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MANAGING EDITOR:

The Democratic Strategist has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As The Democratic Strategists' editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

THE EXTREMIST CONQUEST OF THE GOP: FIVE YEARS OF STRATEGY MEMOS FROM THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST

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BETWEEN MODERATES AND EXTREMISTS.
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INFILTRATED AND TRANSFORMED BY ADVOCATES
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**DENYING THIS REALITY DOES A PROFOUND
DISSERVICE TO DEMOCRACY.**

ARTICLES BY:

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Introduction

The GOP is not engaged in a struggle between moderates and extremists. The entire Republican Party has been infiltrated and transformed by advocates of an extremist political philosophy who now hold it captive. Denying this reality does a profound disservice to democracy.

As negotiations regarding the basic operation of the federal government reach a critical stage, the mainstream media is once again desperately revising its definition of what constitutes a Republican “moderate” in order to maintain the fiction that the GOP still has both moderate and extremist wings. This fits the unwritten rule of mainstream journalism that powerful conservative political and economic elites and establishments must always be described as basically “moderate” or “reasonable” in some sense or other while right-wing or conservative “extremism” must always be portrayed as a disreputable fringe aberration.

But this is deeply and fundamentally false. Today’s GOP is not engaged in a struggle between moderates and extremists. The entire Republican Party has been infiltrated and transformed by the advocates of an extremist political philosophy who for all practical purposes now hold it captive.

It is profoundly dangerous to refuse to recognize and confront this simple reality. For the last five years The Democratic Strategist has been tracking this profoundly disturbing trend and has repeatedly called attention to the fundamental changes that have been occurring.

During the last five years we have argued the following:

1. That the core ideology of modern GOP extremism is the ethos of “politics as warfare” and the view of opponents as literal enemies. This perspective, which has gained major traction within the GOP, represents a fundamental change from a traditional conservative and Republican view of American political institutions as designed and intended to foster negotiation and compromise.
2. That the current “extremism” of the GOP is not confined to extreme positions on issues. It also rejects and undermines basic democratic norms of behavior and democratic institutions and embraces tactics used by European extremist parties.
3. That GOP extremism is not confined to a “fringe” of the GOP, a small minority of officeholders or only to the party’s grass-roots base. On the contrary, it is now supported by major elements of the conservative political and economic establishment and is as financially and organizationally powerful as the traditional Republican “establishment” of previous years. The fact that the GOP leadership in the House of Representatives now regularly and systematically capitulates to extremist demands dramatically illustrates the degree to which the entire party is now effectively controlled by the “extremists”.

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4. That the mainstream media has played a deeply destructive role in minimizing and even denying the facts about the rise of Republican extremism. Over the last four years the media have evolved from first consistently asserting a spurious “false equivalency” between the two political parties to more recently demonstrating a willingness to continually redefine the term “GOP moderate” so that the extremist leader or extremist position of two years ago suddenly becomes the more “moderate” leader or position today.

Listed below are some of the major TDS Strategy Memos we have published during the last five years about republican extremism. They can be read in the pages following.

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**A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:
WHAT IS “RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM?”**

By JAMES VEGA

The recent much-discussed report on “Rightwing Extremism” by the Department of Homeland Security has raised a very important issue of definition: What precisely is right-wing “political extremism” and how does it differ from other concepts like “the radical right” or “hard-right conservatism”?

For most Americans, the most critical—and in fact the defining—characteristic of “political extremism”—whether left or right—is the approval of violence as a means to achieve political goals. Opinions on issues, no matter how “extreme” or irrational they may be do not by themselves necessarily make a person a dangerous “extremist.” Whether opinions are crackpot (e.g., abolish all paper money) or repulsive (e.g., non-whites should be treated as sub-humans), extreme political opinions are not in and of themselves incitements to or justifications for violence.

But there is actually one very clear and unambiguous way to define a genuinely “extremist” political ideology—it is *any ideology that justifies or incites violence*.

Underlying all extremist political ideologies is one central idea—the vision of “*politics as warfare*”. While this phrase is widely used as a metaphor, political extremists mean it in an entirely concrete and operational way. It is a view that is codified in the belief that political opponents are literally “enemies” who must be crushed rather than fellow Americans with whom negotiated political compromises must be sought.

In recent decades we have unfortunately become accustomed to political opponents being defined as “enemies” rather than fellow Americans, but the notion was profoundly shocking when Richard Nixon first used the term in his famous “*enemies list*.” It marked a tremendous change from generally collegial attitudes of Senators and members of Congress, where a certain basic level of civility was almost always maintained, even among the most bitter political opponents. Unlike many other countries, until the Nixon era American politicians generally saw “politics” as the job of achieving rational compromises among democratically elected representatives and not as the task of crushing, purging or liquidating political enemies, as was often the case in totalitarian countries.

Watergate and the election of Jimmy Carter temporarily derailed the trend toward defining politics as warfare, but the notion got a powerful “second wind” in the 1980’s—which came from two main sources.

The first was the culture and doctrines of counter-insurgency and covert operations that blossomed in the Reagan era. In combating insurgent movements, U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine carefully studied Leninist organizations and frequently imitated their strategy and

tactics in order to dismantle them. The basic philosophy was frequently to “fight fire with fire” using any available tactics, including even blatantly undemocratic and morally indefensible ones.

During the Reagan years, there was a massive expansion of extremely secret counter-insurgency programs—primarily in Central America and Afghanistan—that were conducted outside the formal structure of traditional civilian-military control. Among the people involved in these programs, an ethos of loyalty developed to the secret military/intelligence hierarchy that was conducting these operations rather than to the formal elected government.

The hero and symbol of this trend was Oliver North. By showing up in his military uniform at congressional hearings called to investigate his role in the illegal funding of counter-insurgencies in Central America and Afghanistan (although he was actually a political appointee of the Reagan white house at the time and not on active military duty) North dramatically embodied the view that his primary loyalty was to the covert military/intelligence command running the secret operations around the world and not to the majority of Congress that had specifically prohibited the actions he had coordinated. He became a symbol of a perspective that viewed the majority of Congress (that had voted against funding the Nicaraguan “contras”) as an internal “enemy” just as the Nicaraguan Sandinistas were an external enemy.

By the early 1990’s this general point of view had become deeply entrenched among many right-wing conservatives. As conservative talk radio shows grew in popularity, many hosts like Rush Limbaugh repeated and refined this militarized and combative version of conservative ideology.

These views became even more extreme after the fall of the Soviet Union. In the conservative view, Liberals quickly replaced communism as the principal “enemies” of America. Conservative leader Grover Norquist expressed the view quite clearly when talking to a former college classmate. He said: “For 40 years we fought a two-front war against the Soviet Union and statism in the U.S. Now we can turn all our time and energy into crushing you. With the Soviet Union it was just business. With you, it’s personal.”

The titles of a whole series of books by well-known conservatives reflected this same view of liberals as literal “enemies”:

Dinesh D’Souza: “The Enemy at Home”

Ann Coulter: “Treason: liberal treachery from the cold war to the war on terror”

Michael Savage: “The Enemy Within: saving America from the liberal assault on our schools, faith and military”

From this it followed that there could be no compromise with liberalism. Politics became visualized as a bitter civil war.

“This war [between liberals and conservatives] has to be fought with the scale and duration and savagery that is only true of civil wars.” – Newt Gingrich

“We’ll defeat them [the democrats] and crush their institutions...a cornered rat fights. The left is playing for its life and will fight harder than anyone on the right sees”.
– Grover Norquist

“We will not try to reform existing institutions. We only intend to weaken them and eventually destroy them” – The manifesto of the Paul Weyrich-inspired New Traditionalist Movement

Along with the covert counterinsurgency culture, the second major source of the “politics as warfare” view was the growing religious right.

In the 1980’s and 1990’s the religious right began to reach large audiences through the growing network of evangelical TV shows, particularly those of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and by the “Left Behind” novels of Tim LaHaye. The religious right also absorbed a tremendous emotional intensity and “by any means necessary” sense of urgency from the increasingly militant and violent anti-abortion movement.

It is worth offering a wide range of quotes to show how remarkably widespread the “politics as warfare” view became among the religious right in the last 25 years.

“There is a cultural war going on for the soul of this country...the issue is making this God’s country again” – Ralph Reed

“Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty; we are called by God to conquer this country.” – Randall Terry

“Will you join me in a Declaration of War?” “There is no middle ground... the church is marshalling its forces.” – Fund Raising letter from Jerry Falwell

”We are involved in a “cultural war” for the very soul of America... [We are] recruiting “soldiers in the army of Christ... [There are] “five key fronts in the modern-day culture war”– Rev. D. James Kennedy, Coral Ridge Ministries

“It is dominion we are after, not just a voice. It is dominion we are after, not just influence. It is dominion we are after, not just equal time. World conquest. That is what Christ has commissioned us to accomplish” – George Grant, former executive director of D. James Kennedy’s Coral Ridge Ministries.

“Man your battle stations. Ready your weapons. They say this rhetoric is so inciting. I came to incite a riot...Man your battle stations. Ready your weapons. Lock and Load.”
– Rev. Rod Parsley

“We’re on the beaches of Normandy and we can see the pillbox entrenchments of academic and media liberalism. We’ll take back our country for Christ” – Rev. Russell Johnson, head of the Ohio Restoration Project.

Michelle Goldberg¹ described one nationwide series of rock concerts for fundamentalist youth as follows:

Battle cry, a Christian fundamentalist youth movement that has attracted as many as 25,000 people to Christian rock concerts in San Francisco, Philadelphia and Detroit uses elaborate light shows, Hummers, Ranks of Navy SEALs and the image and rhetoric of battle to pound home its message. The Rock band “Delirious, which played in the Philadelphia gathering, pounded out a song with the words “we’re an army of god and we’re ready to die... Let’s paint this big ol’ town redwe see nothing but the blood of Jesus. The lyrics were projected on large screens so some 17,000 participants could sing along. The crowd in the Wachovia sports stadium shouted in unison “we are warriors”

This vision of politics as warfare was profoundly reinforced and extended by the *Left Behind* series. As Chris Hedges² described the plot:

...200 million ghostly, demonic warriors would sweep across the planet, exterminating one-third of the world’s population. Those who join forces with the Antichrist in the *Left Behind* series, true to LaHaye’s conspiracy theories, include....the media, liberals, freethinkers, and international bankers.

The Antichrist, who heads the United Nations, eventually moves his headquarters to Babylon. These demonic forces battle the remaining Christian believers—those who converted after the rapture took place, remnants of extremist American militia groups, who in the novels are warriors for Christ...

This apocalyptic vision introduced a profound change in many conservative Christians’ view of liberals. They were no longer simply “immoral” or “sinners”—who might yet be saved or forgiven. They were literally demon soldiers in a satanic army.

In both the military and theological versions of the “politics is warfare and liberals are the enemies” perspective, the difference between violent extremists and others becomes quite subtle—it is simply whether one takes the notion of “enemies” as literal or figurative.

- From a military point of view, if the notion of “enemy” is taken literally, then liberals or Democrats become defined as “enemy combatants” in the military rules of engagement that all soldiers are taught and become legitimate targets for lethal action. Once defined this way, it is not wrong to kill these “enemies”; on the contrary it is a soldier’s solemn duty.
- Equally, from a religious point of view, if the “enemies” of Christianity are understood not simply as immoral and sinful human beings, who should be evangelized and hopefully saved, but rather as literally the demonic soldiers of a satanic army, then the Bible offers many passages that justify their violent annihilation—justifications for “Holy War” which were repeatedly invoked during the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the European wars between Catholic and Protestant.

