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THEY SAID IT

“Back when Woodrow Wilson was running for president, he had a campaign song called “Wilson, That’s All.” If only. With Joe Wilson, it’s never all. He keeps coming back like a song. But in the real world there’s only one scandal in this whole wretched business – that the CIA, as part of its institutional obstruction of the administration, set up a pathetic “fact-finding mission” that would be considered a joke by any serious intelligence agency and compounded it by sending, at the behest of his wife, a shrill politically motivated poseur who, for the sake of 15 minutes’ celebrity on the cable gabfest circuit, misled the nation about what he found.”

--Mark Steyn July 17, 2005 *Sun-Times* Columnist

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VICTORY BLUEPRINT FOR DEMS IN ‘08.

Now I am not in the business of giving advice to Democrats, but three people who have provided me with a great deal of pleasure over the years make a lot of money doing just that, so this week I thought I would lend them a helping hand as a token of my appreciation.

These individuals are Bill Clinton’s famous hatchet man James Carville, a.k.a., the Ragin’ Cajun; one of the Democratic Party’s best known pollsters, Stan Greenberg; and the man who was once described by *Atlantic Monthly* as “the most sought-after consultant in the Democratic Party,” namely Robert Shrum. Together, these three have arguably done more to help the GOP become America’s majority party than any other combination of “political experts” in the country, with the possible exception of Bill and Hillary Clinton. So it goes without saying that Americans owe them a great debt of gratitude.

In fact, Shrum has been helping Democrats lose elections for 33 years now, beginning in 1972 when he worked for the presidential campaigns of John Lindsey, Ed Muskie, and then George McGovern. Since that time, he has been involved in a steady stream of losing Democratic Party ventures, including presidential bids by Ted Kennedy, Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, Al Gore, and John Kerry. To the everlasting despair of the nation, he quit the Carter campaign before he had a chance to destroy it and was never able to torpedo Bill’s efforts because Bill wouldn’t hire him.

Today, these three genuine American heroes are united under the banner of an organization called the Democracy Corps, which, according to its website, was founded by them in 1999 as a result of the “outrage” they each felt over the unfair Republican insistence that an amoral, ethically challenged perjurer should not sit in the Oval Office.

Another reason I like these guys so much is that their *modus operandi* as political advisers is similar to and sometimes every bit as comical as that of the Three Stooges, who have appealed to my highly sophisticated sense of humor since I was an adolescent.

These hilarious comics would always present themselves as enormously serious and businesslike when they would show up somewhere to do some sort of job. If they were going to paint, they would have all sorts of ladders and brushes and tarps with them and would have painter's caps on their heads. If they were going to do plumber's work, they would have tools hanging from their belts and lots of boxes containing an amazing array of pipes and wrenches and plumbing stuff. Then the poor sap who had made the mistake of hiring them would leave the scene and the chaos would begin.

Like Larry, Moe and Curly, the Democracy Corps' Jim, Stan, and Bob always show up for work with a highly impressive array of the principal tools of their trade, which in their case consists of polling data. For example, their latest effort, entitled "Democrats' Moment To Engage," was based on a 20-page long poll (you can find it at <http://www.democracycorps.com>.) which contains a seemingly endless list of questions, some of which require respondents to fine tune their "feelings toward some people and organizations" on a scale from 1 to 100, with 1 being VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE and 100 being VERY WARM, FAVORABLE (caps in the original).

The initial impression is, as it was when the Three Stooges assured the lady that they could fix the leaky faucet in her bathroom, that these guys must be very good. I mean wow, measuring "feelings" and "warmth" on a Celsius scale? That's impressive! "Gee Stan, my 'feelings' tell me the answer is 42.7, but my 'warmth' seems to indicate a 43.8. So I guess I would have to say 43.25." (FYI, 22% of Americans feel "warm" about gay marriages, while 54% feel "warm" about stem-cell research.)

Then one begins to look through 24 pages of virtually incomprehensible, multi-colored graphs and charts and 14 pages of "analysis," and the only appropriate response anyone in their right mind could possible muster is the old Three Stooges line, Nyuk! Nyuk! Nyuk!

