



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

DEMOCRATS:
UNITY IS VITAL—
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BY

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If you read the national press and commentators these days you could be forgiven for thinking that there is a savage war going on between Democrats. Just look at the recent headlines in the New York Times, the Washington Post and other national publications:

House Democrats explode in recriminations as liberals lash out at moderates.

Bernie Sanders–Style politics are Defining 2020 Race, Unnerving Moderates

Centrist Democrats push back against party's liberal surge

The fight for the soul of the Democratic Party has begun

Centrists under Siege

Sanders' wing of the party terrifies moderate Dems. Here's how they plan to stop it.

This same perspective is also reinforced by the network of think tanks, organizations and advocates whose specific goal is to support one perspective or the other. Their commentaries declare: *"Democrats are center-left. They'll stay there if they want to win"* or *"How Third Way Democrats could get Trump re-elected."*

Just about anywhere you turn you get the *"Dems in Disarray," "Circular Firing Squad," "Civil War,"* and *"Battle for the Soul of the Party"* clichés shoved in your face.

But here's the thing: it's just not true.

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To start with, the vast majority of rank and file Democratic voters don't think this way. An article in Politico nicely summed this up in a piece titled, *The Democrats' Civil War Is Over Before It Began—But Political Journalists are Refusing to Jump on the Peace Train*. As it says:

Some reporters—especially those who have never seen a mortar round fired in anger—love to describe politics as “war” and portray any contentious intraparty dispute as a “civil war” or a “battle for the soul of the party.” Even before the November elections, which sent a majority of Democrats to the House, our political war correspondents were filing dispatches from the purported conflict being waged inside the Democratic Party... [But] are the Democrats really waging war on each other or is all this noise just politics by the usual means?

The voters don't seem to be preparing for war... **Among Biden voters, the No. 2 choice for president is Sanders. Among Sanders voters, the top No. 2 pick is Biden.** Kamala Harris supporters pick Biden second. Warren supporters pick Sanders second, and Beto O'Rourke supporters pick Sanders, too.

The Democratic Party is obviously split along progressive and establishment lines, but the polling data render the brother-against-sister hysterics of a civil war as overblown... Democratic voters appear to be much more open to candidates from other wings of the party and political compromise than you'd expect given the raucous combat reports.¹

Let's just repeat that key fact – in order to defeat Donald Trump, Biden voters say they will support Bernie and Bernie voters will support Biden. Of course this is partially the result of the two men's substantial name recognition but there are a range of other polls that reinforce and extend the conclusion that Democratic voters will indeed support the party even though it contains candidates with whom they disagree.* But the most compelling proof that Democrats were not at each other's throats was the 2018 elections themselves. GOP candidates screamed that Nancy Pelosi was Joe Stalin's secret granddaughter in order to scare moderate voters away from the Dems but it just didn't work. Middle class educated suburbanites, many of them former GOP voters, voted along with solid Democrats to create one of the most powerful anti-GOP wave elections in decades.

Well, OK, if rank and file Democratic voters are not at each other's throats, maybe congressional Democrats are.

But that's not happening either. If you read more than just the lurid headlines in those hysterical articles above it becomes clear that, as Paul Waldman notes, Democrats in congress are actually “*weirdly united*.” As he says:

*Note: For example, a recent Monmouth poll asked registered Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents about who should be their party's standard bearer. A majority of 56% preferred someone who would be a strong candidate against Trump even if they disagree with that candidate on most issues. Just 33% say they would prefer a nominee who they are aligned with on the issues even if that person would have a hard time beating Trump.²

¹<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/12/democrats-civil-war-225780>

²Note:

https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/documents/monmouthpoll_us_020419.pdf/

When the controversy over Rep. Ilhan Omar's (D-Minn.) comments about U.S. policy toward Israel heated up, many in the news media described it as a bitter conflict within the Democratic Party. Liberals against moderates, young new members against older ones, Dems in disarray!

But then something interesting happened. Democrats got together, came up with a compromise resolution and voted on it — and every last Democrat voted yes.... **In fact, although they've had internal disagreements, Democrats in Congress have been remarkably, even shockingly, unified.**

Let's look at some of what they've done. On Friday morning, the House passed H.R. 1, its sweeping political reform bill, and once again, every Democrat voted in favor. Last month, the House passed two gun background-check bills; the mere fact that members are voting on such legislation at all shows that they've lost the fear of the NRA that used to grip them. Democrats voted for one measure 225 to 7, and for the other, 232 to 2.

