# strategist

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The Democratic Strategist is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

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".

# A DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

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"THAT'S ENOUGH".

BY ED KILGORE JAMES VEGA J.P. GREEN

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**A TDS 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," 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 weaken Democratic prospects in the 2012 elections.

The debate quickly devolved into an argument over the inflammatory word "sabotage" 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.

- 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<sup>3</sup> 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")<sup>4</sup> 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:<sup>5</sup> "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?

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

³http://www.amazon.com/Eliminationists-Hate-Radicalized-American-Right/dp/0981576982/ref=sr\_1\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1291133554&sr=1-1

<sup>4</sup>http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/ac/2009/05/what is rightwing extremism.php

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

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 demagogy 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.