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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.

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A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

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OPPONENTS OF EXTREMIST POLITICAL
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BY
ED KILGORE
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A TDS STRATEGY MEMO: Enhancing “civility” in politics is too broad a goal to be enforceable by public pressure and “eliminating threats of violence” is too narrow to stop extremist rhetoric. Here’s a proposal for what opponents of extremist political oratory should demand.

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

President Obama’s memorial speech in Tucson has established a solid foundation for the creation of new social norms to reduce the role of violent extremist political rhetoric in American public life. But our politics will quickly revert to its previous state if political commentators and politicians cannot define a clear and reasonably unambiguous “line in the sand” between what should be considered acceptable in political discourse and what should be viewed as unacceptable.

One social norm that is already emerging is that specific threats of violence are simply no longer acceptable. It is unlikely that we will hear overtly threatening remarks again anytime soon about “meeting census surveyors at the door with shotguns”, or “watering the tree of liberty with blood” in mainstream political discourse. Nor are we likely to see men appearing at political rallies with assault weapons strapped to their backs without there being serious and strenuous outcry. Among elected officials there will for some time probably even be a self-imposed ban on “humorous” remarks about “my close friends Smith and Wesson” or coy references to “second amendment remedies” that imply the threat of using guns and violence to achieve political goals.

This in itself will certainly be healthy, but it will not prevent the gradual (or not so gradual) return of the kind of rhetoric that portrays politics as a desperate, life or death struggle between literally evil and subversive, “*un-American opponents of freedom and liberty*” on the one hand and “*heroic patriots*” standing against them on the other (In the comparable left-wing rhetorical framework the dichotomy is between embattled “*defenders of traditional democratic values*” and “*racist, right-wing crypto-fascists*”). Simply creating a norm against clear threats of violence will not by itself reverse the broader “climate of hate” or “lack of civility” in politics.

Yet neither a “climate of hate” nor a “lack of civility” are sufficiently precise to create a clear new social norm. In fact, because of this imprecision, they are already being subject to criticism and even ridicule on the grounds that “politics is necessarily passionate” and “metaphors don’t kill people, people kill people.” A number of conservative commentators have dismissed the notions as typical nanny-state political correctness run amok.

As a result, we need a standard that reasonable people can consistently apply and insist upon—one that distinguishes what is acceptable from what is not acceptable.

Politics as Warfare, Political Opponents as “Enemies”

For some time TDS has been arguing that there are two key concepts that lie at the root of both political extremism and the climate of violence: The notions of *politics as warfare* and *political*

opponents as enemies. This is how a [TDS Strategy Memo put it last year](#)¹:

“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.

As a result, 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 are two central ideas – the vision of “*politics as warfare*” and “*political opponents as enemies*.” While these notions are widely used as metaphors, political extremists mean them 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 different opinions with whom negotiated political compromises must be sought.

Seeing liberals as “enemies”

These two concepts have always been a part of extremist thinking, but—among conservatives—they became dramatically more prevalent after the fall of the Soviet Union. As the TDS Strategy Memo continued:

In the conservative view—after the fall of the Soviet Union—Liberals quickly replaced communism as the principal “enemies” of America.

The titles of a whole series of books by well-known conservatives reflected this view:

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. While we are lucky that in this country our civil wars are fought at the ballot box, not on the battlefields, nonetheless this is a civil war.” – 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

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

“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

The ultimate results of taking the *“politics as warfare”* and *“liberals as enemies”* notions literally was dramatically illustrated 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 soldiers and “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 and followed them to their logical conclusion.

Distinguishing conservatives from extremists

It is important to underline two key facts about the two concepts of “politics as a form of warfare” and “political opponents as enemies”:

First, the definition of extremism as based on these two notions, in principle, applies equally to extremists on both sides of the political spectrum. While right-wing extremists are generally more prone to use military language and concepts, there is a clear left-wing analog—a view of politics as resembling warfare and Republicans, conservatives or red-state Americans as mortal enemies rather than political opponents. Historically the “politics as warfare” point of view has always been a part of the basic doctrine of Marxist-Leninist political parties like the American Communist Party and was evident in the rhetoric and actions of groups like the Weather Underground in the late 1960’s. By the 1990’s neither of these political forces were any longer significant but the perspective could still be identified in the “direct action” wing of the anti-globalization protests of the late 1990’s and early 2000’s.

Within the Democratic Party and the traditional liberal and progressive organizations the “politics as warfare” perspective has always been relatively rare but with the rise of the blogosphere in the early 2000’s, a number of sites arose which expressed a bitter loathing of Bush, Cheney, the conservative “echo chamber” and the Right that clearly identified these groups and individuals as “enemies”. One notable difference between the Left and Right in the last two decades, however, has been the absence on the Left of actual political murderer-assassins like Tim McVeigh and Eric Rudolph in the 1990’s, Knoxville church assassin Jim Adkisson, abortion doctor assassin Scott Roeder, Holocaust Museum killer James W. von Brunn and Neo-Nazi Richard Poplawski, **all of whom carried out lethal attacks**² on liberal “enemies” in the last three years.

Second, this definition clearly separates traditional Republicans and conservatives—and even “right-wing conservatives” from unacceptable extremists. Many conservative groups object to being lumped together with violent extremists, and argue that even the most intense and passionate opposition to Obama and his policies does not make them either advocates of violence or political extremists.