The House Democrats voted to revoke President Trump's national emergency declaration, with zero Democratic votes against. They passed a bill calling for the removal of U.S. troops from Yemen, with zero Democratic votes against. They passed a bill to raise federal worker pay, with zero Democrats against, and a bill on child care for veterans, also with zero Democratic votes against. They passed a series of appropriations bills with either zero or one vote against.

It's true that a number of Democratic moderates have expressed some nervousness about the party being defined by more liberal figures such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.). And last week, in a private meeting some moderates and liberals had it out over a Republican amendment to one of the background-check bills, which some moderates voted for.

But in the end, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) prevailed on everyone that they'll be much more likely to accomplish their common goals if they stick together. And the members seemed to agree. Which is one of the explanations for the notable Democratic unity at the moment: Although there may be substantive differences from time to time, the party understands that it's stronger as a united front.³

In fact, a significant cause of the problems that arose in the first weeks of the new Congress were two specific factors and not intractable divisions. The battle over the amendment mentioned above, for example, occurred as a result of a procedural trap set by Mitch McConnell, one which Pelosi is taking steps to make more difficult for the GOP to employ again in the future. Equally, Twitter and social media dramatically inflamed the problem, something that was particularly notable in the intra-Democratic debate over anti-Semitism.

But, again, Democrats are working it out. As a Washington Post article noted:

The week of friction has led to some soul searching, as Democrats realized that airing their laundry in public only helps Republicans.

³https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/03/08/why-democrats-are-weirdly-unified-these-days/?utm_term=

"I do think it is interesting to see how some incidents, I think, can be weaponized to target the [Democratic] caucus and that it's pretty surgical in the way that it's done," Ocasio-Cortez said. "So I'm kind of learning about those dynamics."

From Wednesday through Friday, she focused almost all of her tweet fire on Republicans and conservative activists, calling out the 23 GOP lawmakers who voted against the anti-hate resolution.

When she talked about fellow Democrats, Ocasio-Cortez offered only praise, even giving a "shout out" to Rep. Joe Cunningham (S.C.) for his questioning of a Trump administration official about climate change. A week earlier, Cunningham was one of the 26 Democrats on Ocasio-Cortez's "list" of Democrats who voted with Republicans.

...Rep. Jan Schakowsky (Ill.) has encouraged Democrats to talk to one another before publicly criticizing their positions. Almost a quarter of the caucus members are in their first term, barely two months into office. Many angry Twitter exchanges are occurring between lawmakers who hardly know each other. And Twitter, with its limit of 280 characters per tweet, often brings out the sharper edges.⁴

In short, the problems the press has presented as a fearsome death cage match were to a large degree part of a necessary "shake-down cruise" that was inevitable when a huge class of first time legislators took their first steps in a new twitter dominated media environment. As the necessary lessons are learned, Democratic unity will become more apparent in the future.

Looking ahead, Democratic strategists have come up with several recommendations that Democrats should follow:

First, intra-Democratic debate should be focused on issues not personalities. As Long time Democratic strategist Steve Rosenthal argued in an American Prospect article, *How Democrats Can Avoid Turning Their Presidential Primaries into a Circular Firing Squad*:

Don't try to stifle new ideas, new opinions, or new plans: Many of the Democrats elected to congress and state legislatures in 2018 are new to the process. For that matter, most of their announced and potential presidential candidates are seeking national office for the first time. All of these people are bringing new ideas, new opinions, and new plans to the table for discussion and debate. These new leaders will make mistakes along the way. But they will learn and grow, and we will be better as a country for it. So, let's embrace this outpouring of initiatives.

.... Trump, Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, and some in the media will predictably paint new ideas from the Democratic camp as "socialist" and "fringe." **They will suggest that the views of every single elected Democrat represents the views of the entire party. This will only work if Democrats take the bait, turn on each other, and, so to speak, eat their young.**

⁴https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/after-a-week-of-twitter-spats-the-democratic-caucus-does-some-soul-searching/2019/03/09/036b758e-41cf-11e9-a0d3-1210e58a94cf_story.html?utm_term=.dcdea63dc3a9

New York Magazine columnist Ed Kilgore makes the point more sharply:

A debate about ideas is healthy; a debate about motives is not. The Democrats should hash out their differences in 2020 without slashing up one another — not casting aspersions on each other’s integrity, motivation or intentions. It is that latter path that creates an opening for Trump’s reelection in 2020.

