-differently/2012/04/12/gIQAzB1kDT_story.html

The two authors quoted Mike Lofgren, a veteran Republican congressional staffer, who wrote [an anguished diatribe](#)³ about why he was ending his career on the Hill after nearly three decades.

“The Republican Party is becoming less and less like a traditional political party in a representative democracy and becoming more like an apocalyptic cult, or one of the intensely ideological authoritarian parties of 20th century Europe,”

Mann and Ornstein’s forceful critique provided the impetus for other moderates and centrists to follow their lead and directly address the growing extremism within the GOP. James Fallows, for example, [expressed the view as follows in The Atlantic](#):⁴

Normally I shy away from apocalyptic readings of the American predicament... But when you look at the sequence from *Bush v. Gore*, through *Citizens United* ...and you combine it with ongoing efforts in Florida and elsewhere to prevent voting from presumably Democratic blocs; and add that to the simply unprecedented [abuse](#)⁵ of the filibuster in the years since the Democrats won control of the Senate and then took the White House, you have what we’d identify as a kind of *long-term coup* if we saw it happening anywhere else.

Liberal democracies like ours depend on rules but also on *norms*—on the assumption that you’ll go so far, but no further, to advance your political ends. The norms imply some loyalty to the system as a whole that outweighs your immediate partisan interest.

American politics has always been open to the full and free expression of even the most extreme ideas, but the profound danger posed by the current extremism of the GOP lies in one deeply disturbing fact: the Republican Party’s extremism goes far beyond support for extreme public *policies*. Instead, in three key respects, it deliberately seeks to undermine basic norms and institutions of democratic society.

The two very different meanings of political extremism

To clearly demonstrate this, however, it is necessary to carefully distinguish between two entirely distinct meanings of the term “political extremism.”

On the one hand, it is possible for a person or political party to hold a wide variety of very “extreme” opinions on issues. These views may be crackpot (e.g. “abolish all courts and judges”) or repugnant (“deny non-insured children all medical care”). But as long as the individual or political party that holds these views conducts itself within the norms and rules of a democratic society, its right to advocate even the most extreme views is protected by those same democratic institutions.

The alternative definition of the term “political extremism” refers to political parties or individuals who do not accept the norms, rules and constraints of democratic society. These individuals or parties embrace a view of “politics as warfare” and of political opponents as

³ http://truth-out.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=3079:goodbye-to-all-that-reflections-of-a-gop-operative-who-left-the-cult

⁴ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/06/scotus-update-la-loi-cest-moi/258900/#>

⁵ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/05/filibuster-and-false-equivalence-fiesta/257221/>

literal “enemies” who must be crushed. Extremist political parties based on a “politics as warfare” philosophy emerged on both the political left and right at various times in the 20th century and in many different countries and circumstances.

Despite their ideological diversity, extremist political parties share a large number of common characteristics, one critical trait being a radically different conception of the role and purpose of a political party in a democratic society. In the “politics as warfare” perspective a political party’s objective is defined as the conquest and seizure of power and not sincere collaboration in democratic governance. The party is viewed as a combat organization whose goal is to defeat an enemy, not a representative organization whose job is to faithfully represent the people who voted for it. Political debate and legislative maneuvering are seen not as the means to achieve ultimate compromise, but as forms of combat whose only objective is total victory.

It is this “politics as warfare” view of political life that leads logically and inevitably to the justification of attempts to attack and undermine basic democratic institutions whenever and wherever they present a roadblock to achieving the ultimate goal of complete ideological victory.

Three tactics of political extremism

The new moderate and centrist critics of Republican extremism have noted three specific kinds of attacks that the GOP has launched on basic American democratic norms and institutions.