¹http://www.amazon.com/Kingdom-Coming-Rise-Christian-Nationalism/dp/0393329763/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241049391&sr=1-1

²http://www.amazon.com/American-Fascists-Christian-Right-America/dp/B001O9CBAI/ref=sr_1_6?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241056770&sr=1-6

The ultimate results of taking the “*politics as warfare*” and “*liberals as enemies*” notions literally can be dramatically seen in the cases of the two most famous right-wing American terrorists—Tim McVeigh (the Oklahoma City bombing) and Eric Rudolph (the 1996 Olympics and abortion clinic bombings). Both men saw themselves as genuinely heroic American patriots and righteous Christian warriors who were first soldiers and then “prisoners of war” in the battle against America’s most evil enemies. The difference between them and other right-wing conservatives -- and what made them profoundly dangerous political “extremists”—was simply that they took the two concepts above literally rather than figuratively and followed them to their logical conclusion.

According to government statistics, violent right-wing extremism declined during the Bush years because of a combination of improved law enforcement efforts after Oklahoma City and also because of a widespread sense that Bush was following a deeply militaristic and crypto-theocratic agenda. But the underlying “politics as war” philosophy remained and, in fact, was powerfully reinforced by the Bush administration.

In fact, even with a Republican in the White House, violent rhetoric in America actually increased. In his book, *The Eliminationists*³, David Neiwert traces the infiltration of violent “kill them” rhetoric into the political mainstream. Although he does not arrange his information into a formal hierarchy of threat levels, it is easy to do so. The following are drawn from Neiwert along with other sources:

Levels of Violent Threats

1. Disturbing “Jokes” About Killing Liberals

Rush Limbaugh: “I tell people don’t kill all the liberals. Leave enough so we can have two on every campus—living fossils—so we we’ll never forget what these people stood for.”

Ann Coulter: “My only regret with Tim McVeigh is that he did not go to the *New York Times* building.”

2. Implied Threats:

Bill O’Reilly: “Americans who work against our military once the [Iraq] war is underway will be considered Enemies of the State by me. Just fair warning to you, Barbara Streisand, and others who see the world as you do. I don’t want to demonize anyone, but anyone who hurts this country in a time like this, well, let’s just say you will be spotlighted.”

3. Overt Threats of Violence against Liberals:

Glen Beck: “Hang on, let me just tell you what I’m thinking. I’m thinking about killing Michael Moore, and I’m wondering if I could kill him myself, or if I would need to hire somebody to do it. No, I think I could.”

³http://www.amazon.com/Eliminationists-Hate-Radicalized-American-Right/dp/0981576982/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241049550&sr=1-1

Eric Erickson (Redstate.com): “At what point do [people] get off the couch, march down to their state legislator’s house, pull him outside and beat him to a bloody pulp for being an idiot?”

Michael Savage: “I say round liberals up and hang em’ high”. “When I hear someone’s in the civil rights business, I oil up my AR-25.”

4. Specific Incitements to Violence against Law Enforcement Officers:

Dick Morris: “Those crazies in Montana who say “we’re going to kill ATF agents because the UN’s going to take over” Well, they’re beginning to have a case.”

G.Gorden Liddy (broadcasting advice on how to kill law enforcement officers): “Headshots, they are wearing body armor, head shots... or shoot for the groin.”

Seen in combination, it is clear that all these notions represent a profoundly ugly and slippery slope that leads toward actual violence. The various excuses usually offered—“I was just joking”, “I didn’t make any specific threat”, “Everyone understood that I didn’t actually mean it” and, most pathetically, “It’s no big deal because everyone talks that way these days”—are really utterly inadequate responses to the profoundly sinister trend they attempt to justify.

It is precisely a major increase in the violent rhetoric in extremist meetings and on extremist websites that has set off alarms within the law enforcement community and which was probably among the motivations for the release of the HRS report. Virtually every governmental and non-governmental agency that monitors extremist activity has noted that a similar trend in extremist rhetoric directly preceded the increase in violent terrorist activity in the 1990’s.

Many conservative groups object to being lumped together with violent extremists, and argue that even their most intense and radical opposition to Obama does not make them violent political extremists.

In fact, they are entirely correct. What distinguishes “political extremism” from other concepts like “the radical right” or “hard-right conservatism” is the following:

1. The two ideological pillars on which genuine political extremism rests are the notions of “politics as warfare” and of political opponents as “enemies”. Groups which reject these notions are not political extremists,
2. Political extremism becomes dangerous and violent whenever and wherever these two notions are taken literally.

What should Democrats do? Basically, there needs to be clear and resolute pushback against these two notions. When politicians or others use the notions of “politics as war,” and “liberals and Democrats as enemies”, Democrats have to clearly and forcefully object. They have to stop the discussion dead in its tracks and say:

No, you are profoundly wrong. Politics is not warfare and Americans with whom we disagree are not “enemies”. We totally reject these ideas. In fact, that’s one of the most fundamental differences between you and us and we think it is a major reason why most Americans now support Obama. You actually believe that you are literally at war with every single American who does not agree with you. We don’t think that way, and most Americans don’t either.

In fact, particularly now, in the age of Obama, most Americans do not see the world this way. But they have become accustomed to hearing hateful rhetoric and no longer immediately object.

As a result, the best defense against the political extremism and violence that now presents itself as a potential threat is precisely to object and to revive the traditional American sense of shock and outrage at extremist thinking—a sentiment that was once a proud hallmark of America’s profoundly democratic political culture.

STRATEGY MEMO: BEYOND “SABOTAGE”—THE CENTRAL ISSUE ABOUT THE GROWING POLITICAL EXTREMISM OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY IS THAT IT’S UNDERMINING FUNDAMENTAL AMERICAN STANDARDS OF ETHICAL POLITICAL CONDUCT AND BEHAVIOR. IT’S TIME FOR AMERICANS TO SAY “THAT’S ENOUGH”.

By ED KILGORE, JAMES VEGA AND J. P. GREEN

In a recent *Washington Monthly* commentary titled, “None Dare Call it Sabotage,”¹ Steve Benen gave voice to a growing and profoundly disturbing concern among Democrats—that Republicans may actually plan to embrace policies designed to deny Obama not only political victories but also the maximum possible economic growth during his term in order to weaken Democratic prospects in the 2012 elections.

The debate quickly devolved into an argument over the inflammatory word “sabotage”² and the extent to which the clearly and passionately expressed Republican desire to see Obama “fail” will actually lead them to deliberately choose economic and other policies that are most conducive to achieving that result.

But, among Democrats themselves, this particular question is actually just one particular component of a much broader and deeper concern—a very real and authentic sense of alarm that there is something both genuinely unprecedented and also profoundly dangerous in the intense “take no prisoners” political extremism of the current Republican Party. There is a deep apprehension that fundamental American standards of proper political conduct and ethical political behavior are increasingly being violated.

The key feature that distinguishes the increasingly extremist perspective of today’s Republican Party from the standards of political behavior we have traditionally considered proper in America is the view that politics is—quite literally, and not metaphorically—a kind of warfare and political opponents are literally “enemies”

This “*politics as warfare*” perspective has historically been the hallmark of many extremist political parties of both the ideological left and ideological right—parties ranging from the American Communist Party to the French National Front.

Historically, these political parties display a series of common features—features that follow logically and inescapably from the basic premise of politics as warfare:

I. Strategy:

- In the *politics as warfare* perspective the political party’s objective is defined as the conquest and seizure of power and not sincere participation in democratic governance. The party is viewed as a combat organization whose goal is to defeat an enemy, not an organization whose job is to faithfully represent the people who voted for it.

¹http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2010/11/the_sabotage_party.php

²http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2010/11/sabotage_who_us.php

- In the *politics as warfare* perspective extralegal measures, up to and including violence, are tacitly endorsed as a legitimate means to achieve a party's political aims if democratic means are insufficient to obtain its objectives. To obscure the profoundly undemocratic nature of this view, the “enemy” government—even when it is freely elected—is described as actually being illegitimate and dictatorial, thus justifying the use of violence as a necessary response to “tyranny”.
- In the *politics as warfare* perspective all major social problems are caused by the deliberate, malevolent acts of powerful elites with nefarious motives. An evil “them” is the cause of all society's ills.
- In the *politics as warfare* perspective the political party's philosophy and basic strategy is inerrant—it cannot be wrong. The result is the creation of a closed system of ideologically controlled “news” that creates an alternative reality.

II. Tactics:

- In the *politics as warfare* perspective standard norms of honesty are irrelevant. Lying and the use of false propaganda are considered necessary and acceptable. The “truth” is what serves to advance the party's objectives.
- In the *politics as warfare* perspective the political party accepts no responsibility for stability—engineering the fall of the existing government is absolutely paramount and any negative consequences that may occur in the process represent a kind of “collateral damage” that is inevitable in warfare.
- In the *politics as warfare* perspective the creation of contrived “incidents” or deliberate provocations are acceptable. Because the adherent of this view “knows” that his or her opponents are fundamentally evil, even concocted or staged incidents are still morally and ethically “true.” The distinction between facts and distortions disappears.
- In the *politics as warfare* perspective compromise represents both betrayal and capitulation. Destruction of the enemy is the only acceptable objective. People who advocate compromise are themselves enemies.

These various components all form part of an integrated whole. Seen as a coherent package they make it clear that *politics as warfare* is simply not an acceptable philosophy for an American political party. It is profoundly and unambiguously wrong.

It is easy to see examples of the various *politics as warfare*- based views and tactics listed above directly reflected in the statements and actions of the extreme wing of Republican coalition—they range from Michelle Bachmann and Sharon Angle's winking at violence with references to “second amendment remedies” to Andrew Breitbart's deliberate editing of a video to smear Shirley Sherrod, Glen Beck's suggesting that George Soros was a Nazi collaborator, Fox News' tolerating attacks on Obama as equivalent to Hitler and airing repeated suggestions that the miniscule New Black Panthers present a real and genuine national threat of stolen elections and Grover Norquist's endorsement of a government shutdown over extending the debt limit, despite the genuine dangers this poses to international financial stability.

The list can be continued with many other examples from Eric Erickson's RedState, Rush Limbaugh's radio show and organizations like Freedomworks. **An entire book has been written**³ containing nothing but examples of recognized right-wing spokesmen subtly and not so subtly endorsing and encouraging the use of violence against liberals and Democrats.

And this *politics as warfare* perspective is not confined to the “fringes” of the Republican Party.

Since the recent elections it has been increasingly argued that the top Republican leadership is not actually extreme. John Boehner, in particular, is typically portrayed as an old fashioned, traditional Republican politician.

But this misunderstands the role that the *politics as warfare* perspective plays within many extremist political parties. The leadership of these parties very often asserts complete and absolute fealty to democratic norms of behavior but simultaneously gives “wink and a nod” encouragement to the extreme elements within its base. Through euphemisms and veiled language the message is communicated that the leadership is really in agreement with the ideology of the “fringe.” This strategy of using “dog-whistles”—inaudible to others—to signal the base allows political parties to deny embracing extremism at the same time that they reassure and retain the loyalty of their extremist supporters.

Moreover, Republican leaders are now under enormous pressure to maintain a very belligerent, warlike rhetoric and style in all their activities. John Boehner is, after all, in the line of succession begun by Newt Gingrich, the first Republican congressional leader to explicitly argue for politics as a form of warfare (In 1994 Gingrich said: **“This war [between liberals and conservatives] has to be fought with the scale and duration and savagery that is only true of civil wars”**)⁴ and Tom DeLay, who now faces a prison sentence for his own indifference to the legal prohibitions against hyper-partisan scorched-earth tactics.

