

The Survival Guide for Democrats

By Langdon Morris

January 11, 2005

Having largely misunderstood the key political lessons of the last 25 years, the Democrats now find themselves in a new and unpleasant situation - firmly entrenched as the minority. As they think about how rebuild their party, here are four survival tips for them to keep in mind over the next four tough years.

Step 1: Frame the Morality Debate. As cognitive scientist George Lakoff has so eloquently pointed out, the Republicans have taken control of the government by taking control of the debate about government.

And as the exit polls showed, morality remains at the very center of that debate. Yet the Democrats remain unaware that this issue that could be the very key to their revival. Why? Because the current climate is one of increasing fear - fear of terrorism, fear of economic decline, fear of crime, drugs, violence, social decay, and a widespread fear of the future - and when people are afraid, they revert instinctively to the security blanket called "morality." Ronald Reagan was the first to exploit such fears (remember the "evil empire"?); and Bush has done a pretty fair job too, although now it's the "axis of evil." Even Cheney and Condi are at it, busy reminding us to be terrified of "the mushroom cloud," etc., etc.

So what should the Democrats do? They must talk about morality; but if they allow the morality discussion to remain stuck on the right wing hot-button issues of abortion, God, guns, gays, and taxes, then they're sure to remain in the minority for a long time to come. Instead, there's plenty of Democratic morality to spread around - environmental protection, a rational response to global warming, energy conservation, sustainability, fairness, a balanced budget, social justice, national health care, poverty, homelessness, respect for the world's nations, population control, self-restraint, and personal choice are strong Democratic issues that most average Americans care deeply about.

Step 2. Return to the Roots. The seeds of the current Republican majority were sown in the 1980s with a systematic grass roots effort to win local offices. Now the Democrats have to do the same thing, developing strong candidates and campaign strategies to win seats on city councils, school boards, county commissions, and in state legislatures across the country, while at the same time developing the next generation of leaders.

Step 3. Articulate a Vision. In 2004 John Kerry positioned himself as the guy "who wasn't George W. Bush." This turned out to be insufficient. In contrast, Bush - even in his rather inarticulate way - actually did present a vision. Never mind that it was trite, simplistic, and deceptive - at least he said something about what he wanted to accomplish.

To survive into the next round, the Democrats are going to have to say not only who they're not, but who they are; not only what they're against, but what they're for.

Step 4: Be Ready When the Other Shoe Drops. Sooner or later, most Republican policy initiatives tend to backfire (and thus the greatest challenge that the Republicans face is probably their own ideology).

Here are a few examples, in case your memory needs jogging, related to anything having to do with "deregulation, reform, or relief:" Republican-led savings and loan deregulation cost the taxpayers billions, and so did electricity and then securities deregulation (Hello, Enron?). Airline deregulation isn't looking rosy, either, as all the major carriers flirt with bankruptcy.

Now the focus has shifted from deregulation to "reform," as in a "Medicare Reform" that will punish our senior citizens for decades to come. And now here's Bush's economic *piece de resistance*, as having created a \$500 billion deficit with "tax relief," he's now promoting "tax reform" and "Social Security reform," twin budget-busters that are certain to cost you and your grandchildren dearly - unless you already happen to be a millionaire.

And of course there's Iraq, a debacle now almost 2 years along, with 1350 American lives lost and \$200 billion spent so far, and still without a clear victory in sight, nor any possible way out.

So when you really think about it, it's been a long time since much of anything from the Republican agenda has worked out. Despite their comfortable majorities, then, the Republicans remain highly vulnerable, and the Democrats probably have better prospects than it appears on the surface. But since the Democrats failed to exploit George W. Bush's many shortcomings in 2004, it's clear that it will take some very astute leadership for them to capitalize on what's likely to be another four years of Republican policy blunders, tepid excuses, and moral demagoguery.

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