I won't go into detail because the purpose here is not to review their advice to Democrats, but to offer some of my own. But basically, the message that this dynamic trio draws from all this effort is the amazingly insightful observation that the American public is growing a little sour on George Bush after almost five years in the White House (who knew?), followed by the stunning insight that this provides Democrats with an opportunity to make some gains at the expense of the Republicans.

Okay, you say. And how might they do this? Well, according to Jim, Stan, and Bob, "they must poise [sic – a great touch, like holding the pipe wrench by the wrong end] sharp choices – ones that define the Democrats, not just the Republicans and ones that, in every battle, make the Democrats the instrument for reforming and changing Washington." Right.

This provides me with an opportunity to show off my sophisticated sense of humor, as mentioned above. A man walks into a drug store and asks for some talcum powder. The woman clerk says, "Walk this way." And he says, "If I could walk that way I wouldn't need talcum powder." The point being that if the Democrats could find a way to "poise sharp choices," which would define them as instruments for "reforming and changing Washington" they wouldn't need consultants and pollsters. Duh! They would be the majority party.

Anyway, with that introduction, here's my free advice to Democrats, who badly need it.

First, Democrats need to recognize that they will be running a liberal 2008. That's a fact, not a speculation, since there are no moderates or conservatives left in the Party and if there were, he or she couldn't win the Party's nomination anyway. The Party can and will

dress its candidate up as a moderate, but he or she will be liberal nevertheless. Reference the “moderate” John Kerry, who had the most liberal voting record in the U.S. Senate.

This means that coming up with a list of “sharp choices” to “poise” is not the key to victory. It is part of the equation, of course, but not a particularly large part. Delightfully packaged toothpaste still won’t sell if it tastes terrible, drips off the brush, and comes in a leaky tube.

The key to a Democratic victory is to figure out how to sell a liberal dressed up as a moderate. Now, contrary to what some conservatives would like to believe, this can be done. Bill Clinton did it. And both Al Gore and John Kerry came close, all because a great many Americans share the traditional liberal dream of an active federal government employing the tools of a modern state to make their individual daily lives better and safer and their society more just and compassionate. It’s basically a good political message, which is why the “compassionate” George Bush has stolen large chunks of it. In fact, there is little question that a great many Americans would like to vote for a liberal proponent of this message, if both the time and the liberal in question seemed right to them.

So, with this in mind, the very first thing that Democrats need to do is stop trying to convince the American public that the United States is in dire straits, i.e., that the war in Iraq is turning into another Vietnam and that the economy is in danger of blowing up like Mount St. Helens.

Democrats may not like it to admit this, but a great many people do not consider troubled times to be the “right time” to vote for a liberal, and this is especially true when the trouble in question involves national security matters. And since there is a strong likelihood that the United States will still be threatened by terrorism in 2008, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will still be going on, Democrats might want to abandon the center piece of their current political strategy, which consists of incessant hand wringing and doomsday talk.

The way I see it, there are two replacement strategies available to them. The first would be to convince the public that Democrats are as aggressive and astute when it comes to national security matters as the Republicans. A really hawkish Democratic candidate might be able to accomplish this, but, as I said above, there is no such animal in the Democratic Party and if there were he or she probably couldn’t win the nomination.

The Democrats tried this in 2004 when they nominated Kerry. But he wasn’t convincing, even though he was a “war hero.” Thus, in my opinion, the only practical way to change the public’s attitude on this score would be for a Democrat to first win the White House and then to demonstrate competence on the national security front. Bill Clinton did the first and failed to do the second. In any case, this isn’t a practical option for 2008.

The second alternative strategy would be for Democrats to convince the public that there is no national security threat; that things are just fine, thank you; that George Bush has done a remarkably good job of securing the country against terrorism and that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not only going quite well but have already made the world safe for a liberal Democrat to sit in the White House.

An elemental part of this option is the fact that George Bush will not run for president in 2008. The 22nd Amendment prevents this. You can look it up. So praising him would not hurt the Democrats, as long as they could make the case in 2008 that their candidate would be a better choice to handle things from that point on than the Republican. And why not? Wouldn’t it make sense, they could say, to have an intelligent, compassionate, and moderate president, who is tough but isn’t carrying the baggage that the Bush administration had accumulated by poor diplomacy over the preceding eight years?