Here is just one recent example of how deeply the *politics as warfare* perspective has become embedded in the Republican worldview. On November 29th Rep. Joe Barton, seeking support to become head of the House Energy and Commerce Committee **told the Republican leadership**:⁵ “Speaker Boehner is our Dwight Eisenhower in the battle against the Obama Administration. Majority Leader Cantor is our Omar Bradley. I want to be George Patton—put anything in my scope and I will shoot it.”

It is not that long ago—in the era when the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy were still fresh in memory—that an inflammatory statement like this would have been considered grotesque and irresponsible. Now it barely merits comment.

The concerns of Democrats are therefore entirely serious. The *politics as warfare* perspective can no longer be dismissed as a phenomena that is confined to a fringe of the Republican Party—increasingly it permeates the organization.

But what can Democrats—and other Americans—do?

³http://www.amazon.com/Eliminationists-Hate-Radicalized-American-Right/dp/0981576982/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1291133554&sr=1-1

⁴http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/ac/2009/05/what_is_rightwing_extremism.php

⁵<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/29/AR2010112904500.html>

On the one hand, it is an unfortunate fact that many Americans are now hopelessly entangled in the alternative universe of the right-wing media. With a steady diet of Fox News it becomes possible for these people to look at the list of traits above and with absolute and total honesty say that, to them, it appears to describe the behavior of Democrats better than Republicans. Large numbers of these people now sincerely believe that Obama is consciously following in the footsteps of Hitler and that massive election theft is a commonplace event. The sad reality is that, with such people, rational discussion of this issue is simply not possible.

But there is huge and politically pivotal group that does not share the alternative reality of the conservative media. Many business leaders and moderate Republicans as well as large numbers of ordinary working class and other Americans disapprove of Obama's liberal policies but nonetheless clearly see that there is something profoundly wrong going on within the Republican Party.

It is this group to whom Democrats must direct their appeals. Conservatives need not agree with Democrats and can continue to oppose progressive reform but at the same time they can also recognize that the growing extremist trend within the Republican Party is simply unacceptable.

The situation has many parallels with the rise of McCarthyism in the 1950's. At first many conservatives in the business community and the military thought they could control and benefit from McCarthy's demagoguery but then came to realize that the situation had spun out beyond their control. Today these same groups face a similar moment of truth. The threat to basic American values and standards of ethical political conduct and behavior posed by the growth of an extremist perspective within the Republican coalition is now as great as the threat that was posed in the 1950's by McCarthyism.

At this time, far too many of the "sensible moderates" one would expect to stand up and challenge the rise of the extremist politics as warfare perspective within the Republican Party have hidden behind the notion that "*both sides are equally at fault*" and that no special or particular criticism needs to be leveled at the Republicans. Unlike the inhabitants of the alternative reality of the right, however, these individuals know perfectly well that Obama is not Hitler and that—no matter how much they may dislike the Democratic legislative agenda—*politics as warfare* is not an acceptable philosophy and strategy for an American political party. There is a boundary beyond which intellectual dishonesty becomes transformed into shameful moral cowardice and the "*both sides are equally at fault*" advocates now stand teetering on the edge of this profound moral abyss.

The issue is simple—the political philosophy of *politics as warfare* is an unacceptable ideology for an American political party and it now holds a disturbing position of influence and power within today's Republican coalition. The time has now come for everyone who agrees with this simple and fundamental proposition to clearly take a stand.

A TDS STRATEGY MEMO: WAKE UP, COMMENTATORS. THE MOST DANGEROUS GROUP OF “RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS” TODAY IS NOT THE GRASS-ROOTS TEA PARTY. IT IS THE FINANCIAL AND IDEOLOGICAL LEADERS IN THE REPUBLICAN COALITION WHO HAVE EMBRACED THE EXTREMIST PHILOSOPHY OF “POLITICS AS WARFARE.”

By ED KILGORE, JAMES VEGA AND J.P. GREEN

In recent days the mainstream media has been rapidly converging on a new common wisdom—a set of clichés that they will use to frame the rest of the campaign for the Republican nomination and the election of 2012. This new common wisdom portrays the intra–Republican struggle as one between more moderate and extreme wings of the party, with “pragmatic” Republican elites seeking a candidate who can beat Obama in opposition to the more “extremist” fringe elements and candidates of the grass-roots Tea Party.

It is inevitable that the mainstream media will find this image utterly irresistible. It not only serves their personal and professional needs but also reinforces their ideological preconceptions.

The image of “*Republican elites as pragmatic, the tea party fringe as extreme*” suits commentators’ personal and professional needs because it allows them to be publicly disdainful of “extremism” without ever having to actually use the term to describe any powerful and significant figure in the Republican coalition who might be in a position to retaliate. A suggestion of “extremism” directed against anyone in this latter group is a social—and possibly career-damaging—faux pas that mainstream journalists will take every imaginable step to avoid.

At the same time, the “*Elites as pragmatic, grass roots as extreme*” image also validates mainstream commentators’ essentially condescending view of political life, in which “extremists” are always scruffy, largely disreputable individuals on the lower rungs of society—the kind of people who live in trailer parks and rant incoherently about the second amendment. Wealthy, powerful and influential “movers and shakers” within the Republican world, on the other hand, regardless of their actual views, are still invariably accorded respect as essentially serious and sensible individuals.

There is nothing new about this pattern of behavior among the mainstream media. It follows the same pattern as the “*both sides are equally to blame*” clichés about partisan gridlock and “*dysfunctional government.*” Writers and commentators who, in private, will cheerfully concede that, of course, the crisis is fundamentally the fault of Republican intransigence will then fall back on “*both sides are equally to blame*” clichés in their public writing—not only to avoid charges of liberal bias but also to portray themselves as impartial and intellectually superior observers of all career politicians.

There is, unfortunately, one major problem with this “*elites as pragmatic, fringe as extreme*” view: it is deeply, profoundly and fundamentally wrong. The most dangerous group of political extremists today is not the grass roots supporters of the Tea Party. It is the major

sector of the Republican financial and ideological elite who have embraced the philosophy of “politics as warfare.”

To see why this is so, it is necessary to very clearly distinguish between two entirely distinct meanings of the term “extremism.” On the one hand, it is possible for a person or political party to hold a wide variety of very “extreme” opinions on issues. These views may be crackpot (e.g., “abolish paper money) or repugnant (“deny non-insured children medical care”). But as long as the individual or political party that holds these views conducts itself within the norms and rules of a democratic society, this, in itself, does not lead such groups or individuals to be described as “political extremists” by the media or society in general.

Libertarians and the Libertarian Party offer the best illustration. Vast numbers of Americans consider many libertarian views “extreme.” But, because the libertarians conduct themselves within the norms and rules of a democratic society, they are virtually never described by the media as “political extremists”.

The alternative definition of the term “political extremists” refers to political parties or individuals who do not accept the norms, rules and constraints of democratic society. They embrace a view of “*politics as warfare*” and of political opponents as literal “*enemies*” who must be crushed. Extremist political parties based on the *politics as warfare* philosophy emerged on both the political left and right at various times in the 20th century in many different countries and circumstances.

Despite their ideological diversity, **extremist political parties share a large number**¹ of common characteristics, one critical trait being a radically different conception of the role and purpose of the political party itself in a democratic society.

In the *politics as warfare* perspective a political party’s objective is defined as the conquest and seizure of power and not sincere collaboration in democratic governance. The party is viewed as a combat organization whose goal is to defeat an enemy, not a governing organization whose job is to faithfully represent the people who voted for it. Political debate and legislative maneuvering are seen not as the means to achieve ultimate compromise, but as forms of combat whose objective is total victory.

This basic conception of the role of political parties leads to the justification and use of two profoundly anti-democratic strategies.

First, in the *politics as warfare* perspective it is a legitimate strategy for a political party to paralyze the workings of government in order to prevent a democratically elected government of an opposing party from implementing the platform on which it was elected. In the *politics as warfare* perspective the extremist political party accepts no responsibility for stability—engineering the failure of the existing government is absolutely paramount and any negative consequences that may occur in the process represent a kind of “collateral damage” that must be accepted as inevitable in warfare.

¹http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Kilgore_Vega_Green.pdf

Historically, the Republican Party never embraced this strategy at any time during the Democratic administrations of Truman, Kennedy or Carter. The strategy first made its appearance when Newt Gingrich engineered the shutdown of the government in 1994. After Obama's election in 2008 the use of this "paralyze the government" tactic accelerated dramatically with the conversion of the filibuster into a minority veto of virtually all majority-sponsored legislation and a Republican bar to the huge numbers of judicial and administrative appointments. Previous generations of Republicans would have been scandalized by the notion of crippling the administration of justice by leaving courts grotesquely understaffed in order to prevent the appointment of individuals who did not strictly adhere to conservative orthodoxy.

The most dramatic escalation of this approach, however, occurred after the elections of 2010 and was reflected in the rejection of the very substantial reduction in federal spending that Obama offered the Republican house majority. Observers concurred that the deal was far more favorable to conservatives in terms of policy than the deal Ronald Reagan accepted in 1986 on tax reform or that Newt Gingrich accepted on welfare reform in 1995. But public statements by Republican leaders indicated that the deal was rejected in substantial part on the explicitly political grounds that any legislative agreement that produced a "victory" for Obama was unacceptable. In effect, the political objective of weakening the president had actually become a higher priority than the achievement of the most fundamental long-sought conservative policy goals.

It is almost impossible for anyone who does not remember previous eras of American politics to realize how extraordinary this transformation actually is. It would have been literally inconceivable to the Republican senators and congressmen of the 1950s and 1960s.

The second, even more directly and profoundly anti-democratic strategy that directly flows from the *politics as warfare* philosophy is the calculated attempt to disenfranchise likely pro-Democratic voters.

There were no systematic Republican initiatives to disenfranchise voters during the Nixon, Reagan or Gingrich eras. But after the 2008 elections Fox News began promulgating the notion that massive voter fraud had occurred. Fox News featured a video of two members of the New Black Panthers at a single polling site more than 100 times on its national programs, asserting that they had intimidated voters in order to insure Obama's election. Even after it was **conclusively demonstrated**² that sworn eyewitness testimony had been intentionally falsified in order to fabricate this charge, Fox continued to air the accusations and to assert that they were the tip of the iceberg of similar incidents. In parallel, accusations were also made that massive numbers of fraudulent votes had been cast in the election.

The result of these charges was a widespread grass-roots effort by local tea party groups to police polling places and record incidents of intimidation and fraudulent voting during the 2010 elections—an effort that produced *not a single documented case* anywhere in the country. Nonetheless, there is now a major, nationally coordinated and massively funded effort to prevent pro-Democratic constituencies from casting their ballots. TDS managing editor Ed Kilgore accurately summarized the situation as follows:

²http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/01/central_eyewitness_testimony_i.php

In the wake of the 2010 elections, Republican governors and legislatures are engaging in a wave of restrictive voting legislation unlike anything this country has seen since the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which signaled the defeat of the South's long effort to prevent universal suffrage. This wave of activism is too universal to be a coincidence, and too broad to reflect anything other than a general determination to restrict the franchise.

Millions of voters are affected.... As Ari Berman explained in an excellent recent summary of these developments for *Rolling Stone*, restrictive legislation, which has been introduced in 38 states and enacted (so far) in at least 12, can be divided into four main categories: restrictions on voter registration drives by nonpartisan, nonprofit civic and advocacy groups; cutbacks in early voting opportunities; new, burdensome identification requirements for voting; and reinstatement of bans on voting by ex-felons.

