

Hard Lessons for Democrats (Expanded, for E-Mail)

**The Basis for Two Guest Appearances on *NewsRap* with *Barry Gordon*,
And Later a (Condensed) Speech,
After E-Mail to Democratic Activists**

December 15, 2004

How do you get the attention of a Democratic donkey? You hit it over the head with a two-by-four! The electorate has done just that. Clinging to the filibuster (or the threat of one) as our only remaining lever of federal power, we Democrats have some hard lessons to learn, if we do not wish our storied party to go the way of the Know-Nothings.

PLAY TO OUR STRENGTHS, NOT THEIRS.

Running candidates whose strengths lie within Republican domains, like security and defense, invites only defeat. Although we cannot afford to cede any position, we must nominate candidates whose reputations have been built upon popular Democratic positions, particularly domestic issues. It may not be entirely "the economy, stupid"; but that is usually—and rightfully—a winning issue for us.

PUT OUR POLICIES IN TERMS OF "VALUES."

We must not just tolerate but truly respect deep-seated religious convictions. We must appreciate that most Americans will put their faith, which sustains them through the toughest of times, ahead of their immediate self-interest—a fact not lost on others, exploiting the faithful.

Although hell will freeze over before evangelicals will say that it is OK to perform abortions or homosexual acts, that sex talk or acts on TV are "family friendly," or that kids should not pray in school, when the economy got bad enough in 1992 half the Born Agains voted for Bill Clinton, because the first President Bush was seen as insensitive to the needy. On Judgment Day, the King will say, "Whatsoever you did to the least of My brethren, that you did unto Me."

On everything from Social Security and progressive taxation to child care and the environment, we Democrats have positions that can be righteously "sold" as ethical and moral, as well as pragmatic and wise. Our opponents' positions, by contrast, reek of the greatest sin of all: hypocrisy.

We need to listen to the people and understand what is most important to them. The Right stresses personal responsibility; the Left, public spiritedness. We need to stand for both of these traditional American values: In a nutshell, good citizenship.

GET BACK TO OUR ROOTS. Working people have been hurt the most by conservative economic policies—sending their jobs overseas, increasing their workloads, lowering their wages, squandering their Social Security, dumbing down their kids, and killing their kids in wars overseas—but they have also been the very voters putting the Nixons, Reagans, and Bushes into the White House. Putting a working class balladeer centerstage in a campaign is not nearly enough; putting working class concerns centerstage in our agenda is key. Too many working people—and small business owners—feel like we are not treating them with respect.

Likewise, we must not take minority groups for granted. Our party did not effectively reach out to Latinos in this last election, and we lost almost half their votes.

More than anything else, the Democratic Party stands for the equitable sharing of power, between people of different means, ethnicities, orientations, and genders. Our party must re-emphasize its ideals of fairness.

AFFABLE BEATS ALOOF. JFK, Reagan, Clinton, George "Dubya"—all were perceived as charismatic, folksy, or unpretentious. "Populists" have bested "elitists" throughout American history. A candidate must connect with the people in order to win their support.

NOMINATE EXECUTIVES. Since Senator JFK, all those (re-)elected President have been Presidents, Vice Presidents, or governors—all executive branch leaders. There is good reason for this: Executives act; legislators talk ... and

talk ... and talk ... And the people want action, not just talk. Unless we would care to re-run Gore or Mondale, we had better take a long, hard look at our dwindling list of Democratic governors (and ex-governors): They are our last, best hope. [However, note the note in the "condensed" version: "Charisma trumps all!"]

DO NOT FRONTLOAD THE PRIMARIES. If we don't take the opportunity to vet our candidates fully, our opponents will be more than happy to air our dirty laundry in public, at the least opportune time.

DON'T PULL YOUR PUNCHES. "Playing nice" is a good way to win the second spot on the ticket, not the way to run a convention.

DON'T LET THE OTHER GUY DEFINE YOU. Even the most conservative of our candidates will eventually be branded "liberal," just because he or she is a Democrat. We have to be prepared to defend and define ourselves and our positions, in terms that are to our best advantage and are clear to the public: If we do not know what we stand for, we cannot expect the voters to.

GET NEW LEADERSHIP, "TRUE BELIEVERS." The people will apparently buy anything if you believe in it enough yourself. In the case of George W. Bush, that is his fervent belief in a mission from God (Lord, help us).

Our party and our nation need leadership that will reach out over the political establishment to the heads and hearts of the voters, with a sincere, infectious, gut-level passion that makes

Democratic values, "liberal" or otherwise, not merely "acceptable" but simply irresistible.

We need a Democratic Ronald Reagan.