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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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BY
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TDS STRATEGY MEMO: THE MOST IMPORTANT AND UNSTATED “LESSON” OF 2014 IS THAT THE GOP’S EMBRACE OF EXTREMISM AS A CALCULATED POLITICAL STRATEGY WORKED PERFECTLY. IT HAS INVALIDATED KEY ELEMENTS OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL STRATEGY AND IT IS URGENT THAT DEMOCRATS NOW FACE THIS REALITY.

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In the weeks since the elections, Democratic post-mortems have essentially focused on four main reasons for the Republican victory: the low turnout of Democratic base voters, the conservative nature of the states that were in play, the too-slowly recovering economy and/or stagnant incomes and the weak Democratic platform and messaging.

All these factors did indeed play a role but there was another crucial dynamic that has been almost completely ignored. The Republican victories in 2014 also reflected the perfecting and successful employment of a new and deeply troubling strategy of political extremism as the calculated political strategy of the GOP.

Since Obama’s election in 2008, The Democratic Strategist has repeatedly insisted on the unprecedented nature of the political transformation that has been occurring within the GOP. **In a series of strategy memos¹** we have tracked the growing influence of extremism as a **political strategy and philosophy** within the GOP—an extremist strategy and philosophy that views politics as essentially a form of warfare and political opponents as literal enemies.

One key point upon which these TDS memos have insisted is that the danger posed by the GOP’s current political extremism is not simply due to the fact that it advocates extreme positions on *policies* (although today’s conservative agenda is indeed ideologically extreme) but, even more disturbingly, because the strategy attacks *fundamental democratic norms and institutions in American society*. In stark contrast to the past, the tactics of the current conservative movement include sabotaging the normal operations of government, undermining the right to vote for groups that tend to vote Democratic and attacking once shared social values like respect for science, support for the separation of church and state, tolerance for diversity of opinion and belief in reasoned compromise as the proper foundation for American political life.

Although the mainstream media has largely accepted the extremist conquest of the GOP as “the new normal” for American politics, most Democratic strategists do indeed recognize that it represents a profoundly dangerous development. At the same time, however, this awareness has had very little effect on the post-election discussions of Democratic political and electoral strategy. Instead, the exchanges among political strategists have largely remained focused on the long-standing problems of low turnout among key elements of the Obama coalition and the need to further expand the Democratic electorate.

But limiting the discussion to these challenges ignores a pivotal and fundamental reality: the extremist conquest of the GOP has changed the American political “game” in ways that

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

profoundly undermine and invalidate a number of key elements of the traditional Democratic approach to both base mobilization and coalition expansion. In consequence Democrats urgently need to consider major revisions in their current political strategy.

The difference between traditional Republican conservatism and the new political extremism

To understand why this is so, it is necessary to quickly review several fundamental differences between the traditional conservatism of Republicans like Dwight Eisenhower or even Ronald Reagan and the political extremism of today's GOP.

The current political extremism that emerged in the GOP since the mid 90's—and which exploded with particular virulence after the election of Barack Obama—has four key characteristics:

1. ***Intentionally blocking passage of virtually all legislation*** – The traditional Republican view of the proper role of their elected legislators was to negotiate over the content of proposed bills in order to shape the legislation in the most conservative possible way. Today, in contrast, the explicit political strategy of the GOP is to systematically block all significant legislation—even legislation that Republicans had originally proposed themselves—for the deliberate purpose of creating virtually complete congressional gridlock and the consequent public perception of fundamental Democratic “failure.”

As the distinguished congressional scholar Thomas Mann **recently noted**:²

The President has faced unified and unrelenting opposition from Republicans in Congress since the first day of his presidency... Republicans have never accepted the legitimacy of his presidency nor demonstrated any willingness to enter into negotiations with him to deal with the Great Recession, stagnant wages, serious flaws in the regulation of financial services, unsustainable health care costs, a deteriorating infrastructure, climate change, and a widely acknowledged broken immigration system. Instead, since the 2010 elections returned the GOP to the majority in the House, they have engaged in unprecedented and irresponsible brinksmanship and hostage-taking that have threatened the full faith and credit of the country, weakened the economy, and precipitated a sharp decline in the public's trust in government.