While new voter ID laws have clearly been coordinated by the powerful conservative state legislative lobbying network ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), other initiatives have spread almost virally. Virtually all of these restrictions demonstrably target segments of the electorate—the very poor, African-Americans and Hispanics, college students, and organizations trying to register all of the above—that tend to vote for Democrats.

In previous decades large sectors of the Republican elite would have been extremely uncomfortable with such measures and a significant group would have been vocally critical. Today, however, there is literally not a single significant figure in the Republican universe who is publicly objecting. The overwhelming influence of Fox News and talk radio have converted the notions that Obama represents a threat as massive as the rise of Hitler did in Germany, and that massive voter fraud is occurring all across the country, into passionately held urban legends that Republican elites no longer dare—or indeed even wish—to challenge.

There are two profoundly disturbing conclusions that must be faced:

First, the paralysis of government and the disenfranchisement of citizens are not “business as usual” for American conservatism. They are not attempts to prevent or reverse the enactment of particular policies and bills to which conservatives object but are rather strategies that strike at the most basic institutions and operations of representative democracy itself. To put it bluntly, they are not the policies of conservatives—they are strategies of political extremism.

Second, these strategies are not the products of a disreputable fringe of grass roots conservative activists, but have been designed, executed, endorsed and financed by a major sector of the Republican and conservative financial and ideological elite. The extraordinary fact that there is no major group or individual within the Republican coalition vocally objecting to these measures, as would have occurred in the past, offers the most profoundly disturbing evidence imaginable of the widespread tacit approval by the Republican elite.

The problem will only become more severe and dangerous as the 2012 election approaches. If Obama appears to be winning as Election Day nears, the logic of the extremist view will drive its adherents to embrace a “by any means necessary” philosophy to prevent what they will consider to be nothing less than a cataclysmic social and political catastrophe. If reasonable people across the political spectrum do not speak up now the measures that have been introduced so far could easily become only the opening salvo in even more dangerous attacks on the institutions and operations of American democracy.

A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

IT'S TIME TO FACE A HARSH REALITY: THE GOP NO LONGER BEHAVES LIKE A TRADITIONAL AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTY. IT HAS BECOME AN EXTREMIST PARTY. MODERATES AND SENSIBLE CONSERVATIVES NEED TO FIRMLY REJECT AND CONDEMN THIS DEEPLY DISTURBING AND DANGEROUS TREND.

By ED KILGORE, JAMES VEGA AND J.P. GREEN

Although it is only a few days since the 2012 election ended, the national media is already settling into a familiar political narrative regarding the GOP, a narrative that goes as follows: the Republican Party, having suffered major setbacks at the polls, is now “reassessing” its approach and seeking ways to “moderate” its image and positions.

This is a profoundly comfortable and comforting narrative—one that reflects a kind of ceremonial ritual in American politics. A political party, chastened by defeat, is widely praised by mainstream commentators as it moves back toward the center, re-establishing the basic “balance” and “moderation” of American political life.

But in this case there is one overwhelming problem with this narrative: it is profoundly and dangerously wrong.

Beginning last spring, a growing chorus of influential observers and commentators—political moderates and centrists rather than partisan progressive Democrats—began to express a very different view of the GOP—a view that the Republican Party was no longer operating as a traditional American political party. Rather, they argued, it had evolved into an extremist political party of a kind not previously seen in American political life.

During the presidential campaign this perspective was temporarily set aside as journalists and commentators tried to keep up with the almost daily twists and turns of Mitt Romney’s reinventions of himself as a conservative, a moderate and then a conservative once again. But now that the election is over, the underlying issue must be squarely faced.

The first major statement expressing the view that the Republican Party had embraced a dangerous extremism appeared in **a very influential Washington Post article**¹, “*Let’s just say it, the Republicans are the problem*” written by the well known and widely respected congressional scholars Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein. As the article’s key paragraph said:

In our past writings, we have criticized both parties when we believed it was warranted. Today, however, we have no choice but to acknowledge that the core of the problem lies with the Republican Party. The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; **unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science**;² and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition... [It has] all but declared war on the government....

¹http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lets-just-say-it-the-republicans-are-the-problem/2012/04/27/gIQAx-CVUIT_print.html

²http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/liberals-and-conservatives-dont-just-vote-differently-they-think-differently/2012/04/12/gIQAz1kDT_story.html

The two authors quoted Mike Lofgren, a veteran Republican congressional staffer, who wrote [an anguished diatribe](#)³ about why he was ending his career on the Hill after nearly three decades.

“The Republican Party is becoming less and less like a traditional political party in a representative democracy and becoming more like an apocalyptic cult, or one of the intensely ideological authoritarian parties of 20th century Europe,”

Mann and Ornstein’s forceful critique provided the impetus for other moderates and centrists to follow their lead and directly address the growing extremism within the GOP. James Fallows, for example, [expressed the view as follows in The Atlantic](#):⁴

Normally I shy away from apocalyptic readings of the American predicament... But when you look at the sequence from *Bush v. Gore*, through *Citizens United* ...and you combine it with ongoing efforts in Florida and elsewhere to prevent voting from presumably Democratic blocs; and add that to the simply unprecedented [abuse](#)⁵ of the filibuster in the years since the Democrats won control of the Senate and then took the White House, you have what we’d identify as a kind of *long-term coup* if we saw it happening anywhere else.

Liberal democracies like ours depend on rules but also on *norms*—on the assumption that you’ll go so far, but no further, to advance your political ends. The norms imply some loyalty to the system as a whole that outweighs your immediate partisan interest.

American politics has always been open to the full and free expression of even the most extreme ideas, but the profound danger posed by the current extremism of the GOP lies in one deeply disturbing fact: the Republican Party’s extremism goes far beyond support for extreme public *policies*. Instead, in three key respects, it deliberately seeks to undermine basic norms and institutions of democratic society.

The two very different meanings of political extremism

To clearly demonstrate this, however, it is necessary to carefully distinguish between two entirely distinct meanings of the term “political extremism.”

On the one hand, it is possible for a person or political party to hold a wide variety of very “extreme” opinions on issues. These views may be crackpot (e.g. “abolish all courts and judges”) or repugnant (“deny non-insured children all medical care”). But as long as the individual or political party that holds these views conducts itself within the norms and rules of a democratic society, its right to advocate even the most extreme views is protected by those same democratic institutions.

The alternative definition of the term “political extremism” refers to political parties or individuals who do not accept the norms, rules and constraints of democratic society. These individuals or parties embrace a view of “politics as warfare” and of political opponents as

³ http://truth-out.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=3079:goodbye-to-all-that-reflections-of-a-gop-operative-who-left-the-cult

⁴ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/06/scotus-update-la-loi-cest-moi/258900/#>

⁵ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/05/filibuster-and-false-equivalence-fiesta/257221/>

literal “enemies” who must be crushed. Extremist political parties based on a “politics as warfare” philosophy emerged on both the political left and right at various times in the 20th century and in many different countries and circumstances.

Despite their ideological diversity, extremist political parties share a large number of common characteristics, one critical trait being a radically different conception of the role and purpose of a political party in a democratic society. In the “politics as warfare” perspective a political party’s objective is defined as the conquest and seizure of power and not sincere collaboration in democratic governance. The party is viewed as a combat organization whose goal is to defeat an enemy, not a representative organization whose job is to faithfully represent the people who voted for it. Political debate and legislative maneuvering are seen not as the means to achieve ultimate compromise, but as forms of combat whose only objective is total victory.

It is this “politics as warfare” view of political life that leads logically and inevitably to the justification of attempts to attack and undermine basic democratic institutions whenever and wherever they present a roadblock to achieving the ultimate goal of complete ideological victory.

Three tactics of political extremism

The new moderate and centrist critics of Republican extremism have noted three specific kinds of attacks that the GOP has launched on basic American democratic norms and institutions.

1. Paralyzing the operations of government to extort political “ransom”

Mann and Orenstein [describe the strategy clearly](#):⁶

The filibuster, once relegated to a handful of major national issues in a given Congress, became a routine weapon of obstruction, applied even to widely supported bills or presidential nominations. And Republicans in the Senate have abused the confirmation process to block any and every nominee to posts such as the head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, *solely to keep laws that were legitimately enacted from being implemented.*

In the third and now fourth years of the Obama presidency, divided government has produced something closer to complete gridlock than we have ever seen in our time in Washington, with partisan divides even leading last year to [America’s first credit downgrade](#)⁷...On financial stabilization and economic recovery, on deficits and debt, on climate change and [health-care reform](#),⁸ Republicans have been the force behind the widening ideological gaps and the strategic use of partisanship.

⁶http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lets-just-say-it-the-republicans-are-the-problem/2012/04/27/gIQAx-CVUIT_print.html

⁷http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/sandp-considering-first-downgrade-of-us-credit-rating/2011/08/05/gIQAqKelxl_story.html

⁸http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-the-roberts-court-could-save-health-care/2012/03/07/gIQALijXGS_story.html

Mann and Orenstein have impeccable reputations as honest, independent analysts and not partisan warriors (their book “the Broken Branch” was dedicated to Republican Rep. Barber Conable and included a blurb from Newt Gingrich). Thus, when Senate minority leader “Mich” McConnell absurdly dismissed their criticism as the opinions of “ultra, ultra liberals,” absolutely no one in Washington took him seriously. In a reply, Ornstein (a resident scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute) quoted a whole series of statements by McConnell himself that actually proved his and Mann’s basic point. For example, immediately after the debt limit debate, **McConnell said:**⁹

“I think some of our Members may have thought the default issue was a hostage you might take a chance at shooting. Most of us didn’t think that. What we did learn is this—it’s a hostage worth ransoming.”

Far more than any critique by a Democrat or independent observer could possibly have demonstrated, McConnell’s statement itself revealed the fundamentally extremist character of the Republican strategy. It is an open admission that that strategy is actually to hold the economy “hostage,” and force Dems to “ransom” it order to extort policy results that could not be achieved by reasoned political negotiation between the elected representatives of the citizens. The metaphors of “hostages” and “ransom” provide a startling demonstration of the inherently extreme and anti-democratic nature of the strategy.

2. Disenfranchising politically “undesirable” voters as a way of winning elections

In this year’s elections an unprecedented number of state laws were passed and administrative decision taken by Republican state governments whose intention was to make voting more difficult for minorities, students and other groups who tended to vote Democratic. These measures were widely condemned as profoundly unjust and undemocratic.

The attempts to disenfranchise Democratic voters did not play a decisive role in determining the outcome of the election in 2012 only because of the sheer scale of the Democratic victories, the massive mobilization of lawyers and poll watchers by groups defending voting rights and a series of major court decisions that temporarily blocked key policies that would have disenfranchised the largest numbers of citizens.

In 2014 and 2016, however, similar measures could easily play a decisive role in illegitimately changing the outcome of important contests across the country. By most estimates, had all the voter suppression measures introduced by state governments actually been in effect during this election hundreds of thousands of voters—particularly in Florida, Pennsylvania and Ohio could have been prevented from casting a ballot.

Moreover, in states with Republican elected officials and election administrators, the potential exists for the enactment of measures that could disenfranchise entire classes and categories of citizens. Students, for example, are uniquely vulnerable because of their distinct status and pro-democratic voting patterns.

⁹http://www.rollcall.com/issues/58_11/McConnells-Own-Words-on-Senate-Gridlock-216401-1.html

As a *New York Times* editorial stated:¹⁰

Seven states have already passed strict laws requiring a government-issued ID (like a driver's license or a passport) to vote, which many students don't have, and 27 others are considering such measures. Many of those laws have been interpreted as prohibiting out-of-state driver's licenses from being used for voting.