1. Paralyzing the operations of government to extort political “ransom”

Mann and Orenstein **describe the strategy clearly**:⁶

The filibuster, once relegated to a handful of major national issues in a given Congress, became a routine weapon of obstruction, applied even to widely supported bills or presidential nominations. And Republicans in the Senate have abused the confirmation process to block any and every nominee to posts such as the head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, *solely to keep laws that were legitimately enacted from being implemented.*

In the third and now fourth years of the Obama presidency, divided government has produced something closer to complete gridlock than we have ever seen in our time in Washington, with partisan divides even leading last year to **America’s first credit downgrade**⁷...On financial stabilization and economic recovery, on deficits and debt, on climate change and **health-care reform**,⁸ Republicans have been the force behind the widening ideological gaps and the strategic use of partisanship.

⁶http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lets-just-say-it-the-republicans-are-the-problem/2012/04/27/gIQAx-CVUIT_print.html

⁷http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/sandp-considering-first-downgrade-of-us-credit-rating/2011/08/05/gIQAqKelxl_story.html

⁸http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-the-roberts-court-could-save-health-care/2012/03/07/gIQALijXGS_story.html

Mann and Orenstein have impeccable reputations as honest, independent analysts and not partisan warriors (their book “the Broken Branch” was dedicated to Republican Rep. Barber Conable and included a blurb from Newt Gingrich). Thus, when Senate minority leader “Mich” McConnell absurdly dismissed their criticism as the opinions of “ultra, ultra liberals,” absolutely no one in Washington took him seriously. In a reply, Ornstein (a resident scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute) quoted a whole series of statements by McConnell himself that actually proved his and Mann’s basic point. For example, immediately after the debt limit debate, **McConnell said:**⁹

“I think some of our Members may have thought the default issue was a hostage you might take a chance at shooting. Most of us didn’t think that. What we did learn is this—it’s a hostage worth ransoming.”

Far more than any critique by a Democrat or independent observer could possibly have demonstrated, McConnell’s statement itself revealed the fundamentally extremist character of the Republican strategy. It is an open admission that that strategy is actually to hold the economy “hostage,” and force Dems to “ransom” it order to extort policy results that could not be achieved by reasoned political negotiation between the elected representatives of the citizens. The metaphors of “hostages” and “ransom” provide a startling demonstration of the inherently extreme and anti-democratic nature of the strategy.

2. Disenfranchising politically “undesirable” voters as a way of winning elections

In this year’s elections an unprecedented number of state laws were passed and administrative decision taken by Republican state governments whose intention was to make voting more difficult for minorities, students and other groups who tended to vote Democratic. These measures were widely condemned as profoundly unjust and undemocratic.

The attempts to disenfranchise Democratic voters did not play a decisive role in determining the outcome of the election in 2012 only because of the sheer scale of the Democratic victories, the massive mobilization of lawyers and poll watchers by groups defending voting rights and a series of major court decisions that temporarily blocked key policies that would have disenfranchised the largest numbers of citizens.

In 2014 and 2016, however, similar measures could easily play a decisive role in illegitimately changing the outcome of important contests across the country. By most estimates, had all the voter suppression measures introduced by state governments actually been in effect during this election hundreds of thousands of voters—particularly in Florida, Pennsylvania and Ohio could have been prevented from casting a ballot.

Moreover, in states with Republican elected officials and election administrators, the potential exists for the enactment of measures that could disenfranchise entire classes and categories of citizens. Students, for example, are uniquely vulnerable because of their distinct status and pro-democratic voting patterns.

⁹http://www.rollcall.com/issues/58_11/McConnells-Own-Words-on-Senate-Gridlock-216401-1.html

As a *New York Times* editorial stated:¹⁰

Seven states have already passed strict laws requiring a government-issued ID (like a driver's license or a passport) to vote, which many students don't have, and 27 others are considering such measures. Many of those laws have been interpreted as prohibiting out-of-state driver's licenses from being used for voting.

It's all part of a widespread Republican effort to restrict the voting rights of demographic groups that tend to vote Democratic...

Wisconsin once made it easy for students to vote, making it one of the leading states in turnout of younger voters in 2004 and 2008. When Republicans swept into power there last year, they undid all of that, imposing requirements that invalidated the use of virtually all college ID cards in voter registration. Colleges are scrambling to change their cards to add signatures and expiration dates, but it's not clear whether the state will let them.