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

In fact, they are entirely and emphatically correct. What defines “political extremism” and distinguishes it from other concepts like “right-wing” 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” (as in “enemy combatants”). Groups that reject these notions are not political extremists.
2. Political extremism becomes dangerous and violent whenever and wherever these two notions are taken literally, particularly, as is generally the case, in toxic combination with each other.

The two concepts are linked

It is also important to note that the two concepts of “politics as war” and “political opponents as enemies” are directly linked by cause and effect—the view of politics as warfare inescapably leads to the view that political opponents are enemies with no more legitimacy than enemy combatants in a shooting war. This linkage is crucial because, when the two concepts are separated, it becomes easier to dismiss the notion of “politics as warfare”, in isolation, as just an innocuous metaphor.

Numerous commentators have made this argument in recent days. [Charles Krauthammer had this to say](#)³:

...fighting and warfare are the most routine of political metaphors. And for obvious reasons. Historically speaking, all democratic politics is a sublimation of the ancient route to power—military conquest. That’s why the language persists. That’s why we say without any self-consciousness such things as “battleground states” or “targeting” opponents. Indeed, the very word for an electoral contest—“campaign”—is an appropriation from warfare.

Krauthammer’s view confuses two profoundly different things—individual words used as metaphors and the coherent ideological view of “politics as warfare”. Last month, for example, Rep. Joe Barton, while seeking support to become head of the House Energy and Commerce Committee [told the Republican leadership](#)⁴: *“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.”*

There is absolutely nothing “routine” or innocuous about this comment. Only a month later this statement now seems incredibly chilling, vile, repulsive and grotesque. But when Barton said it last month, the remark passed largely without comment and was justified by many on the Right with the precisely same excuse Krauthammer offers.

The distinction between individual words and a coherent ideological view is crucial. In isolation words like “targeting” or “battleground states” may seem acceptable, but metaphors that actually assert the view that *“politics is a form of warfare”* lead directly to the conclusion that opponents are enemies who must be stopped, if necessary by violence. And when the

³<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/11/AR2011011106068.html>

⁴<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/29/AR2010112904500.html>

concept of politics as warfare is linked with the notion of political opponents as enemies, the profound error of the notion that military metaphors are basically innocuous becomes clear.

In the language of warfare, opponents who live within the home country are not only “enemies”, but “traitors”, “subversives”, “turncoats”, “spies” and “collaborators.” All of these terms imply behavior that is despicable, evil, vile and criminal and which justly merit punishment by execution, reflecting the traditional view that enemies in a civil war are not entitled to even the respect accorded to enemy combatants in an international war. When applied to politics rather than warfare, these terms are every bit as toxic and inflammatory as they are in the language of actual combat. There are absolutely no innocuous political metaphors that involve terms like “enemies,” “traitors” or “subversives”. They are inherently and inescapably extremist terms and incitements to violence.

Conclusion: a new social norm

There is now a widespread national support for a new social norm for congress and commentators—a social norm that demands a higher level of civility in political discourse and rejects rhetoric that encourages violence and extremism. What is needed is a clearer definition of this norm than simply the general goals of “greater civility” and “eliminating threats of violence”.

What is here proposed is a norm which holds that there are two specific concepts that should be considered both extremist and unacceptable—the notions that politics is a form of warfare and that political opponents are literally enemies. This norm has number of useful characteristics:

- It is sufficiently clear and specific that serious people can agree on whether a specific statement does or does not violate the norm.
- It is a norm with which the very large majority of Americans agree. Virtually every survey shows Americans want politicians to work together to solve the nation’s problems and not seek to destroy each other.
- The norm is not biased against either Right or Left. It can—and should—be applied equally to both sides of the political spectrum, to Democrats and Republicans, progressives and conservatives, right-wingers and left-wingers.
- The norm does not unfairly lump passionate advocates of views with extremists. It clearly separates both traditional conservatives and nonviolent radicals from the category of “extremists”.
- The norm frames violence as only a part and not the entire problem. It suggests that politically inspired violence (as opposed to random psychotic violence) flows from an underlying ideology and that when one rejects the ideological underpinnings the justification for violence is simultaneously and automatically undermined.
- The norm reinforces democratic institutions. It rejects the notion of a right to revolution or insurrection—*what Ed Kilgore defines as “the idea that it may become necessary”*⁵—

⁵http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/01/after_tucson.php

at some point for “right-thinking” citizens to undertake the violent overthrow of the government on behalf of some higher law”. A democratically elected government is by definition not a tyranny and attempts to overthrow it are by definition assaults on democracy itself. The same is true of threats to secede from the Union or nullify constitutionally adopted law. It is a historical fact in this country that such threats implicitly involve insurrection.

- The norm directly supports the broader goal of increasing civility—of creating a political dialog—that, in president Obama’s words seeks to “Heal. Not wound.”

This new social norm is practical and applicable. It supports President Obama’s compelling statement that “we are all Americans, and that we can question each other’s ideas without questioning each other’s love of country” and his moving challenge that “only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation in a way that would make the victims of the Tucson tragedy proud.”

**To honor Rep Gabrielle Giffords and support
President Obama’s call for greater civility let
all Americans make the following commitment:**



**Politics should not be viewed as a form of warfare
Political opponents should not be treated as enemies.**