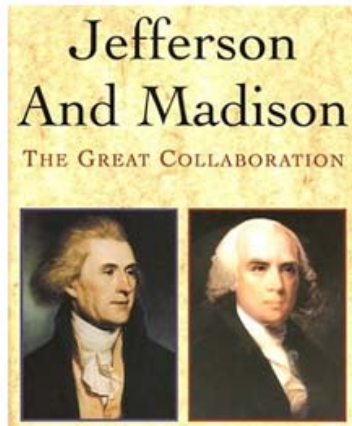


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A libertarian Democrat manifesto.

*Re-claiming a classical liberal heritage, with a
back to the future ideology for the Democratic Party*



(Used with appreciation to publishers and editors
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In the several decades since most of our candidates began treating the “liberal” label like a bastard child, those of us who consider ourselves card-carrying Democrats have been wandering in an ideological no man’s land. We’ve been unable to gather around an informing set of core beliefs that both energize and motivate us, and which attract the center of American politics. As Republicans embraced “conservative,” our standard bearers drew closer to their pollsters and media consultants.

Since the end of the Sixties, the party that boasts the oldest continuing national committee in the world, formed in 1848, has been experiencing a problem not uncommon to venerable institutions: a loss of brand equity.

In the marketplace, a brand is a story wrapped around a product to differentiate it from similar stuff, so you feel good when you buy for reasons beyond the utilitarian. My Jeep isn’t transportation, it’s a toy for a late middle-aged boy.

Evolving in the early decades of the republic from anti-federalist, “Democratic-Republican” or “Republican-Democratic” versions and then Andrew Jackson’s “Democracy,” the 21st Century Democratic Party is suffering a branding dilemma similar to the Episcopal Church after the 1950s.

You didn’t go to the American branch of the Church of England just to visit god. Being Episcopalian was a statement about your old-line, blue blood heritage. But then, along

came the egalitarian Sixties, and Episcopalian membership lost cachet. Professor James Twitchell, whose “Branded Nation” provides useful insight into this problem of mature institutions, notes that the American Episcopal church brand lost value, with membership slumping from about three-and-a-half million in the early 1960s to a little over two million at the beginning of the 21st Century.

***Agrarian story,
re-fashioned in an industrial age,
seeking an information era renewal***

Born in the Agrarian Era of its founders, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the Democratic Party’s original story was of a limited central government serving self-sufficient “little people” (farmers, artisans, shop keepers) prizing and preserving individual liberty-- juxtaposed against the elitist federalists, and their seemingly monarchical, big central government ambition.

The Party’s narrative was refashioned in the Industrial Era, from Andrew Jacksonian and William Jennings Bryan populism to FDR’s social welfare New Deal in the 1930s, when one-size-fits-all, central authority, wealth re-distributive policies became appealing to many of those little guys. Most traded self-sufficiency for wage labor that would have distressed Jefferson. Their economic lives revolved around big centralized, corporate economic units, against which they eventually were represented by big centralized labor unions.

But somewhere around the middle of the 20th Century, with the advent of a post-industrial Information Era, the little guys, from the working class to the great middle class that Democrats have always claimed to represent, edged back toward more self-sufficiency. They benefitted from the democratization of technology, finance and information. This paradigm shift, from used-and-abused workers to empowered, share-holding, producer-consumers, allowed our “little guys” to make--tailor-make, in fact--choices for themselves. A trivial, but instructive example: a few years ago I built my own Nikes online. A hundred pairs at Foot Locker weren’t enough. The “Central Authority Solutions” story offered by Democrats, from the late-19th century Populists and Progressives, to mid-20th Century social welfare liberals, lost luster. With significant implications for the economic frame of political issues, the average American’s relatively successful quest for food, clothing and shelter was at least partly displaced with a focus on amusing our well-fed selves and seeking the psychic rewards of “The Good Life and its Discontents” (see Robert Samuelson’s superb book with that title.)

While the industrial era story lost appeal relative to economic security concerns, when it came to lifestyle and personal choices--the social-cultural issue frame--Democrats, by the end of the 20th Century, still retained some juice from our original Jeffersonian story, which made individual liberty, with privacy and choice, central to party ID. We could fire up the base with messages about body and bedroom freedom. But the economic left-liberal reactionaries among us, with their minds still in the industrial age, couldn’t give up the ghost of oppressed workers of the world, even after the Berlin Wall crashed down, so they were

unable to share a story that rationalized the desire for options in the bedroom with choices in the marketplace.

