

Jefferson's Jacksons: a Wake-up Call for Democrats Trying to Win by Default, Without Firing up the Base

Use social-cultural issues to motivate the base -- about the only thing left, since congressional "leaders" are timid on Iraq and there's no bad economy, stupid!

By Terry Michael, June 7, 2006

The chilled Jacksons found in Congressman William Jefferson's freezer could be a 2006 blessing-in-disguise for the party associated with those famous surnames.

If they are willing to engage in some serious cultural warfare in defense of individual rights, against the bigots who orchestrated the anti-gay marriage amendment, Democratic leaders could be grateful come November for this latest offering from Louisiana, the cradle of comedic political corruption, which once again reminds us that a culture of corruption isn't the sole province of one political party.

The scandal ought to serve as a wake-up call: Democrats can't win with a default strategy of convincing voters Republicans are nasty people. They need to "nationalize" the November elections, so the number of contest-able races is increased. All politics is local, except when it isn't. And it isn't now.

The 90 percent-plus re-election rate in the House of Representatives reflects the handful of marginal seats that exist because of gerrymandering over the past four decades, since Baker vs. Carr required one-person, one-vote, and digital technology allowed legislatures to divide the congressional district spoils about equally between parties.

Mid-term elections are fundamentally about a party's reliable base voters, whereas presidential campaigns usually turn on the less partisan center, expanded in quadrennial years with casual, once-every-four-years electoral participants.

Challenge: to energize the base, stupid!

The challenge for Democrats is to energize the base, so the faithful will vote in maximum numbers, while demoralized Republicans stay home. The situation is the mirror image of 1994, when religious conservatives went to the polls in record numbers, while Democrats, coming off a very bad year for their president, opted against voting.

Democrats don't necessarily need a gimmick like the GOP's 1994 "Contract With America," but they do need to fire up their voters with messages drawn from one or more of the three basic issue frames: foreign, economic, and social-cultural policy.

Thus far, congressional Democrats have passionately resisted drawing any important distinctions with Bush on the war in Iraq, failing at both listening to their anti-war base and noting that the center has turned against the war with almost a vengeance. Timid legislative Democrats continue to be frightened by their Cold War shadows, afraid they won't look tough enough. So they marginalize their voices for withdrawal, like Murtha in the House and Feingold in the Senate, and leave their base voters as cold as Congressman Jefferson's cash. Because the Democrats' neo-conservative wing, headquartered at the Democratic Leadership Council, seems to dominate on what passes for Democratic foreign policy on Capitol Hill, it's unlikely the party will find its voice in real opposition to an outrageous elective war.

While they have given up the playing field on foreign policy, just as John Kerry did in 2004, Democrats have very little hope of nationalizing the 2006 election around the economic frame of issues. The economy is simply doing too well, or at least not so badly, that the party can make a case for change, either with its base or the center. In truth, outside-the-Beltway Democrats are seldom interested anymore in the middle class neo-populist, you-never-had-it-so-bad, re-distributionist left liberalism still being peddled by the DuPont Circle wing of the Democratic Party. Bill Clinton was correct, several decades into the individual-empowered, information age, which eschews centralization, in his 1995 declaration that the era of big government was over. But the Democrats' small government founder, Mr. Jefferson from Virginia, knew that over 200 years ago, in the self-reliant agrarian age that produced the Anti-Federalists, and which preceded the one-size-fits-all industrial era that spawned big government.

This leaves just one issue set, the social-cultural frame, to pump up the base, unless the economy turns really sour or Democrats receive a spinal implant on Iraq.

But timid Democratic leaders are living in a culture as well as cold war past when it comes to understanding where voters have moved in the last couple of decades on things like abortion, gay rights, and religion in politics.

Many from my parents' generation, the children of the Depression, became Nixon and Reagan Democrats when they dominated the center in national politics in the 1970's and 1980's. Their values were in opposition to the sex, drugs and rock-and-roll Sixties' inclinations of their kids.

But the Baby Boom generation is now in charge of the middle of the electorate, and they elected and re-elected a president in the 1990's who was accused of skirt-chasing, draft-dodging and smoking without inhaling.

Simply put, Democrats have won the culture war, but can't quite believe it, because the strength of the religious right has looked apparent without being real. It is a rural myth, for example, that politicized evangelicals gave George Bush the edge in Ohio in 2004. Democrats lost the election not because of some grand Karl Rove strategy to turn out evangelicals, but because John Kerry offered nothing different from Bush on Iraq to the center and failed to motivate the Democratic base with his split-every-difference mushy message.

The irony is that Republican leaders understand their Taliban wing is hurting them with centrist voters. That's how Dick Cheney publicly discovered his lesbian daughter just before the GOP convention in 2004 and how Bush said he found civil unions acceptable about 10 days before the election. And it's why both the vice president and the First Lady are tri-angulating on the anti-gay marriage Constitutional Amendment.

Culture war, not "Religion Lite"

So, if Democratic leaders (oxymoronic?) want to turn on and turn out their voters, they must stop listening to the consultant wing of the party and its misguided efforts to promote a kind of pull your punches, "Religion Lite" message on social and cultural concerns.

An intelligent Democratic message, which will fire up the faithful and which will not turn off the center, would look something like this.

– Republicans are trying to put hate into the Constitution with their anti-gay amendment. We Democrats understand the culture has not yet embraced gay marriage, but we also know Americans are much more tolerant than Jerry Falwell and the other demagogues who are dominating the GOP.

– We won't compromise on a woman's right to choose, nor will we allow fanatics on the religious right to hinder medical research or turn back the Enlightenment with their crusade against evolution.

– The best way to protect religious freedom is the same way the founder of the Democratic Party advocated: keep religion out of politics and politics out of religion. As we confront dangerous politicized Islamists who want to create theocracies, we will resist those who demand that we write their narrow religious dogma into our statutes and our Constitution. Ethics in politics, yes. The rantings of Pat Robertson, never!

Can we expect Democratic leaders to embrace that kind of tough talk on social-cultural issues? Well, maybe. But maybe that cash in Congressman Jefferson's freezer was money he'd been saving to donate to Katrina victims.

*A former press secretary for the Democratic National Committee,
Terry Michael is director of the Washington Center for Politics & Journalism. www.terrymichael.net*