The first step in implementing this strategy would be to immediately stop complaining that America is losing the war on terror and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and that the nation is in big trouble because of George Bush. The idea would be to

support U.S. efforts to spread democracy abroad, speak confidently about the future, and make the case that Democrats played an important part in this success story and probably would have done it better, since the mistakes Bush made were not his personal fault but the fault of a conservative philosophy that is unable to use the carrot and the stick simultaneously. The message would be that aggressive hawks might be good at starting and fighting wars, but that a moderate Democrat would be the best choice for ending a well-fought conflict and establishing a permanent peace. Oust Churchill and put in Attlee.

Democrats would be wise to take a similar approach toward the economy. They should stop with the hand wringing and doomsday talk; stop trying to scare the public into believing that the nation is on the brink of disaster due to the twin deficits and tax cuts. Make the case that President Bush, with a lot of help from them, did a good job of getting the country through the economic troubles caused by 9/11, and that the one requirement for continuing the good times that we are enjoying today is to employ the skills that a moderate Democrat would bring to the table, skills that are not ordinarily found among conservative Republicans, who are too ideologically rigid to take the best advantage of good times.

As evidence of this, they could cite the many economic troubles that Bush failed to solve, including the pending bankruptcy of Social Security and Medicare, rising health care costs, the trade deficit, and all sorts of other troubles that loom as a result of baby boomer aging. The idea would be not to blame Bush personally or to argue that America is on the brink of disaster. Instead, Democrats should make the case that these need to be addressed in order for the good times to last; that they can be addressed satisfactorily with a minimum amount of sacrifice by the average American; and that they, the Democrats, are best positioned to do this, given that conservatives had eight years and failed. The message would be that the future is bright, but that it needs a little fine tuning, not the ham handed efforts of a conservative who has no respect for government and no competence in making it work.

Now if all this is done correctly, the Democrats should be in a position to argue that the time is right for a moderate Democrat to take the reins of government. The problem then would be to find a moderate Democrat who is right for the time.

The first step in this process would be to get over the angry bit. The Democratic Party desperately needs a leader who can project a happy, upbeat image. Anger is a hard sell. Bill Clinton ran as a happy, optimistic guy. And he won. Al Gore and John Kerry ran as men who were angry most of the time. And they lost. What's to know?

This may not be easy. The Democrat Party seethes with anger. Al and John are still around and still testy. Bile fills the rhetoric of the likes of Teddy and Harry. Miss Hillary is wound tighter than a spring in an eight-day clock. Howard Dean openly speaks of his "hate" for Republicans "and everything they stand for." Even the comedy team of Jim, Stan, and Bob publicly proclaim in the opening line of the second paragraph of their web site that their organization was born out of "outrage."

If the public still read Milton, the Democratic Party of today would remind them of four of the five infernal rivers that run through hell.

Abhorred Styx, the flood of deadly hate;
Sad Acheron of sorrow, black and deep;
Cocytus, named of lamentation loud
Heard on the rueful stream; fierce Phlegethon,
Whose waves of torrent fire inflame with rage.

I have no practical solution to offer for this problem. The mass administration of psychotropic drugs might help, but with Howard Dean in charge of the party and Miss Hillary as its titular political leader, the road from Prozac to Kool-Aid might be too short to risk.

But the problem is out there and I'll leave it to the Democrats to find a solution. In the meantime, for those gentle readers who are likely to criticize me for aiding and abetting the enemy, let me make the following case.

For starters, the Democrats neither would nor could follow my advice, even if they learned of it, which they won't. Second, it seems to me that the United States would be a better place if they did. As currently constituted, the Democratic Party is a blight on America's political landscape that needs to be treated if the nation is to realize its full potential in the 21st century.

KARL ROVE AND DEMOCRATIC SLOTH.

So, as it turns out, Karl Rove was not the notorious, malicious leaker who spitefully and illegally told reporters the secret identity of former Ambassador Joseph Wilson's wife, thereby blowing her cover, endangering her life, and threatening national security. With the revelations made over the last week, it has become clear that, at worst, Rove is guilty of poor judgment in relaying what he had heard from one reporter to another and suggesting that the second reporter be careful about how much credence he should give to Wilson's story, since his trip to Niger was of dubious origin and his report was, in many aspects, patently false.