It's all part of a widespread Republican effort to restrict the voting rights of demographic groups that tend to vote Democratic...

Wisconsin once made it easy for students to vote, making it one of the leading states in turnout of younger voters in 2004 and 2008. When Republicans swept into power there last year, they undid all of that, imposing requirements that invalidated the use of virtually all college ID cards in voter registration. Colleges are scrambling to change their cards to add signatures and expiration dates, but it's not clear whether the state will let them.

The potential effect of disenfranchising college students can be summed up with one startling statistic. In Florida, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin—three states where measures to disenfranchise students have been seriously proposed—severely restrictive measures could potentially deprive over a million young voters of their most fundamental democratic rights.

The justifications for such measures are breathtakingly and indeed repulsively anti-democratic. As the *New York Times* editorial continued:

Political leaders should be encouraging young adults to participate in civic life, but many Republican state lawmakers are doing **everything they can**¹¹ instead to prevent students from voting in the 2012 presidential election. Some have openly acknowledged doing so because students tend to be liberal.

William O'Brien, the speaker of the New Hampshire State House, **told a Tea Party group**¹² earlier this year that students are "foolish" and tend to "vote their feelings" because they lack life experience. "Voting as a liberal," he said, "that's what kids do." And that's why, he said, he supported measures to prohibit students from voting from their college addresses and to end same-day registration. New Hampshire Republicans even tried to pass a bill that would have kept students who previously lived elsewhere from voting in the state; fortunately, the measure failed, as did the others Mr. O'Brien favored.

3. The use of propaganda and agitprop techniques that were once considered the hallmarks of totalitarian regimes.

During the 2012 election there was an extraordinary change in way political advertising was produced and designed. While it can reasonably be argued that false claims, distortions and baseless charges are all abuses of long standing in American politics, a qualitatively new

¹⁰http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/27/opinion/keeping-college-students-from-the-polls.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print

¹¹http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/voting_law_changes_in_2012

¹²http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8tqpBzLNzE&feature=player_embedded

element was added in the 2012 campaign—the incorporation of technically altered or edited video and audio that makes a candidate appear to express a view he or she did not actually assert.

The most dramatic example of this new strategy was Romney's *"you didn't build that"* campaign ad. Although the details were widely reported at the time, they are worth repeating. Here is **what Obama actually said**:¹³

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business—you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn't get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet.

The point is, is that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together. There are some things, just like fighting fires, we don't do on our own.

Read as a whole, it is clear that the words *"you didn't build that"* actually modify the phrase *"roads and bridges."* The Romney campaign extracted the truncated fragment *"If you've got a business—you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen"* and presented it as proof that Obama actually despises small business and businessmen. The Romney ad team elevated the "you didn't build that" accusation against Obama into one of the core elements of their national ad campaign.

Conservative commentators minimized the radical departure that this use of deceptively edited video and audio represents by lumping it together with a variety of examples of other "negative" advertising from both campaigns. But, there is a huge, indeed, fundamental difference between an ad that asserts—fairly or unfairly—that an opposing candidate's policies will result in sick people dying and an ad that deceptively edits video clips of the candidate to make him appear to actually say the words *"So what if people die. It's no big deal, sick people die all the time."*

The most stunning aspect of the Romney campaign's approach, however, was not simply the use of doctored video itself but the Romney campaign's proud and unashamed defense of the technique as absolutely legitimate and justified. **As Tom Edsall noted**:¹⁴

Struggling to justify a recent television spot that reached new heights of deception, a top operative in Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign [In fact, top Romney campaign ad strategist Stuart Stevens] put it plainly, while insisting on anonymity:

"First of all, ads are propaganda by definition. We are in the persuasion business, the propaganda business.... Ads are agitprop.... Ads are about hyperbole, they are about editing. It's ludicrous for them to say that an ad is taking something out of context.... All ads do that. They are manipulative pieces of persuasive art."

¹³<http://prospect.org/article/meaning>

¹⁴<http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/05/the-reinvention-of-political-morality/>

For anyone who is old enough to remember the eras of WWII or the Cold War this is a genuinely appalling and deeply repulsive assertion. In that period “propaganda” and “agitprop” were techniques that were universally considered clearly and unambiguously evil—they were the vile, cynical tools of the worst totalitarian monsters like Hitler and Stalin. In that era calling a message a piece of “propaganda” or “agitprop” was tantamount to calling it a dirty, bald-faced communist or fascist lie. For Romney’s top campaign ad strategist to proudly embrace those same words as admirable goals is an absolutely extraordinary illustration of how extremism and cynical amorality in the Republican Party has become “the new normal.”

And it must be noted that this new acceptance of technically manipulated video and audio, which began on the political fringe in 2009 with Andrew Breitbart’s dishonest editing of a speech by USDA official Shirley Sherrod, was not limited to the Romney campaign. Similar fraudulent editing of video and audio material could be noted in advertisements from sources ranging from the Republican National Committee to outside groups like the Emergency Committee for Israel.

In September 2012, for example, The RNC released a video in which Obama appears to say the following:

“Anyone who does well for themselves should do their fair share in return. Now some people call this class warfare”

But here is what Obama actually said:

Do we want to keep giving tax breaks to the wealthiest Americans like me, or Warren Buffett, or Bill Gates—people who don’t need them and never asked for them? Or do we want to keep investing in things that will grow our economy and keep us secure?

Now, some people call this class warfare. But I think asking a billionaire to pay at least the same tax rate as his secretary is just common sense. We don’t envy success in this country. We aspire to it. But we also believe that anyone who does well for themselves should do their fair share in return, so that more people have the opportunity to get ahead—not just a few.

Equally, in October 2012 the Emergency Committee For Israel put out an automated robocall with what sounded like an actual face to face “debate” between Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu during which Obama seemed to directly reject Netanyahu’s call to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons by saying that the United States would respect Iran’s sovereignty and not interfere with its affairs.

In fact, however, the so-called “debate” was actually an utter fraud created by cutting and pasting together audio clips taken from three different speeches by Obama made three years apart —one delivered in 2009, one in 2011 and one in 2012. Washington Post fact checker Glen Kessler characterized the ad as “an Orwellian descent into falsehoods and misrepresentation.”¹⁵

¹⁵http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/an-imaginary-misleading-debate-between-president-obama-and-benjamin-netanyahu/2012/10/31/c8d7c1b8-22c5-11e2-8448-81b1ce7d6978_blog.html

Facing up to the challenge of Republican extremism

Despite the widespread popularity of the current narrative that describes Republicans as “reassessing” and seeking to “move toward the center”, the simple fact is that there has been absolutely no Republican repudiation of the three central extremist strategies described above.

Consider:

- Not a single major figure in the current GOP has questioned the legitimacy of the legislative strategy of “hostage taking” used during Obama’s first term
- Not a single major figure in the current GOP has publically repudiated the efforts to disenfranchise voters.
- Not a single major figure in the current GOP has criticized the quasi-totalitarian propaganda tactics of deliberately distorting video and audio that were employed during the 2012 elections.

Whatever Republican motion toward the center is actually occurring is entirely tactical and pragmatic. Many GOP figures now urgently assert that “we have to win more Latino votes” or “we have to win more women” and so on. But there is absolutely no assertion of the view that “we must forcefully repudiate the dangerously extremist philosophy of “politics as warfare” and the anti-democratic strategies that flow from it.”

But despite its profound inaccuracy, the narrative that Republicans are “seeking moderation” maintains its popularity. It does so because it is extremely convenient for three key groups within American society.

For the media the notion that the “GOP is seeking to moderate its positions” allows them to continue to use a well-worn, clichéd journalistic narrative and to continue to perpetuate the “false equivalency” notion—the idea that journalistic objectivity consists not in reporting the facts as they are but in criticizing Republicans and Democrats in mechanically equal measure regardless of the actual merits of the case.

In practice, however, what this approach actually does is simply to allow everything that is distinct and uniquely dangerous in current Republican extremism to slip by without criticism. As such, it amounts to both intellectual dishonesty and journalistic malpractice. It allows the GOP extremists to have it both ways—to demand that the GOP be treated by the media as a normal political party but yet to simultaneously be able to persist in extremist behavior and even privately gloat and sneer at the gullibility of the mainstream press.

For non-tea party individuals in the Republican Party, on the other hand, the myth the GOP is seeking to move to the center is useful because it allows them to call for tactical reforms in the party’s outreach and messaging without having to directly challenge the extremists in their party and explicitly attack the extremist philosophy and strategy.

Some traditional Republicans have taken a very timid first step toward rejecting the extremism within their party by calling for greater “civility” in American political life. George Herbert Walker Bush, Colin Powell, Richard Lugar and Olympia Snowe, for example, have

joined with Democrats on the board of the National Institute for Civil Discourse, an organization set up after the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. The problem that must be confronted within the GOP, however, goes deeper than a lack of civility. Until the remaining moderates within the Republican Party directly and explicitly challenge the extremist philosophy of “politics as warfare” and the anti-democratic tactics that flow from it, calls for “civility” will have little if any effect.

Finally, for moderates and centrists outside the Republican coalition, the myth of current GOP “movement toward the center” allows them to avoid the unpleasant need to directly confront their conservative counterparts and firmly assert that the current Republican extremism is fundamentally unacceptable in a democratic society. It permits moderates and centrists to continue to treat conservatives as a normal and traditional part of the American political dialog and to pretend to themselves that genuine “extremism” is a fringe phenomena that exists somewhere outside of current mainstream conservatism itself.

But the harsh truth is that even formerly reputable and influential conservative institutions like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute are now increasingly adopting the ideology of today’s Republican extremism.

The Heritage foundation, for example, has a reputation that dates from the Reagan era as a serious think-tank that developed market-oriented alternatives to liberal social policies (The private insurance based approach that is at the heart of Obamacare, for example, was originally derived from research done at the foundation).

But if one looks at the message coming from the Heritage Foundation and its Political Action Committee today, it reflects a very different view. Several days after the 2012 election, for example, [the Heritage PAC released a video](#)¹⁷ that expressed the “politics as warfare” philosophy of modern extremism with stunning clarity. The video displays dramatic, ominous images of war, disaster and decline while an on-screen narrator declares:

We are in a war

We are in a war to save the nation

Abandoning our posts in this war will abandon America to a future of managed decline

To win this war we must remain committed to fighting president Obama’s agenda. Heritage Action is committed to this fight....

The video ends with dark, apocalyptic images of war and dictatorship while Reagan dramatically intones the words “We have nowhere else to go—this [America] is the last stand of freedom on earth.”

When Reagan spoke those words he was pointing to the Soviet Union and world communism as the great threat to human freedom. The extraordinary extremism now dominating the GOP and major conservative institutions is dramatically illustrated by the fact

¹⁷http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=p7D0d7ztLY0

that these groups now define the democratically elected president of the US and the majority of the American people who elected him as a dictatorial “threat to freedom” entirely equivalent to that which was posed by world communism.

Moderates and centrists cannot continue to pretend that this is not a dangerous and unacceptable view. They must move from timidly expressed disapproval to genuine and passionate outrage.

E.J. Dionne is a clear and outspoken liberal but he is also by temperament one of the most moderate and fair-minded political commentators currently writing. Yet in a recent column, he felt obligated to **pose the fundamental moral issue in a very powerful and unequivocal way**:¹⁸

...those who regard themselves as centrists now have a moral obligation to make clear what the stakes are in the current debate. If supposed moderates refuse to call out the new conservatism for the radical creed it has become, their timidity will make them complicit in an intellectual coup they could have prevented.