Liberals disappear, morph to "progressives"

People still vote Democrat, of course--they still buy the party product--but the old-time Democratic religion lost its revivalist energy sometime after Nixon resigned and Carter failed. Nowhere is that reflected more than in the abandonment of our party's old auxiliary label, liberal, which all but disappeared in the 1970s and was replaced by the soft, safe descriptor: progressive.

As all of that was happening, Republicans found themselves in an ideological wilderness a few decades after the New Deal was embraced by the late industrial age political center. Their wandering was reflected in Eisenhower's declaration of "modern" Republicanism, which basically acknowledged some of the more moderate social welfare policies of the New Deal, similar to the "new" Democrats who emerged in the 1980s, accepting some of the free market principles of Reaganomics.

But the intra-party reactions to Modern Republicans and New Democrats yielded very different ideological results. With the arrival of Barry Goldwater and then Ronald Reagan, Republicans coalesced around a relatively clearly defined and labeled ideology, while many Democrats gathered around our pollsters and press secretaries for centrist, "third way" messages to create temporary electoral coalitions. We elected the politically crafty and seductive Bill Clinton twice, but then failed to win with the stiff, personality-challenged Al Gore and the have-everything-every-way John Kerry (for and against both Vietnam and Iraq.)

Republicans universally embraced an ideology by name. Whether they were economic libertarian, Main Street balanced-budget, interventionist Neo-Con, or politicized religious right in perspective, they called themselves "conservative." The "stickiness," as marketplace brand managers would call it, of the Republican Party label was in a story enthusiastically shared by Republicans of all stripes: government, with its taxes and regulation, is the problem, not the solution.

Two stories – one somewhat clear, the other equivocating

You might reduce the resulting GOP brand, which helped produce Republican victories in seven of the ten national elections before 2008, to this: "Government bad. America good. The marketplace will provide. In God we trust. Support the troops. Meritocracy, but not equal outcomes, for all."

What's the story behind today's Democrat brand? I continue to be a partisan Democrat, but I'm not sure. I believe it's something like: "Government isn't all that bad; look at Social

Security and Head Start. America isn't always that good; we try to impose our will on the rest of the world. The marketplace is full of mostly bad guys who need to be restrained, including their greed-driven political speech. Hey, we're religious, too. And, not just equal opportunity for all, but re-distributive social justice entitlements for special "minority" victims, because, except for me and my friends, racism and all the other "ism's" endure."

Voters in the center find some of each party's message appealing, some appalling. The last several presidential elections and the close, back-and-forth partisan divides in Congress reflect that.

Believe what you will about each message, the Republican story had, for awhile, clarity going for it. The Democratic narrative--as I have caricatured it, but I think accurately--sounds like a congressional speech, a little of this, a little of that.

It wasn't always so. From Jefferson and Madison, to Jackson's Democracy, the party of the people had an energizing little government for the little guy ideology, firing up the base and attracting the center. And from FDR to LBJ, the message was pretty clear; we'll use government to protect the little guy from those greedy bastards.

Two flawed prescriptions for renewal

The usual prescriptions for Democratic Party renewal come in two forms. Centrists, like the now-defunct Democratic Leadership Council, continue to propose triangulation tactics that divert attention of persuadable voters from the Washington-based politics of interest and identity group-dominated left-liberals. Such middling Democrats offer government as a tool, not an end, to provide middle-class economic opportunity. They were good at the end of the 20th Century at talking to the center on pocketbook questions, but didn't offer a coherent energizing philosophy for the base. They couldn't understand that today's political middle is dominated by moderate-to-liberal Baby Boomers on social-cultural questions, rather than by the more conservative Depression Era, World II, "greatest generation" voters who filled the center when the DLC was formed in the 1980s. And their foreign policy prescriptions became a kind of Neo-Conservative Lite, which resulted in their collusion with the disastrous elective war policies that infuriated much of the party's anti-war base.

The second approach, offered by the economic policy reactionaries overly represented in the party's congressional wing, preaches a return to an "old-time religion," "complete-the-New-Deal" ideology. That Fifties and Sixties battle cry might have made sense once. But it is mis-matched for today's smarter voters, who want to make decisions from their homes, or at least their states. Social welfare left-liberals often peddle a kind of middle-class neo-populism, a William Jennings Bryan appeal to folks with SUVs and satellite TV, with selective-memory imagery of the good life of the 1950s. Old-time religion seems to motivate (or at least receive lip service from) the Dupont Circle, K Street and AFL-CIO Washington-based wings of the base, but usually leaves cold the hinterland-center. And the Beltway-based lefties have lost their nerve on non-interventionist foreign policy, so afraid of that "soft-on-defense" Cold War scarecrow the Neo-Con Lites have been peddling for over two decades that they allowed Bush's and Obama's elective wars to

commence and continue without engaging any real debate.

