

Let's "Talk Turkey" ***(About Democratic Losses in the 2002 Elections)***

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My Fellow Democrats:

I've been reading what you and others have been writing in the wake of the election; and it's been, to say the least, disturbing. And rightly so. It's Thanksgiving time, so let's "talk turkey."

Although the Congress and the country are still fairly evenly divided, it would be foolish to deny the fact that the Republicans thrashed us Democrats pretty darn good in these last elections, at least outside of California; worse yet (whether we choose to "gloat" [as some have put it] or not over our better fate in our home state), the polls show that a solid majority of Americans now think of the Republicans as "winners" and us—and our ideas—as "losers."

So how did we descend into this political hell? And how do we redeem ourselves?

Briefly, as we've heard ad nauseam, the GOP won big for two big reasons. One, they were united behind the president, who—despite being a simpleton or a conman (or both)—is enormously personally popular. Two, the Democratic leadership couldn't get out their own agenda; and it's questionable if they even had one (Granted, the political environment in this country has been pretty conservative, even by

historical standards, ever since the presidency of "The Great Communicator," Ronald Reagan; but that didn't stop President Clinton from articulating—and successfully promoting—a generally progressive and effective agenda).

However, let's not flagellate ourselves; let's trace these consequences back to some common origins.

Bush became so very popular only after leading the country through the horrors of 9/11—events so traumatic we don't even refer to them by name, only by number. "Thank you," Mr. Bin Laden—may you rot in *Jahannam* [the Islamic concept of Hell], you murderous, blasphemous bastard.

But does anyone truly think that if Albert Gore had been president on that day of infamy, the country would not have rallied around him? The Russians even rallied around Stalin when they were attacked by Hitler (and Big Al's a lot more lovable than Poppa Joe ever was).

Even before but especially after 9/11, as a disciple of Ronald Reagan (even more so than of his father), our pugnacious President Bush (yet again *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year"?) has aggressively set the agenda—from tax cuts (the

debate not being "if" but "how much") to war on Iraq (God protect our men and women in uniform and all the innocent people to be caught in the crossfire in that most dangerous region, of untamed political/religious passions)—neither issue had ever been a top priority for the American public until Mr. Bush and his oily company made it so.

And put on the spot, the Democrats have been divided on these issues and conquered at the polls. How can our Democratic officials put forth a compelling competing agenda of their own when so many are on the record, for whatever reason, as supporting the Republican agenda, in one form or another?

Does anyone believe that enormous tax cuts going mostly to the rich or an unprovoked war on Iraq would be a front-burner issue if Al Gore were President today?

Once again, the issue comes back to who became president in 2000; more to the point, how?

Let's look past the debacle of the actual election, if you can call it that (Incidentally, how did all the talk of "election reform" get pared down to "new voting technology," as important as that is, with no more debate on the historical absurdity—no, make that slap in the face to the whole concept of democracy—we call the Electoral College?). After all, that election should have never been so close—during an era of relative peace and unprecedented prosperity, the public had no obvious reason to change the party of the Chief Executive ... so why did they?

... Why did the public turn on Clinton and company, even though they had to know it might cost us all dearly in the end (how many billions or trillions so far)? Whitewater? It didn't seem to matter in '96, and by 2000 it was old news. Wako? Ruby Ridge? Area 51? Maybe big concerns for a few conspiracy nuts—many of whom were "scared straight" by the vile actions and inglorious demise of Timothy McVeigh—but I doubt those were the burning issues for John and Jane Q. Public.

No, according to virtually all the "swing voters" I've ever spoken to, what turned them against President Clinton, and consequently his vice president, was ...

"Morality."

You know, that thing that good ol' George Dubya's supposed to have so much of and that "lying" Al Gore and "Slick Willie" Clinton are supposed to have so little of.

Even to this day, you should see all the "hilarious" jokes I'm e-mailed by even my "moderate" and "independent" family and friends ... who sincerely felt betrayed by Clinton's "affair" (or whatever you'd parse it) and especially, as they saw it, his bald-faced lying to them about it. Clint Eastwood won the Oscar[®] for *Unforgiven*; George Bush, the presidency.