It is impossible to express the issue any more simply or eloquently than that.

¹⁸http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-rights-stealthy-coup/2012/04/01/gIQAZIBjpS_story.html

A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

THE REAL GOP SPLIT ISN'T BETWEEN TEA PARTY EXTREMISTS AND "ESTABLISHMENT" MODERATES. IT'S BETWEEN EXTREMISTS WHO WANT TO RESTORE THE BUSH STRATEGY OF RUNNING PARALLEL COVERT AND OVERT AGENDAS VS. EXTREMISTS WHO WANT TO OPENLY ASSERT A RADICAL RIGHT-WING AGENDA

By Ed Kilgore, James Vega and J.P. Green

In the last few days a wide range of journalists and political commentators have joined in the discussion of the suddenly open split between Karl Rove's new initiative, the Conservative Victory Project, which is aimed at funding and supporting more "electable" Republicans and the substantial sector of the GOP that supports the candidates and issue positions of the Tea Party. Many quickly moved to portray the conflict as representing something more than simply a tactical split over campaign strategy and messaging. Rather they characterized it as also reflecting a basic ideological battle between the "extremists" and "moderates" within the GOP.

To put it simply, this is nonsense. The current split within the GOP isn't between Tea Party extremists and "Establishment" moderates. It's between one group of GOP extremists that wants to restore the Bush strategy of running parallel covert and overt agendas versus another group of GOP extremists that wants to openly assert a radical right-wing agenda. In the period leading up to and including the administration of George W. Bush, sophisticated conservative strategists (preeminently Karl Rove) perfected a "dual track" strategy of running two parallel political agendas. One track was an overt, "*moderate*" agenda designed for the press and general electorate. It included slogans like "compassionate conservatism" aimed at softening media and public perceptions of "movement conservatism, along with policies designed to appeal to specific "swing" constituencies (e.g., No Child Left Behind for married women; Medicare prescription drug coverage for seniors; comprehensive immigration reform for Latinos). At the same time, however, there was also a parallel covert agenda aimed at the religious and social conservatives who comprised a large section of the Republican base. This second agenda was executed by providing special high-level access for conservative base leaders, "below the radar" administrative and executive actions supporting conservative issues and policies and continual "dog whistles"—the use of coded words and phrases to assure the conservative base that deep down Bush and other Republican leaders were really "one of us." This strategy was successfully deployed first in 2000, when Bush managed to secure the universal support of the conservative movement during the presidential primaries, yet still competed aggressively with Al Gore for swing voters during the general election, without changing his policy positions.

The dual track strategy continued to work quite well (with some assistance from post-9/11 fears over national security) through the 2004 elections. But by 2008 the Republican base and the movement conservative leadership had become deeply frustrated with being taken for granted and given relatively minor, symbolic victories rather than major social and political changes. The financial crisis then exposed the incredible fiscal irresponsibility from a traditional conservative point of view of the Bush administration's big-spending, "give big business everything it wants" economic policies and brought the whole dual track strategy

tumbling down. The bailouts and fiscal stimulus measures initiated by Bush in his final days in office not only outraged and infuriated the grass roots Republican base but also convinced a powerful group of right-wing multibillionaires to move from their previous approach of supporting narrowly focused conservative cause groups (and leaving electoral politics to the RNC) to a new approach of energetically providing financial and organizational support for the “new” Tea Party Movement—actually just radicalized movement conservatives removed by only five years from lionizing Bush as a world-historical titan—to organize against the Bush-era establishment.

Said establishment quickly snatched up any three cornered hats and muskets they could lay their hands on and meekly subordinated their oratory and issue stances to the Tea Party/ right-wing money axis. By 2010, most GOP candidates either identified themselves with the new all or nothing rhetoric or went down to defeat in Republican primaries. To a remarkable extent, the rigid ideology and harsh partisan rhetoric that was once associated with southern conservatives or national extremist groups dominated the GOP, representing the culmination of a half-century movement conservative struggle to control the party. The Bush forces went along without protest because they hoped that the energetic fury of the base voters would allow the GOP to retake the presidency in 2012 which would give them the opportunity to hash out a compromise with the Tea Party upstarts “behind closed doors.” But Romney’s defeat and Obama’s initiatives since his reelection have forced the two wings of the GOP into an open split.

But the critical fact is that this split is emphatically and categorically not a split between “extremists” and “moderates.” The traditional Republican moderates like George Herbert Walker Bush and Bob Dole were shoved aside a long time ago or else changed their public positions to swim with the tide. The split today is between the new “*all or nothing*” Tea Party right-wingers and the Bush era veterans who want to go back to running a two track “overt/covert” strategy.

It is a perversion of the English language to describe this second group as “moderate” in any meaningful sense of the word. In point of fact, every one of the disturbing “extremist” tactics that are decried today—attempts at voter suppression, undermining key foundations of the New Deal/Great Society legacy, undermining Democratic organizations and institutions and sabotaging the operation of Democratic inspired government programs—can be traced back to initiatives launched under the direction of Karl Rove and Bush’s other political strategists.

(Note: this assertion may sound overstated, but, as a simple matter of fact and data, it is not. A skeptic need only read Tom Edsall’s 2006 book, Building Red America and London Economist Editors John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge’s 2004 book, The Right Nation to find quite comprehensive documentation.)

The division between these two kinds of extremists within the GOP—the Tea Party/ ultraconservative big money wing of the GOP that advocates an uncompromised, “*full-throated, all or nothing*” conservative message and agenda and the Bush-era wing that prefers a “dual track,” approach that combines separate overt and covert strategies—can be clearly observed in both the GOP’s overall political strategy and across virtually the entire range of specific political issues.

At the most general level, the division between the two flavors of extremism can be seen in the debate between Republicans who insist that the loss in 2012 was the result of Romney's failure to present a full and uncompromised conservative position versus those who hold that the party must soften its image and rhetoric.

Beneath this disagreement, however, there is a shared conviction that the GOP platform, which is an entirely consistent and clear expression of the conservative base ideology, is absolutely fine and absolutely does not require the slightest adjustment away from extremism and toward "moderation".

Here is how *Politico* recently described the current consensus:¹

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – The Republican Party honchos who huddled here for their first big gathering since the election devoted lots of time talking about the need to welcome Latinos and women, close the technology gap with Democrats and stop the self-destructive talk about rape. But the party's main problem, dozens of Republican National Committee members argued in interviews over three days this week, is who delivers its message and how, not the message itself. Overwhelmingly they insisted that substantive policy changes aren't the answer to last year's losses.

"It's not the platform of the party that's the issue," RNC Chairman Reince Priebus said Friday after being easily reelected to a second, two-year term. "In many cases, it's how we communicate about it. It is a couple dumb things that people have said."

...New Hampshire chairman Wayne MacDonald said party leadings need to work on "not being sour-pusses on television or the radio"—that there is a way to be firm and assertive without being mean-spirited.

"Nobody is saying the Republican Party has to change our beliefs in any of our platform planks," he said.

In short, there is a division within the GOP as to whether there is a need for changes in rhetoric and image but no debate about any need for changes in basic social and economic policy.

The division between the two extremist strategies is equally evident in the management of individual political campaigns. In this area there is a clear distinction between candidates like Allen West or Michelle Bachmann who believe conservatives should clearly and proudly run on a full and uncompromised extreme conservative agenda versus "stealth candidates" like Scott Walker in Wisconsin or Rick Snyder in Michigan who do not champion unpopular conservative positions during their campaigns but suddenly unveil them once they are elected. It is obviously inaccurate to describe either one of these strategies as more "moderate" than the other. Their objectives are identical; they differ only in their tactics.

This same basic distinction—between openly and proudly proclaiming radical conservative goals versus seeking to clothe the extremist wolf in moderate sheep's' clothing—is equally evident across a wide range of specific issues:

¹<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/01/gop-leaders-insist-no-overhaul-needed-86757.html>

Medicare: The division between the two varieties of extremist strategy can be seen in the split between GOP candidates and strategists who favor openly denouncing the system as an evil form of “socialist medicine” versus those who want to “strengthen it for future generations” by drastically reducing benefits and ultimately converting it into a limited subsidy for purchasing private insurance.

Taxes: In this area the division between the two strategies can be seen in the split between Republicans who want to directly attack and cut funding for a wide range of specific programs (ranging from scientific research and infrastructure support to assistance for the poor) versus those who want to create the same outcome indirectly via abstract limitations on federal domestic spending, “block grant” schemes, and arbitrary limits on federal revenues.

Social Security: The split between the two extremist strategies can be seen in this difference between conservatives who want to see an explicit attack on Social Security as a financially bankrupt program that inevitably creates a parasitic class of dependent “takers” from government and those who seek to use moderate rhetoric such “Strengthening Social Security for future generations” while actually supporting the shrinking and privatization of the system.

Voting: The split in this area is between Republicans such as those in the state legislatures in Maine and Wisconsin who have expressed support for explicitly disenfranchising groups like college students on the grounds that they are immature and irresponsible versus those who try to conceal any anti-Democratic motive by claiming they only want to avoid voter fraud.

Government Shutdown: In this area the split is between conservatives who wish to extort a major reduction in spending by creating a dramatic government shutdown versus those who deny a desire to actually shut down the government or throw the nation into default on its debt but who nonetheless support a stealth campaign of sabotaging the government by blocking a huge number of administrative appointments and hamstringing the operation of agencies of which they disapprove.

Abortion: The split in this area is between conservatives who openly advocate eliminating all abortions as morally equivalent to murder and genocide versus those who seek to subtly extinguish the practice by hemming it in with restrictions (such as obligatory ultrasounds) or setting impossible standards for the operation of birth control clinics.

Unions: The division in this area is between Republicans who openly and vocally oppose unions in principle versus those who make strategic attacks on public-sector benefits or bargaining rights, or federal enforcement of labor laws.

Environment: In this area the split is between conservatives who attack all environmental measures as a mere subterfuge for a sinister and covert radical totalitarian agenda and those who express verbal support for protecting the

environment but oppose action on climate change and other environmental challenges as incompatible with economic recovery and growth or insufficiently supported by scientific research.

In short, in almost every area that one can examine, a split appears between “all or nothing” extremists and advocates of a “two track, covert/overt” strategy to achieve the same ends.

The one seeming exception to this near-universal pattern that is in all the headlines right now is, of course, immigration. In this area there is indeed a genuine split between Republicans who are prepared to support a “path to citizenship” for illegal immigrants versus those who reject any such reform as a totally unacceptable form of “Amnesty.”

Yet, ironically, this one apparent exception is actually consistent with the larger pattern, since, as noted above, support for immigration reform was a pillar of the original Rove strategy for making the GOP’s conservative “base” sufficient for electoral victory with marginal improvements in performance among Latinos. The only thing that has changed is that a growing number of conservatives of every variety now acknowledge the growing size of the Latino vote as a serious obstacle to the success of “base”-oriented electoral strategies focused on energizing older white voters.

As a result, it is really now indefensible for journalists and commentators to continue to describe the two broad Republican strategies as representing a choice between “extremism” and “moderation.” The old fashioned Republican moderates like George Herbert Walker Bush and Bob Dole who followed the pre-Newt Gingrich rules of political behavior have now been reduced to a literal handful. The current split within the GOP is between two different flavors of Republican extremism: the blatant Tea Party, John Birch-like approach that believes the party should loudly and proudly declare its radical agenda and the Bush-era approach that seeks to reinstate the dual track strategy of *“one story for the press and mainstream, dog whistles and below the radar policy victories for the base.”* MSM commentators who persist in labeling the split between the two groups as a split between “extremists” and “moderates” need to face the fact that using such terms represents intentional and deliberate pro-GOP partisan advocacy aimed at improving the party’s image and not honest journalism or political commentary.