...The only way to head off this [latter path] is if other candidates along with party leaders and activists come down like the wrath of God on any candidate that succumbs to the temptation of straying over the line into attacks on a rival’s character or motives, or forgets to remind listeners that any differences on issues are laughably small when compared to the terrifying agenda of the GOP.

Kilgore then adds:

It’s not enough for candidates to play nice with each other: They **need to rebuke supporters who don’t and won’t**. Anyone with the least understanding of social media knows that it won’t cut any ice if presidential candidates stay above-board while their most passionate supporters go after opponents with a tire iron—a tool that will be happily picked up by Team Trump the minute it’s discarded. Of course politicians can’t control everything their fans say and do. But public criticism may usefully shame the worst offenders into some self-control. ...Candidates should all preemptively demand a certain degree of civility.⁵

And Rosenthal adds another important rule:

Every Democratic candidate should sign a pledge that they will give their wholehearted support to whoever eventually wins the party’s nomination. Every Democratic candidate who doesn’t win the nomination should campaign full-time for the party ticket in the fall, as if they were the nominee. It might sound obvious, but let’s be honest: Democrats haven’t always followed this rule. To dislodge Trump from the presidency, there’s no room for anything short of complete, total, one-thousand percent support.⁶

In the past Democrats have had the luxury of treating Democratic unity as something that was only vital during the few months between the National Convention and the general election. In the present circumstances where basic American democratic institutions are quite literally in danger, on the other hand, maintaining Democratic unity has become a continuing, year round necessity.

Finally, it’s time for Democrats to start actively fighting back against the “Democrats are at each other throats” narrative – to explicitly defend and champion Democratic unity. If Democrats are passionate about what they believe in, they have to be equally passionate about defending the Democratic coalition from what are, objectively, direct attacks that divide and undermine it.

⁵<http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/02/will-2020-democrats-help-trump-by-destroying-each-other.html>

⁶<https://prospect.org/article/how-democrats-can-avoid-turning-their-presidential-primaries-circular-firing-squad>

The most important objective must be to directly challenge the mainstream press and commentators when they exaggerate and distort the divisions within the Democratic coalition with the clichés of “Disarray,” “Civil war,” “Circular Firing Squad” and “Battles for the Soul of the Party”

This is not the first time that the mainstream media and commentators have indulged in perspectives that were false and deeply unfair to Democrats. During all of Obama’s first term commentators refused to specifically criticize the GOP for its increasingly extremist “*politics as warfare*” strategy of obstruction and sabotage and blamed instead “Washington,” “Congress” or “politicians.” This placed the blame just as much on Democrats as Republicans, even though the commentators understood perfectly well what the GOP was actually doing.

Progressive writers termed this “false equivalence” and the tide began to turn with the 2011 article “*let’s just say it: The Republicans are the problem*” by respected congressional scholars Thomas Mann and Norman J. Ornstein. This unleashed a torrent of criticism until the commentators found that even people in their own social and professional circles were dismissing their commentaries as “*pathetic examples of false equivalence*” with condescending sneers. They responded by first including timid “to be sure” sentences in their pieces (e.g. “*to be sure, Republicans may do this somewhat more than the Democrats...*”) but it quickly became apparent that this was insufficient to quell the criticism and they were increasingly forced to write with more genuine honesty about the real situation.

Democrats must insist that something similar occur again today regarding the use of the lazy clichés of Democratic fratricide and disarray. Mainstream journalists and commentators will continue to exaggerate and distort the situation until Democrats directly challenge their falsifications and point out how they objectively aid and abet Trump and the GOP.

Democrats have a range of opinions and serious disagreements regarding the design of specific policies and programs. But the vast majority of Democrats also recognize that these areas of disagreement are far smaller than the fundamental differences that separate them all from Trump and the GOP. Upholding and defending Democratic unity does not represent a dilution or abandonment of specific goals and perspectives but rather recognition that Democratic unity is the precondition for achieving any progressive and Democratic goals at all.