And even the Democrats seemed to buy into it ...

Why, during the presidential campaign, Al would hardly be seen in public with Bill or even

utter his name out loud; and Democratic politicians from coast to coast followed suit, shunning Al Gore like he was Al Capone.

Pardon my doubling the entendre, but Monica blew it.

Nothing new under the sun—like a Classical Greek hero, President Clinton served his country well, only to be done in by a personal "tragic flaw"—but that opened the door for our rabid political enemies, who must share the blame for the avoidable dire consequences ever since then: Things have never been the same since the Republicans insisted upon impeaching William Jefferson Clinton. *The fact of the matter is, the economy started going downhill and Osama Bin Laden started plotting 9/11 during that period of crippled American leadership.*

The impeachment was more than a newsworthy event; it was a historical turning point—we ignore at our peril the fact that the only other such event was a consequence of the greatest upheaval in American history, the War Between the States.

The bitter disagreements within the deeply divided Supreme Court in the 2000 presidential election and even the passionate controversies surrounding this administration's conduct in the War on Terrorism take on additional meaning within that larger, historical context. Ironically, it is the traditional "states rights crowd" that is centralizing powers into the hands of the federal government—from the congressional investigations into the most personal details of the life of Mr. Clinton, to the

assertion of federal judicial powers over the constitutional rights of a state court in a presidential election, or the denial of due process and other civil rights of individuals in investigations by the Justice and Defense departments.

We are witnesses to history; moreover, we are participants in it.

History teaches us two things: First, we can't change the past; second, we can't help but change the future, so we had best learn from the past.

With that in mind, where do we go from here? How have bodies politic redeemed themselves throughout history?

Answer: Usually by recognizing that they have been conquered by being divided, a strategy pre-dating even the most ruthless of Caesars.

Now, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander: The Republicans, too, are vulnerable to division, primarily into the economic conservatives and the religious conservatives. It is worth noting that in his first election, Bill Clinton captured about half the vote of the Born Again Christians, primarily because they felt that the previous Bush administration was too beholden to business interests and not doing enough for the poor—on Judgment Day, the King will say, "Whatsoever you did to the least of my brothers, that you did unto me."

More important than attacking our political enemies, though, is setting our own political house in order.

Therefore, each one of us should ask our self—not the pollsters, not the press, not our political leadership—why, of all things, am I a Democrat?

The answers we will give will characteristically revolve around balancing fairness (our "liberal" tendencies) with practicality (our "moderate" aspects)—as in the economy, civil rights, the environment, etc.

Although we must prioritize our efforts, particularly since we are in effect, if not numbers, the minority party (as evidenced by the GOP having massively outspent us in this last election, as they will probably do for the foreseeable future), individually and collectively we should politely but unapologetically support and defend as many of these issues of "fairness" and "practicality" as our conscience will allow, whenever and wherever we can, regardless of how outnumbered we might be. Heroes are made, not born.

It is only natural, and completely American and Democratic, for our membership and even our leadership to occasionally agree to disagree; but if we are to succeed in any of our specific goals, we must stay united around our common themes—as of "fairness" and "practicality"—and not let ourselves be permanently divided, along whatever lines our near-sighted or self-serving political enemies might try to exploit.

It is also only natural to get caught up in the day-to-day particulars of political ins-and-outs; nevertheless, we have to recognize that there is a greater good involved: We must take stock from time to time and realize that we are working or fighting, or however we choose to put it, not just for some selfish advantage of power but rather for what we truly believe in. We must never forget that the Democratic Party is a uniquely valuable institution—that our dear country could suffer irreparable harm if left to the foolhardy or devious devices of the Republicans ... or any other rival party, let alone the apathy or cynicism that embitters so many of our fellow citizens, to the point that they even disenfranchise themselves.

We are Democrats because we love America and we believe—we know—that no one else can serve her as we can.

Now that's a concept that should swing some voters. And if it doesn't, to heck with them (another concept that should swing some voters, and if it doesn't ...).

Thankful this Thanksgiving, and always, to be your fellow American and Democrat,

Doug Drenkow