A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

DEMOCRATS: IT'S TIME TO CHANGE HOW WE DEAL WITH MAINSTREAM POLITICAL COMMENTATORS: IT'S NOT JUST "FALSE EQUIVALENCE" ANY MORE. THEY ARE IN DEEP DENIAL ABOUT THE REALITY OF THE GOP'S DANGEROUS EXTREMISM AND ARE INCREASINGLY DISPLAYING SYMPTOMS THAT RESEMBLE STOCKHOLM SYNDROME.

By JAMES VEGA

In general, analyses that attempt to apply psychological diagnoses to the views of political opponents simply produce a sophisticated kind of ad hominem insult. But on certain occasions such analyses can be genuinely useful if they suggest a productive change in Democratic political messaging and strategy.

Progressives and Democrats—and particularly progressive and Democratic political commentators—face a situation like this in dealing with mainstream political commentators' extraordinary and appalling refusal to honestly come to terms with the dangerous growth of GOP extremism. The painful fact is that mainstream political commentators' refusal to forcefully challenge this trend is now playing a central role in reinforcing and enabling the extremist behavior of the Republican Party.

This failure of mainstream political commentators to speak out is a major departure from the past. In previous eras when the GOP lurched toward extremism—such as the McCarthy period in the 1950's or the era of the Nixon administration's assault on democratic institutions—a critical moment came when mainstream TV commentators like Edgar R. Murrow or leading columnists in the *New York Times*, *Time* and the *Washington Post* firmly put their foot down and drew a clear "line in the sand." In contrast, while liberal and progressive commentators today vehemently protest the extremist trend, many of the self-anointed "non-partisan, middle of the road" political commentators either ignore or minimize Republican extremism. Without their support, criticism from liberals and progressives is insufficient to modify the GOP's behavior.

The mainstream political commentators' weak and tepid response to the dramatic increase in GOP extremism has passed through two distinct phases.

During the first phase, which extends roughly from Obama's inauguration to late 2011, mainstream political commentators overwhelmingly directed their criticism at entirely vague targets like "Washington" or "Congress" or "partisan polarization" rather than directly at the GOP. These deliberately evasive euphemisms not only allowed them to avoid directly blaming the GOP's growing extremism for creating problems like the inability of congress to pass needed legislation or maintain necessary government operations but also let them effectively accuse Democrats of being equally at fault without directly saying so.

The challenge progressives and liberals mounted to this dishonest rhetorical maneuver was the accusation of "false equivalency," a critique that expanded from progressive bloggers to leading liberal commentators like Greg Sargent, Paul Krugman and E.J. Dionne at the

Washington Post and *New York Times*. The “false equivalency” critique then decisively moved toward the mainstream when leading congressional scholars Tom Mann and Norm Ornstein published their April 2012 article, “*Let’s Just Say it, the GOP is the problem.*”

Mann and Ornstein’s powerful condemnation of the GOP as “*ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition*” should have been sufficient to embolden other mainstream political commentators to follow suit. Instead, however, it led to only minor change. Some mainstream commentators began to acknowledge the basic truth of Mann and Ornstein’s criticism with a single, very carefully muted “*to be sure*” sentence or clause somewhere in their commentary. A commentary filled with criticism of “Congress”, or “Washington” for example, would now contain a single, carefully hedged clause such as “*to be sure, the GOP is more at fault for this impasse but....*” or “*granted, the GOP’s position does pose the central obstacle but....*” but then immediately return to criticism of Congress or the political system in general.

This represented a very small but still discernible concession. At same time, however, since January this approach has been joined and substantially supplanted by a new evasive maneuver. Recent mainstream commentary not only ignores the GOP’s role or dismisses it with a single “*to be sure*” sentence but also places essentially the entire fault for failing to solve the problem on Obama.

This is done in four distinct ways:

- a. Obama is the president—it is his responsibility to solve the nation’s problems.
- b. Obama should make even greater efforts at compromise than he already has, even to the extent of completely capitulating to the GOP’s basic demands.
- c. Obama is too cold and aloof. He fails to engage in the kind of personal diplomacy that is necessary to secure agreement.
- d. Obama is too timid and hesitant and unwilling to “twist arms” like Lyndon Johnson in order to impose his will.

In all these criticisms, there is a clear unspoken assumption that it is entirely within Obama’s power to solve all political problems. If he fails to do so, the failure can be laid entirely at his feet. Somehow, the fact that GOP extremism is actually the central problem—a point that if mentioned at all is just briefly conceded—slips through the cracks as the commentaries proceed.

This massive failure of the mainstream political commentators poses a profound danger to America. Without the kind of broad “establishment” consensus firmly condemning right-wing political extremism that emerged in the 1950’s and 1970’s, America is now rapidly adjusting to GOP extremism as “the new normal.” Print and TV reporters now routinely say that a bill was “defeated” or a cabinet member “rejected” when in fact both were approved by majorities and only blocked by the GOP’s unprecedented abuse of the filibuster. By 2014, the permanent minority filibuster, routine blocking of all appointments and deliberate sabotage of routine government operations will be treated as entirely normal features of American democracy. Things that were once described as absolutely inconceivable will be accepted as routine.

(It is worth remembering that when progressive commentators first suggested that the GOP would be willing to damage the economic recovery for electoral gain, mainstream commentators savagely attacked them as quite literally “defaming” or “slandering” the GOP. Today the fact that Republicans did indeed consider the economy “a *hostage worth ransoming*” (in Mitch McConnell’s memorable words) is calmly accepted by these very same commentators as no longer even worthy of mention.)

In order for progressives and Democrats to combat this trend, it is important for them to try and understand the reasons for its existence. In part, the failure of mainstream political commentators to condemn GOP extremism can be attributed to mundane and cynical factors—their desire to maintain good and cordial relations with their sources and contacts in the GOP and conservative organizations. But, when even the editorial pages of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* now firmly criticize key aspects of GOP extremism, this cannot be the complete answer. Nor can the problem be simply that criticizing GOP extremism poses a threat to mainstream commentators’ professional self-image. It is indeed true that firmly and consistently criticizing the GOP would deprive these commentators of their carefully crafted self-image as entirely “non-partisan”, “objective” and “above the fray” observers. But this did not deter previous generations of similarly “middle of the road” commentators who managed to take a firm and unequivocal stand when they saw that it had become essential.

As a result, it is necessary to consider quite seriously an alternative explanation: that the mainstream commentators are literally suffering from a socio-political version of the psychological process called the Stockholm Syndrome—the tendency of some captives to identify with and even defend their captors.

In order to decide if this extremely startling hypothesis is actually plausible and not merely a political metaphor, let us briefly review the basic psychodynamics of the Stockholm Syndrome as it is explained in the FBI, [law enforcement](#)¹ and [applied criminal psychology](#)² literature.

In this literature the [classic definition of the syndrome](#)³ is given as follows:

“A nonvoluntary and unconscious positive bond between captive and captor that develops in response to the trauma of victimization. In a true manifestation of the phenomenon, hostages do not perceive the incongruity or irrationality of their feelings toward the hostage-takers in a self-critical or insightful way”

One of the [better popular summaries of the process by which the syndrome occurs](#)⁴ is presented below:

¹<http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/2007-pdfs/july07leb.pdf>

²http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display_arch&article_id=1697&issue_id=122008

³http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display_arch&article_id=1697&issue_id=122008

⁴<http://health.howstuffworks.com/mental-health/mental-disorders/stockholm-syndrome2.htm>

The Stockholm Syndrome Process

1. In a *traumatic* and extraordinarily stressful event a person finds himself or herself held captive by a person who threatens extreme physical harm to the captive if he or she disobeys the hostage-taker in any way. Escape is not an option. The prisoner's only chance at survival is acquiescence to the captor's demands.
2. As time goes on, obedience alone may not be sufficient to insure safety—a change in the captors' mood could mean harmful consequences to the prisoner. Figuring out what might set off the captor's violence so the prisoner can avoid those triggers becomes another survival strategy. In this way, the prisoner gets to know the captor.
3. A minor act of kindness on the part of the captor positions the captor as the prisoner's savior. In the traumatic circumstances in which the prisoner finds himself or herself, the slightest *act of kindness*—or simply the sudden absence of immediate threat—seems a sign of friendship in an otherwise hostile, terrifying world, and the prisoner clings to it for dear life.
4. The captor slowly comes to seem less threatening—more an instrument for survival and protection than one of harm. The prisoner undergoes what some call an act of self-delusion: In order to survive psychologically as well as physically—to lessen the unimaginable stress of the situation—the prisoner comes to truly believe that the captor is his or her friend, that in fact they can help each other “get out of this mess.”
5. The people on the outside trying to rescue the prisoner seem less like the prisoner's allies. They are going to hurt this person who is protecting the prisoner from harm. The fact that this person is also the source of that potential harm gets buried in the process of self-delusion.

The general pattern can be summarized as follows: the captive (1) attempts to deny the reality of total helplessness by propitiating the captor (2) attempts to avoid situations that might provoke the captors' anger (3) comes to blame themselves rather than the captor for the hostage situation (4) begins to defend the captor from criticism or attack (5) comes to see potential rescuers as threats rather than allies.

This kind of pattern is painfully familiar in cases of domestic violence. The abused person is fearful and tries to accommodate all of the spouses' demands. The abused individual adjusts his or her behavior to prevent explosions. They begin to blame themselves for the problem. They defend the spouse when police or social workers come to the house. They begin to see the friends who are trying to help them as threats.

But can this basic schematic outline of the way the Stockholm Syndrome develops actually be applied to mainstream political commentators?

Consider the following:

1. The sudden emergence of right-wing extremism after Obama's election was, in fact, genuinely frightening to many political commentators, especially those too young to have observed, much less participated in, the Civil Rights Movement and tested their courage against the fanatical fury of right-wing activists at close range.

This frightening change occurred on two different levels. On the one hand, there was the sudden explosion of images that portrayed Obama as Hitler or Stalin, not only on the posters of tea party marchers but on the TV shows of major right-wing celebrities with millions of viewers. When organized groups of protesters disrupted town meetings held by congressmen to discuss the health care reform bill and flooded the bill's supporters with thousands of ugly and even threatening e-mail messages, mainstream political commentators recognized that they themselves could easily become potential targets of right-wing rage if they provoked the protesters' irrational anger.

On a broader, national level, the growing extremist rhetoric and behavior of the GOP itself was in many respects even more disturbing. Right-wing extremists are perennial figures on the fringes of American politics but never before in modern American history had the bitter, "*politics as a form of warfare, political opponents as literal enemies*" perspective become so clearly championed and adopted by one of the two major American parties. In the previous cases of Joe McCarthy and Nixon, it was an individual or small group whose actions had to be challenged. In this case it was one of the two major American political parties. The rapid extremist transformation of the Republican Party deeply challenged the illusion that there were ironclad "rules of fair play" in American politics and an unshakable consensus about the limits within which the competition between the two parties was to be conducted. It was genuinely and deeply disturbing for mainstream commentators to have to seriously consider the possibility that one of America's major political parties was evolving in a direction recognizably similar to the extremist parties of Europe like the National Front in Post-War France.