The potential effect of disenfranchising college students can be summed up with one startling statistic. In Florida, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin—three states where measures to disenfranchise students have been seriously proposed—severely restrictive measures could potentially deprive over a million young voters of their most fundamental democratic rights.

The justifications for such measures are breathtakingly and indeed repulsively anti-democratic. As the *New York Times* editorial continued:

Political leaders should be encouraging young adults to participate in civic life, but many Republican state lawmakers are doing **everything they can**¹¹ instead to prevent students from voting in the 2012 presidential election. Some have openly acknowledged doing so because students tend to be liberal.

William O'Brien, the speaker of the New Hampshire State House, **told a Tea Party group**¹² earlier this year that students are "foolish" and tend to "vote their feelings" because they lack life experience. "Voting as a liberal," he said, "that's what kids do." And that's why, he said, he supported measures to prohibit students from voting from their college addresses and to end same-day registration. New Hampshire Republicans even tried to pass a bill that would have kept students who previously lived elsewhere from voting in the state; fortunately, the measure failed, as did the others Mr. O'Brien favored.

3. The use of propaganda and agitprop techniques that were once considered the hallmarks of totalitarian regimes.

During the 2012 election there was an extraordinary change in way political advertising was produced and designed. While it can reasonably be argued that false claims, distortions and baseless charges are all abuses of long standing in American politics, a qualitatively new

¹⁰http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/27/opinion/keeping-college-students-from-the-polls.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print

¹¹http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/voting_law_changes_in_2012

¹²http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8tqpBzLNzE&feature=player_embedded

element was added in the 2012 campaign—the incorporation of technically altered or edited video and audio that makes a candidate appear to express a view he or she did not actually assert.

The most dramatic example of this new strategy was Romney's *"you didn't build that"* campaign ad. Although the details were widely reported at the time, they are worth repeating. Here is **what Obama actually said**:¹³

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business—you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn't get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet.

The point is, is that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together. There are some things, just like fighting fires, we don't do on our own.

Read as a whole, it is clear that the words *"you didn't build that"* actually modify the phrase *"roads and bridges."* The Romney campaign extracted the truncated fragment *"If you've got a business—you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen"* and presented it as proof that Obama actually despises small business and businessmen. The Romney ad team elevated the "you didn't build that" accusation against Obama into one of the core elements of their national ad campaign.

Conservative commentators minimized the radical departure that this use of deceptively edited video and audio represents by lumping it together with a variety of examples of other "negative" advertising from both campaigns. But, there is a huge, indeed, fundamental difference between an ad that asserts—fairly or unfairly—that an opposing candidate's policies will result in sick people dying and an ad that deceptively edits video clips of the candidate to make him appear to actually say the words *"So what if people die. It's no big deal, sick people die all the time."*

The most stunning aspect of the Romney campaign's approach, however, was not simply the use of doctored video itself but the Romney campaign's proud and unashamed defense of the technique as absolutely legitimate and justified. **As Tom Edsall noted**:¹⁴

Struggling to justify a recent television spot that reached new heights of deception, a top operative in Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign [In fact, top Romney campaign ad strategist Stuart Stevens] put it plainly, while insisting on anonymity:

"First of all, ads are propaganda by definition. We are in the persuasion business, the propaganda business.... Ads are agitprop.... Ads are about hyperbole, they are about editing. It's ludicrous for them to say that an ad is taking something out of context.... All ads do that. They are manipulative pieces of persuasive art."