Given that Rove is both a senior White House official and the President's most trusted political advisor, one would expect that most people – Democrats included – would be relieved to know that he did not intentionally break the law by “outing” a clandestine intelligence officer. More to the point, one would expect that they would be similarly relieved that the White House did not put national security at risk – in the middle of a war, no less – in pursuit of a petty, personal vendetta.

Yet Washington's Democrats are not exactly relieved. And they are not particularly happy. Once again, they look like chumps, having invested so much energy and righteous indignation in a potential scandal story, only to have it blow up in their collective face. The Wilson/Plame/Rove affair has, over the course of a week, gone from being a possibly monumental political and national security disgrace that was going to rock the Bush administration to its core to a

second-rate non-scandal that isn't significant enough even to rate a “-gate” suffixed nickname. As *The New York Times*' John Tierney put it over the weekend:

For now . . . it looks as if this scandal is about a spy who was not endangered, a whistle-blower who did not blow the whistle and was not smeared, and a White House official who has not been fired for a felony that he did not commit. And so far the only victim is a reporter who did not write a story about it . . .

What do you call a scandal that's not scandalous?

Nadagate.

Now, since this specific non-scandal is a part of a broad pattern of behavior, whereby Democrats get way out in front of a story that appears potentially embarrassing to the White House, only to end up looking dim, shrill, and aggressively partisan when the embarrassment turns out to be a figment of their collective imagination, it is, in my opinion, worth asking why this happens over and over again and how this particular pathology might affect the Democratic Party's chances at reclaiming majority party status anytime in the foreseeable future.

Most commonly, this habitual scandal mongering by Democrats is blamed either on hatred or payback. In the first explanation, Democrats are obsessively consumed with hatred of President Bush, of his war on terror, and of the political success he and his party have enjoyed. In the case of the Plame Affair, this hatred is magnified exponentially by the fact that the target of the scandal is Karl Rove, who was the architect both of George W. Bush's rise to power and of the consolidation of that power that took place last November. And while most Democrats understand that there is a chance that they might look foolish chasing a scandal that may not pan out, they are nevertheless unable to control themselves, to harness their hatred so to speak. They are, in the end, emotionally driven to try their very best to see the President somehow embarrassed.

The second explanation posits that Democrats are simply trying to exact a little karmic revenge for the way in which the Republicans and, in their estimation, the mainstream media treated Bill Clinton during his eight years in the White House. Bill, they contend, was harassed for eight years and even impeached (though not convicted) over matters that were less than scandalous. And they are, according to this explanation, merely playing the game by the rules Republicans wrote, trying to undermine a twice-elected President by exploiting seemingly minor ethical lapses.

Certainly both explanations contain at least a grain of truth. Washington Democrats are, indeed, consumed with hatred for the President and they do, in fact, believe that their behavior is in line with Inside-the-Beltway norms established last decade by the Gingrich-led Republicans. That said, there is, I believe, a simpler and more plausible explanation for the Democrats' repeated scandal-driven idiocy. They are, in a word, lazy.

I have written repeatedly over the years about liberal Baby Boomers' propensity for believing that their political experiences (e.g. Vietnam) are somehow more significant and more indicative of the "real" course of human history than those of any other generation. This conceit, in turn, leads them to misunderstand the true nature and relevance of those experiences, meaning that they tend to incorporate disastrously mistaken political "lessons" into their core ideology.

In their collective recollection, the Watergate scandal was a boon to their party, both in terms of politics and policy, allowing them not only to reverse the humiliation of the 1972 presidential election, but to foist a "progressive" agenda on official Washington, "reforming" everything from the FBI and CIA to Congress itself. It doesn't really matter to them that the political benefits were exceptionally short-lived or that their post-Watergate reforms have, almost without exception, proven disastrous, both for their party and the nation. They recollect Watergate as being a triumph for liberalism and they want desperately to reenact it.