We Democrats need something radically different from those two tired story-lines. And we need to stop fooling ourselves that we lose because the GOP outguns us with money. In 2010, for example, Democrats and their independent expenditure groups and allies out-raised Republicans, but the party still lost the House, big-time. Democrats, and Republicans, lose because of message, not campaign cash. Money follows message, not the other way around.

The past can inform our future

The answer is in our Jeffersonian and Madisonian roots. Knowing from where we came, in an era when individual liberty was prized much as it is today, we have the glue to make the Democratic brand sticky again.

The digital information-empowered generations--convinced by Republican economic choice, turned off by the social-cultural intolerance of the GOP's Christianist wing, and increasingly disenchanted with the militarist message of the Southern-based Republican Party--could embrace Democrats if we return to our founder's philosophy, a back-to-the-future classical liberalism, now known as libertarianism.

Jefferson and Madison believed government was best that governed least, and knew the era of big government was over two hundred years before Bill Clinton proclaimed it in the 1990's. If we listen to the man from Monticello and his fellow Virginian, who advocated peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none, we can rediscover our anti-war, anti-interventionist nerve. We can be as insistent as Republicans that pluralistic democracy and free markets are noble and worth emulating. But we must equally assert that we don't intervene in the affairs of the rest of the world unless we're directly attacked.

The first Democrats, who warned against the threat to liberty of perpetual war, can inspire today's Democratic candidates, who also need a better way to talk about religion and politics. Instead of mumbling some consultant-driven Religion Lite nonsense about restoring faith to public life, Democrats can find the courage to say what we believe: we protect religious liberty by keeping god out of government. Our Founders knew that, making not a single reference to a deity in the Constitution.

Rough cut of a new story

We need a new story. Here's a rough cut, a little more than can fit on a bumper sticker, assembled around the three fundamental issue frames of politics--economic, social, and foreign--with language Jefferson and Madison might have used to advise today's leaders of their party:

"Assure liberty by keeping government as far away as possible from the balance books, the bedrooms, and the bodies of those you represent. Nurture liberal democracy and free

markets on this earth by example, understanding that neither can be planted by armed force on political ground lacking indigenous human cultivators for growth. Affirm the moral authority of the unalienable rights we guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence by fashioning public policy for individuals, not tribal factions."

The good news for Democrats is that the conservative era in American politics is also in trouble. Congressional Republicans and their last president, George W. Bush, engaged in corrupt big government spending, seriously undercutting the economic conservatism that used to bind the party together. And the heavy internal GOP influence of social-cultural neanderthals is turning off the political center.

With those political atmospherics and without a cohesive shared story, Democrats recently won the presidency almost by default, with personality-based campaigning that fueled Barack Obama's victory in 2008--electing a president with no discernible ideology to guide him.

But winning on personality without clear ideas is only biding time, while Republican conservatives try to shake their cultural right wing, and re-group around the economic conservatism that a majority of Americans find attractive.

It won't be easy for many Democrats to update our brand by embracing a 21st Century libertarian label (many Episcopalians won't laser-off their old blue-blood tattoos, even after they've become egalitarian Unitarians.) So, "Jeffersonian liberal" might be a useful way-station for some. But, whatever you call it, Democrats need a new story, a shared, energizing, informing ideology.

I believe "libertarian" can inspire a 21st Century base and attract many independent voters who have come to believe both parties may be obsolete, and are seeking an alternative. We are going to get a new party in America, but not by addition. It will be in a way followers of eastern religions might appreciate--through reincarnation.

My party, in an ideological desert for decades, is eager to find a well from which we all can drink. We're at a tipping point, and ready, I believe, to adopt a new "L" word.

Born in Jefferson County, Illinois, Terry Michael is a former professional Democrat, who worked as press secretary for the Democratic National Committee from 1985 to 1987. He came to Washington in 1975 with a man who had a core of belief informed by his Progressive Era soul, the late Sen. Paul Simon. You can reach Terry Michael at his "thoughts from a libertarian Democrat" web site, www.terrymichael.net, or directly at his email address: terrymichael@terrymichael.net. He is founder (1989) and executive director of the non-partisan, non-ideological Washington Center for Politics & Journalism (www.wcpj.org) teaching college journalists about politics.