¹³<http://prospect.org/article/meaning>

¹⁴<http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/05/the-reinvention-of-political-morality/>

For anyone who is old enough to remember the eras of WWII or the Cold War this is a genuinely appalling and deeply repulsive assertion. In that period “propaganda” and “agitprop” were techniques that were universally considered clearly and unambiguously evil—they were the vile, cynical tools of the worst totalitarian monsters like Hitler and Stalin. In that era calling a message a piece of “propaganda” or “agitprop” was tantamount to calling it a dirty, bald-faced communist or fascist lie. For Romney’s top campaign ad strategist to proudly embrace those same words as admirable goals is an absolutely extraordinary illustration of how extremism and cynical amorality in the Republican Party has become “the new normal.”

And it must be noted that this new acceptance of technically manipulated video and audio, which began on the political fringe in 2009 with Andrew Breitbart’s dishonest editing of a speech by USDA official Shirley Sherrod, was not limited to the Romney campaign. Similar fraudulent editing of video and audio material could be noted in advertisements from sources ranging from the Republican National Committee to outside groups like the Emergency Committee for Israel.

In September 2012, for example, [The RNC released a video](#)¹⁵ in which Obama appears to say the following:

“Anyone who does well for themselves should do their fair share in return. Now some people call this class warfare”

But here is what Obama actually said:

Do we want to keep giving tax breaks to the wealthiest Americans like me, or Warren Buffett, or Bill Gates—people who don’t need them and never asked for them? Or do we want to keep investing in things that will grow our economy and keep us secure?

Now, some people call this class warfare. But I think asking a billionaire to pay at least the same tax rate as his secretary is just common sense. We don’t envy success in this country. We aspire to it. But we also believe that anyone who does well for themselves should do their fair share in return, so that more people have the opportunity to get ahead—not just a few.

Equally, in October 2012 the Emergency Committee For Israel put out an automated robocall with what sounded like an actual face to face “debate” between Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu during which Obama seemed to directly reject Netanyahu’s call to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons by saying that the United States would respect Iran’s sovereignty and not interfere with its affairs.

In fact, however, the so-called “debate” was actually an utter fraud created by cutting and pasting together audio clips taken from three different speeches by Obama made three years apart —one delivered in 2009, one in 2011 and one in 2012. Washington Post fact checker Glen Kessler [characterized the ad as “an Orwellian descent into falsehoods and misrepresentation.”](#)¹⁶

¹⁵<http://2012.talkingpointsmemo.com/2012/09/rnc-offers-master-class-in-out-of-context-editing-for-anti-obama-video.php>

¹⁶http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/an-imaginary-misleading-debate-between-president-obama-and-benjamin-netanyahu/2012/10/31/c8d7c1b8-22c5-11e2-8448-81b1ce7d6978_blog.html

Facing up to the challenge of Republican extremism

Despite the widespread popularity of the current narrative that describes Republicans as “reassessing” and seeking to “move toward the center”, the simple fact is that there has been absolutely no Republican repudiation of the three central extremist strategies described above.

Consider:

- Not a single major figure in the current GOP has questioned the legitimacy of the legislative strategy of “hostage taking” used during Obama’s first term
- Not a single major figure in the current GOP has publically repudiated the efforts to disenfranchise voters.
- Not a single major figure in the current GOP has criticized the quasi-totalitarian propaganda tactics of deliberately distorting video and audio that were employed during the 2012 elections.

Whatever Republican motion toward the center is actually occurring is entirely tactical and pragmatic. Many GOP figures now urgently assert that “we have to win more Latino votes” or “we have to win more women” and so on. But there is absolutely no assertion of the view that “we must forcefully repudiate the dangerously extremist philosophy of “politics as warfare” and the anti-democratic strategies that flow from it.”

But despite its profound inaccuracy, the narrative that Republicans are “seeking moderation” maintains its popularity. It does so because it is extremely convenient for three key groups within American society.

For the media the notion that the “GOP is seeking to moderate its positions” allows them to continue to use a well-worn, clichéd journalistic narrative and to continue to perpetuate the “false equivalency” notion—the idea that journalistic objectivity consists not in reporting the facts as they are but in criticizing Republicans and Democrats in mechanically equal measure regardless of the actual merits of the case.

