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A Back to the Future Jeffersonian Liberalism

How the Democrats can thrive in the Information Age

Terry Michael | January 25, 2010

Hopes dashed by the first-year bumbblings of Barack Obama and three big GOP victories in Virginia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, Democratic campaign strategists, policy-mongers, and populist fire-breathers are touting formulas for party renewal. Nothing new here. Re-branding has been a cottage industry for Democrats since Lyndon Johnson dashed liberal dreams of wealth redistribution with his war in the 1960's, and mush-mouthed Democrats abandoned the toxic "L" word and started calling themselves "progressives" in the 1970s and 1980s.

While short-term thinking, focused on the November election, will dominate Beltway chatter about re-tooling Obama's legislative agenda, Democrats desperately need a new informing ideology to replace the 19th and 20th Century brand of statist programmatic liberalism rejected by the political center, in a choice-demanding information age.

Bill Daley, the smartest of Democratic icon Richard J. Daley's seven children, a few months ago wrote that the party needs to "plot a more moderate, centrist course or risk electoral disaster." In his first *Washington Post* column of the new year, democratic socialist Harold Meyerson did just the opposite, yearning for the "legislative torrents of the New Deal and the Great Society...templates that fire the liberal imagination." And lefties on the Hill will be beating up on bankers to save themselves from their health care debacle.

Daley's advice was good—for the devastated presidential Democratic Party of 1984. A near perfect distillation of economic left-liberalism admired on college campuses and in Latin America, Meyerson's vision might have been relevant in 1964, when party policy wonks demanded "Complete The New Deal!"

Strangely, these pearls of wisdom come just a few years and months after Democrats took back Congress in 2006 and the White House in 2008. Why the panic? You'd think it was 1972 or 1984, when Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan defeated George McGovern and Walter Mondale in 49-1-state blow-outs.

I spent the latter year of those two historic drubbings working as press spokesman for the Democratic National Committee, in the mid-1980's. We were crushed by the middle of the

electorate that included a lot of apostate "Reagan Democrats." They had fought the good war. They understood *gay* to mean a happy state of mind. They believed a guy should marry the girl he got in trouble. And they thought one-size-fits-all elderly entitlements bestowed from Washington central authorities made sense for men who had factory jobs for life, laboring for central authority corporations, against whom they were represented by their own "international" (workers-of-the-world-unite) unions.

Democrats were losing many of our working class fathers and mothers in 1984 from the backlash against left-liberal Cold War, social-cultural, and identity politics, plus decades of tax-and-spend excess by congressional Democrats. The party sure needed to move back to its parents' center—conflicted as it was about "big government"—because that's where the votes were. And it did, resulting in two terms for centrist President Bill Clinton, who Daley served as commerce secretary.

Ironically, Bill Daley's "moderate, centrist course" is exceedingly good advice in 2010 for the other major party, the one that got its ass handed to it in both the 2006 mid-term and the 2008 national elections, because it fell into a narrow failed state of war-mongering and gay-baiting big conservative governance, under the influence of neo-con artists and TV preachers. The grand old militarist, Christianist, Republican party of the South, and a few of the corn and snow belt Midwest and mountain states, definitely needs to find its way back to the middle of a big tent.

Also filled with irony, Harold Meyerson's musings are a left-liberal echo of the political Puritanism you can hear every day on Fox News, from uncompromising GOP stalwarts of the type who wanted to pass a resolution last year calling on Democrats to rename themselves the "Democrat Socialist Party" and who demand policy purism from Republican candidates.

But a "centrist course" for the Democratic Party touted by Daley is less than half-right, because it ignores important passions of the party's base that were the motive force for winning back the House speaker's chair and securing the Senate majority leader's seat in 2006, and the Oval Office for Barack Obama in 2008. And a statist, wealth-redistributionist ideology like that advocated by Meyerson is mind-numbingly reactionary. It would turn off the American center faster than you can say Hugo Chavez or Evo Morales.

Let me explain.

We have met the new center, and it is us, the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll baby boomers and our younger Gen X siblings and children. Because of our advanced age, we are the "most likely voters" that pollsters and their political clients focus on.

The new center tilts liberal on social issues, like gay rights and abortion. It zigs left on national security, having seen two really bad elective wars in our lifetimes: Vietnam and Iraq. But it zags right on economic questions, empowered with the democratization of information, technology, and finance, eschewing one-size-fits-all fixes from Washington. The new center embraces individual choice in the marketplace.

Democrats certainly need to understand the composition of today's centrist cohort, if they want its

support for the re-election of a Democratic Congress, which requires winning a few dozen moderate swing districts that remain after state legislatures segregate voters into conservative and liberal enclaves. And the party certainly needs to divine the will of the center to put together an electoral college strategy to keep the White House for a second Obama term.

But Democrats must also pay attention to the passions of their base voters, who believe Eric should be able to marry either Ed or Edith, and that our enemies are no longer big bad nation states, but rather a couple of crazy guys in a garage anywhere in the world, as columnist Richard Reeves noted in a recent essay.

Moderate, mainstream, middling messages, crafted by media consultants and pollsters, can take a political party only so far in putting together electoral victories, one election cycle to another. It's just as important, in fact more so, to fire up the base if you want to build party dominance over the long haul—but *not* with flaming economic left-liberalism advocated by Progressive Era throwbacks like Harold Meyerson.

A formula exists for Democratic Party resurgence similar to the dominance Republicans enjoyed in national politics from 1860 to 1932, when they held the White House for 56 of those 72 years. It's in the party's Jeffersonian and Madisonian roots. The government that governs least governs best. No entangling foreign alliances. And a commitment to individual liberties embodied in the Bill of Rights.

In other words, Democrats need to free themselves from the AFL-CIO, K Street, DuPont Circle, share-the-wealth wing of the party and run to the center on money matters, while passionately playing to their base on social issues and vigorously pursuing a non-interventionist foreign policy.

That is *precisely the opposite* of what happened in the first year of the Obama administration.

The president disappointed the center with an ill-advised attempt to substitute government health care mandates for marketplace accountability on one-seventh of America's economy. And he diss'd his party's base with a neo-con lite escalation of another elective war, while soft-peddling on passionate individual liberty concerns like gay rights and the drug war.

To appeal to individualist, Information Age voters, *both center and base*, Democrats need to replace their intellectually spent, statist Progressive Era vision, spawned by the excesses of the Industrial Revolution, with a back-to-the-future Jeffersonian liberalism. First cast in the self-reliant Agrarian Age that informed our individual liberty-centered republic, the messages of Thomas Jefferson's Democratic Party of the 18th century can attract desktop-empowered voters of the 21st, who want to be free to make more choices in their lives than iPhones have apps.

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