The reason for their desperation appears to be the cynical belief that a Watergate-esque scandal is the quickest and least energy intensive means of regaining majority party status. As historian, Vice Presidential advisor, and neocon conspirator extraordinaire Victor Davis Hanson has noted, the Democrats are frustrated by the fact that the last two elections produced a near 50-50 split among voters, but that "that close split is not reflected in the sharing of real political power." Rather than actually doing the "hard, necessary work of winning the public over to a systematic alternative vision," however, the leaders of the Democratic Party appear to hope to shift the balance of power by exploiting a scandal and causing George W. Bush to fall out of favor with the "few million voters" who, in theory at least, hold the keys to power in Washington today.

It has been a quarter century now since the American people overwhelmingly elected a man whose political agenda was radical in its opposition to the post-Depression liberal status quo, and it has been just over a decade since that anti-liberal vision was reaffirmed with the seemingly improbable election of a Republican congressional majority. Yet somehow the leaders of the Democratic Party still appear blissfully unaware that the American electorate has largely rejected their tired, statist agenda. One would have expected that the party would, by now, have read the proverbial handwriting on the wall and altered its own political vision to more accurately reflect the will of the people. But a mixture of arrogance and indolence appears to have prevented them from doing so.

As long ago as the presidential campaign of 2000, we noted that the Democrats had become the party of the "new reactionaries." And little has changed since. With few exceptions, Democratic Party leaders and activists continue to believe that their failed ideology is somehow still relevant and that all they need is the right break to wake the public from the GOP-induced hypnotic trance and to convince voters of the brilliance of the "progressive" agenda.

Of course, the problem with such expectations is that they are, in addition to being reflective of intellectual slothfulness, based largely on a misunderstanding of recent political history. I hate to contradict Professor Hanson, but the 50-50 split that he notes and to which Democrats cling desperately, is misleading. There is a reason that no Democrat, even one with the most liberal voting record in the Senate, is willing to speak truthfully about his (or her) statist inclinations or to wear proudly the “liberal” label, namely because the American electorate is unwilling to tolerate old-school liberalism and will only consider voting for a Democrat when they are sufficiently convinced that he (or she) is reasonably conservative or at least moderate on most issues.

With the exception of Bill Clinton (and to a lesser extent his wife) no big name Democrat in last couple of decades has fully understood that all of the big political battles have, at least rhetorically, been won by the right. Nearly all political debate today takes place on “conservative” terms. No one talks openly about raising taxes; tax hikes are couched as cuts favoring the “middle class” instead of the “rich.” No one talks openly about expanding the size and scope of government power; even Democrats today are “deficit hawks.” And no one openly talks about leveling the discrepancies between rich and poor or about expanding the redistribution of wealth.

What this means, of course, is that even if the Democrats somehow manage to succeed in bringing down or at least kneecapping the Bush administration over some scandal, their political triumph is likely not to last long or to translate into a reestablishment of political dominance. Within six years of Watergate, the GOP had fully recovered, in large part because the “progressiveness” of the Carter administration and the post-reform Congress proved to be unsuited for

serious times and serious problems. The effect today of a scandal as monumental as Watergate would likely be no greater. Today’s Democrats have lost the battle of ideas, and until they are willing to invest the time and effort into rethinking their battle plans, they will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

So while the Democrats continue to chase their tails, hoping desperately to bring down a President who is, by and large, irrelevant now to their future political fortunes, Republicans can rest assured that their majority party status is reasonably safe. No matter how many Plame/Rove scandals they try to exploit, Democrats will not be the majority party again until they address this “deficit of ideas.” The free-spending and big government inclinations of the current GOP leaders have left a great deal of room for serious Democrats to revamp and repopularize their ideology, but in order to do so, they will have to shake off their intellectual laziness.

As Mark notes above, this will not be particularly easy, since simply coming up with “new” ideas is not really an option. If the Democrats are truly going to make themselves relevant again, they will have to accept that the proto-European welfare state they so admire is not only detested by the American electorate but is an empirical failure as well. This will not be a matter of developing new ideas, but of accepting established and successful ones that have heretofore been considered “conservative.”

Until then, Democrats’ sloth will continue to prove deadly to their greater political ambitions.

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