In practice, however, what this approach actually does is simply to allow everything that is distinct and uniquely dangerous in current Republican extremism to slip by without criticism. As such, it amounts to both intellectual dishonesty and journalistic malpractice. It allows the GOP extremists to have it both ways—to demand that the GOP be treated by the media as a normal political party but yet to simultaneously be able to persist in extremist behavior and even privately gloat and sneer at the gullibility of the mainstream press.

For non-tea party individuals in the Republican Party, on the other hand, the myth the GOP is seeking to move to the center is useful because it allows them to call for tactical reforms in the party’s outreach and messaging without having to directly challenge the extremists in their party and explicitly attack the extremist philosophy and strategy.

Some traditional Republicans have taken a very timid first step toward rejecting the extremism within their party by calling for greater “civility” in American political life. George Herbert Walker Bush, Colin Powell, Richard Lugar and Olympia Snowe, for example, have

joined with Democrats on the board of the National Institute for Civil Discourse, an organization set up after the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. The problem that must be confronted within the GOP, however, goes deeper than a lack of civility. Until the remaining moderates within the Republican Party directly and explicitly challenge the extremist philosophy of “politics as warfare” and the anti-democratic tactics that flow from it, calls for “civility” will have little if any effect.

Finally, for moderates and centrists outside the Republican coalition, the myth of current GOP “movement toward the center” allows them to avoid the unpleasant need to directly confront their conservative counterparts and firmly assert that the current Republican extremism is fundamentally unacceptable in a democratic society. It permits moderates and centrists to continue to treat conservatives as a normal and traditional part of the American political dialog and to pretend to themselves that genuine “extremism” is a fringe phenomena that exists somewhere outside of current mainstream conservatism itself.

But the harsh truth is that even formerly reputable and influential conservative institutions like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute are now increasingly adopting the ideology of today’s Republican extremism.

The Heritage foundation, for example, has a reputation that dates from the Reagan era as a serious think-tank that developed market-oriented alternatives to liberal social policies (The private insurance based approach that is at the heart of Obamacare, for example, was originally derived from research done at the foundation).

But if one looks at the message coming from the Heritage Foundation and its Political Action Committee today, it reflects a very different view. Several days after the 2012 election, for example, [the Heritage PAC released a video](#)¹⁷ that expressed the “politics as warfare” philosophy of modern extremism with stunning clarity. The video displays dramatic, ominous images of war, disaster and decline while an on-screen narrator declares:

We are in a war

We are in a war to save the nation

Abandoning our posts in this war will abandon America to a future of managed decline

To win this war we must remain committed to fighting president Obama’s agenda. Heritage Action is committed to this fight....

The video ends with dark, apocalyptic images of war and dictatorship while Reagan dramatically intones the words “We have nowhere else to go—this [America] is the last stand of freedom on earth.”

When Reagan spoke those words he was pointing to the Soviet Union and world communism as the great threat to human freedom. The extraordinary extremism now dominating the GOP and major conservative institutions is dramatically illustrated by the fact that these groups now

¹⁷http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=p7D0d7ztLY0

define the democratically elected president of the US and the majority of the American people who elected him as a dictatorial “threat to freedom” entirely equivalent to that which was posed by world communism.

Moderates and centrists cannot continue to pretend that this is not a dangerous and unacceptable view. They must move from timidly expressed disapproval to genuine and passionate outrage.

E.J. Dionne is a clear and outspoken liberal but he is also by temperament one of the most moderate and fair-minded political commentators currently writing. Yet in a recent column, he felt obligated to **pose the fundamental moral issue in a very powerful and unequivocal way**:¹⁸

...those who regard themselves as centrists now have a moral obligation to make clear what the stakes are in the current debate. If supposed moderates refuse to call out the new conservatism for the radical creed it has become, their timidity will make them complicit in an intellectual coup they could have prevented.

It is impossible to express the issue any more simply or eloquently than that.

¹⁸http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-rights-stealthy-coup/2012/04/01/gIQAZIBjpS_story.html