2. The first reaction to this disquieting and indeed frightening possibility was denial. Column after column reassured readers that, "Don't worry, folks, this is just temporary. The "adults" in the GOP will quickly get back in control."
3. As the change persisted, however, mainstream political commentators began to describe the situation as essentially normal. The GOP's extremism wasn't something new but just the typical behavior of "Washington" or "congress" and the result of routine and long-standing "partisan polarization."
4. Gradually, mainstream political commentators began to lower their standards of acceptable behavior to accommodate the new reality: after a few columns or TV commentaries criticizing routine filibusters, unfilled judicial vacancies and legislative paralysis, all three rapidly became part of "*just the way things are these days*" and not a continuing source of vocal and angry outrage.
5. Since January, mainstream commentators have become increasingly strident and desperate in their demands that it is Obama who must make deeper and deeper compromises to avoid crisis, that he is the one who must avoid taking actions that might provoke conflict, that he must, in effect, accept political hostage-taking as the normal basis for governing. He should do this, they argue, "*for the greater good,*" "*in the nation's best interest*", "*to insure his legacy*", "*to be a great president*" and so on.

6. Most recently, mainstream political commentators have increasingly come to define Obama himself as the real “problem”—that his failure to accept GOP extremism as normal is the roadblock, not the extremism itself.

In short, it is extremely difficult to ignore just how closely this evolution of mainstream commentators’ attitudes essentially mirrors the psychodynamic process that the psychological law enforcement literature describes in actual cases of Stockholm Syndrome.

As suggested at the outset, to the degree that this interpretation of mainstream political commentators’ attitudes is correct, it suggests that a significant change is needed in progressives’ and Democrats’ political messaging strategy.

At this time Democrats and progressives are still responding to the mainstream political commentators by repeating the critique of “false equivalency.” But it is now over a year since Mann and Ornstein’s powerful analysis appeared and, realistically, virtually everyone in the political world is already fully aware of its thesis. Those who have not yet accepted its conclusions are unlikely to do so in the future. Many mainstream political commentators have rationalized their decision to ignore the false equivalency critique by considering it sufficiently answered by a simple “*to be sure*” clause in their commentary and will not depart from that stance in the future.

As a result Democrats and progressives need to press their critique to the next level. They need to firmly and explicitly assert that the mainstream political commentators are, in fact, in a state of profound psychological denial about the reality and depth of GOP extremism and are exhibiting symptoms that actually do mirror those of Stockholm syndrome.

The mainstream political commentators will sputter, fume and howl with self-righteous indignation that it is utterly outrageous for Democrats and progressives to psychoanalyze them in this way and to directly compare them to battered spouses making excuses for their tormentors. They will argue that it is, on the contrary, absolutely reasonable and rational for them to grant that GOP extremism is indeed the basic underlying problem but then to turn around and blame Obama for not accommodating it rather than insisting that the GOP change its behavior.

Most people (and most practicing mental health specialists, as well) will in contrast consider this very peculiar point of view to actually be very compelling evidence of seriously disordered cognitive processing on the part of mainstream political commentators, cognitive processing that is not unlike the thought patterns of victims of domestic abuse who refuse to criticize their abusive spouse and blame instead friends, relatives, doctors and police for creating the problem by not leaving the couple alone.

This will make for some heated and uncomfortable altercations between progressives and Democrats on the one hand and the mainstream political commentators on the other. But, it is a very necessary confrontation if America is not to meekly accept the extremist degradation of the nation’s democratic norms and institutions as a “new normal” rather than firmly condemning and opposing it as an outrageous violation of our most valued democratic traditions and values.

**WASHINGTON MONTHLY'S POLITICAL ANIMAL:
UH, YEAH, THIS IS A DIFFERENT GOP**

By ED KILGORE

I have journalistic friends who aren't really happy with me for early (and middle, and late) doom-saying about the trajectory of gun and immigration reform legislation. Yeah, I was right, but why rub it in, and why not try to promote good bipartisan legislation even if the odds against it are stiff?

My answer to this kind of complaint has been two-fold: First, Political Animal isn't a public utility or an agitprop operation; its mission is to offer acute and accurate and sometimes even slightly profound (at least by frantic-news-cycle-blogger standards) observations about political life in our country from a progressive POV. But second, I'm convinced the most important phenomenon in contemporary American politics is the radicalization of the conservative movement at almost the precise moment it consolidated its hold on the Republican Party after nearly five decades of struggle. There are a variety of interesting byproducts of this phenomenon, including asymmetric polarization, culture wars, the Tea Party Movement (a radicalized phase of the conservative "base" activism that has been there all along), congressional gridlock, and a Democratic Party deep into a defensive crouch. But the main show is what's important, and I feel an obligation to keep pointing that out so long as people keep misunderstanding or discounting it, as they most definitely do.

It does seem, however, that people are coming around, particularly as the reality of what's happening on immigration reform sinks in, viz. a [column](#)¹ from the *New Yorker's* John Cassidy that concludes that it will take at least a third consecutive presidential defeat to bring the GOP to its senses.

With even some respectable political analysts now peddling the argument that the most urgent task of the G.O.P. is to appeal to more alienated and absentee white voters, is it time to junk the theory that the party will eventually direct its attentions to the electorate at large? Could the party really remain in thrall to the God, guns, and anti-government brigade until Ronald Reagan returns to save us all from eternal damnation? That's doubtful. Clearly, though, the adjustment process is going to take more time.

Indeed. But where I part company with Cassidy and a lot of other progressive and/or neutral observers who wonder, as Barack Obama put it, when "the fever" might break, is that I don't think this is just about conservative inability to think straight about how to win elections. History is littered with "lost" political causes that inspire intense loyalty and far outlive their practical usefulness. For one thing, while you might think of politics as a matter of winning the next election so your "team" can implement its immediate agenda, intensely ideological people tend to think of politics as a matter of winning wars rather than battles, and focus on winning elections that put them into the position to radically change history. And for another, some

¹<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/johncassidy/2013/07/why-the-republicans-need-to-lose-the-presidency-for-a-third-time.html>

people express themselves politically in order to vindicate minority points of view—e.g., that the United States is in the midst of a “Holocaust” against unborn babies that’s not fundamentally different from what the Nazis did—whether or not they ever prevail.

So the best way to understand the contemporary conservative movement is as a coalition with an unusually large number of people who either don’t agree with the CV on how to win elections, don’t care about short-term political implications, or don’t care about anything other than expressing their opinion about the hellwards direction of the Republic and perhaps of the human race. Mix in another significant number of people with a large pecuniary interest in reactionary politics, and you have a movement that’s not going to turn from its current trajectory with any great speed. You can stamp your feet or call them crazy people or deplore their impact on the level of discourse all you want, but they just aren’t going away, and we might as well get used to it instead of marveling about it as though it came out of nowhere and will soon disappear.

**POLITICAL ANIMAL:
THE FISCAL CON**

By ED KILGORE

It's a pretty well-known phenomenon that a majority of Americans tend dislike government spending in the abstract, but resist efforts to reduce it once they are concrete. Similarly, a majority of Americans are hostile to "big government" as a construct, but are fiercely defensive about big elements of big government, from Social Security and Medicare to public schools to environmental regulation to the most globally dominant national defense establishment since—well, depending on your definitions, somewhere between the Golden Horde and Victorian England.

This abiding disconnect is a problem for both major political parties, but it's becoming an excruciating problem for a Republican Party that has become steadily radicalized in its demands for a significantly smaller public sector, at least when it comes to domestic governance.

In a sort of [watershed column](#)¹, Paul Krugman views the GOP's dilemma as the final stage of a longstanding con game, in which Republican pols feed lies to the party "base" about the phony feasibility of radical spending reduction schemes, which naturally create grassroots pressure for still more radicalism, carrying both "base" and leadership into a fantasy land increasingly remote from fiscal reality:

For a long time the Republican establishment got its way by playing a con game with the party's base. Voters would be mobilized as soldiers in an ideological crusade, fired up by warnings that liberals were going to turn the country over to gay married terrorists, not to mention taking your hard-earned dollars and giving them to Those People. Then, once the election was over, the establishment would get on with its real priorities — deregulation and lower taxes on the wealthy.

At this point, however, the establishment has lost control. Meanwhile, base voters actually believe the stories they were told — for example, that the government is spending vast sums on things that are a complete waste or at any rate don't do anything for people like them. (Don't let the government get its hands on Medicare!) And the party establishment can't get the base to accept fiscal or political reality without, in effect, admitting to those base voters that they were lied to.

The result is what we see now in the House: a party that, as I said, seems unable to participate in even the most basic processes of governing.

There's a large measure of truth in this diagnosis—certainly in Krugman's identification of the Ryan Budget as a landmark document suggesting but never articulating a radical change in the funding priorities of the federal government. I'd say the same about the [Cut-Cap-Balance formula](#)² which has replaced content-free balanced budget amendment proposals as a GOP

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/05/opinion/krugman-republicans-against-reality.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

²<http://rsc.scalise.house.gov/solutions/debtceiling.htm>

litmus test. CCB pretty clearly calls for a radical, permanent reduction in federal spending as a percentage of GDP, but leaves the implications almost entirely to the imagination.

Where I'd differ a bit from Krugman is in his assumption that "the base" (or more specifically, the grassroots activists who are its voice and its commissars) is being conned instead of being in on a con aimed at the rest of the electorate. Consider supportive "base" sentiments about Social Security and Medicare, which a lot of progressives (including Krugman) regard as *prima facie* evidence of hypocrisy and/or ignorance. I've argued for a **good long while now**³ that this assumption misses the tendency of many white middle-class conservatives to view "their" entitlements as "earned benefits" (at the very most a half-truth, but a powerful one) which are sharply different in nature from "welfare," the redistributive spending benefitting those people. A parallel development has been the steady spread of radical thinking in "the base" about public education, with open hostility to "government schools" becoming common along with resistance to expensive "education reform" efforts aimed at lifting opportunity for *those people*.

You could make a pretty good case that the significance of the Tea Party movement is its open radicalism in favor of a variety of ideological positions and policy ideas that don't command anything like majority support, but that aren't based on its activists being "conned" by an "establishment" that pretends huge spending reductions will be pain-free. A big and enduring share of the GOP party "base" has, since the Goldwater campaign, been committed to what is essentially a rollback in the New Deal and Great Society programs, along with the civil rights laws and other anti-discrimination efforts that accompanied the latter. What's happened since 2008 is that this segment of the base has become radicalized as its practical control over the GOP has been consummated—even when it's failed to nominate a presidential candidate. And so you have Sarah Palin all but taking over the presidential campaign of the "establishment" figure John McCain in 2008, and in 2012, the "establishment" figure Mitt Romney embracing Cut-Cap-Balance and the Ryan Budget and placing Paul Ryan on the national ticket. At the same time, the self-definition of the "establishment" has become steadily more radical, as evidenced by its current infatuation with Marco Rubio, who on every issue other than immigration reform is a hard-core ideologue.

So if, as Krugman rightly says, there is an approaching crisis-point where the "reality" of governing collides with conservative ideology, it's not at all clear "the base" will be "disillusioned" by the phony math and evasions of GOP fiscal proposals. It's more likely they will simply insist on a more straightforward fiscal radicalism at the expense of GOP credibility with voters outside their own ranks. As I've **argued repeatedly**⁴, we are talking about people who don't necessarily care about party prospects in the next election, or the practical implications of their ideology for the economy or the ability of the federal government to function. They are operating in the context of a different "reality" than their fellow-citizens, and that's not likely to change in the near future.

³http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/09/its_not_an_entitlement--its_ou.php

⁴http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal-a/2013_07/uh_yeah_this_is_a_different_go045856.php