2. ***Deliberately sabotaging the operation of government programs and agencies***. The traditional Republican view was that any deeply offensive legislation passed by any one congress should be challenged during the next election campaigns and repealed when the electorate voted out the bill's supporters. Today, in contrast, even extremely popular programs and agencies are deliberately but

²http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/fixgov/posts/2014/11/20-obama-executive-order-immigration-speech-mann?utm_campaign=Brookings+Brief&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=14998176&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-92NeBKAKYkFCJU_HvTyBSpnRiXAFg5gRmpII7SR6Yg-J3Cr0gGBb04zRyB37fvatn4LdS_a1ybgQYHyCw0jRQ7paS-Dbw&_hsmi=14998176

covertly undermined and sabotaged by blocking legislatively authorized funds for their operation through budgetary maneuvering or by refusing to appoint top administrators and functionaries explicitly required by the legislation.

(Conservative extremists, of course, perceive both these actions as representing a heroic battle against the threat of brutal tyranny and dictatorship and not as dangerous right-wing extremism. But it is impossible to take this conservative perspective seriously without also having to agree that the New Deal, Social Security, Medicare, the Voting Rights Act and a vast panoply of other previously bipartisan legislation actually represented sinister totalitarian assaults on human freedom).

3. **Directly attacking basic democratic institutions** – In recent years the GOP has embraced the strategy of deliberately preventing citizens from voting if they are likely to support Democrats. The utter cynicism with which this strategy is executed is startling: in Texas, the legislature endorsed gun registration permits as a legitimate form of voter identification but rejected college ID's. In Georgia, State authorities shut down polling places where substantial numbers of minorities vote and delayed the processing of over 50,000 new voter registration forms during the fall of 2014. This is a political strategy that traditional Republicans would not have tolerated.
4. **Employing “Stealth” electoral tactics** – Traditional GOP conservatives like Barry Goldwater clearly and openly proclaimed the extreme nature of their policy agenda, proudly promising voters “*a choice, not an echo.*” In contrast, many current GOP extremists like Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker have run on an apparently mainstream agenda, but then enacted extreme right wing measures the moment they were elected. Unlike 2010, in 2014 Democratic charges regarding such “stealth extremism” were not effective against the candidates of the GOP. In 2010 Republicans failed to take over the Senate because the insurgent extremists were politically inept and in conflict with the party leadership. In 2014, on the other hand, the leadership essentially capitulated: so-called “establishment” candidates adopted all the major planks of the tea party/extremist agenda while the GOP leadership simultaneously ran special workshops to teach insurgent candidates how to carefully obscure their extremist views and avoid “gaffes” that would reveal them as genuinely nutty.

As Ron Brownstein noted:³ “In the Republican class of 2014, gone was the belligerence and rhetorical recklessness that doomed such Senate tea-party challengers as Sharron Angle in 2010 and Todd Akin in 2012. Yet a look at the candidates’ agendas this year finds an almost indivisible consensus behind deeply conservative positions among the 14 non-incumbent Senate Republican contenders.”

It is critical to note that this new political extremism is not confined to only one wing or faction of the GOP. None of the four extremist political strategies noted above has ever been strongly challenged as fundamentally wrong by **any** major figure in the “establishment” wing of the GOP or by **any** leading GOP politician. There is no organized group or faction within the GOP—including even the so-called “reformacons” who have received so much fawning positive attention from the mainstream media—that has publically and forcefully objected to these noxious innovations.

³ <http://www.nationaljournal.com/political-connections/forecast-right-turn-ahead-20141030>

The fact is simple: the extremist political strategy described above has now become the *shared, commonly accepted political strategy of today's Republican Party.*

The Implications for Democratic Strategy

For Democrats, the critical point about this new GOP extremism is that it invalidates key elements of the traditional Democratic strategies for base mobilization and coalition expansion.

Base Mobilization and Legislative Obstruction

The GOP's strategy of legislative sabotage and obstruction, for example, actually lies at the heart of the "enthusiasm gap" among young and other Obama coalition voters. Unless Democrats can win solid, veto-proof control of not only the White House but also both branches of Congress, the GOP's willingness to rigidly obstruct the passage of new legislation and sabotage its operation if enacted can prevent Democrats from successfully enacting even the most widely popular programs and policies. As a result the extremist political strategy of the GOP makes it impossible for individual Democratic candidates to plausibly promise voters that they will be able to enact a progressive legislative agenda if they are elected.

This presents a profound problem for Democrats because Democratic candidates generally seek to win elections by promising to enact a liberal or progressive agenda while conservatives are content to run on "defending traditional values" or repealing existing laws. Democrats see their role as proposing and enacting programs and policies that improve people's lives and if they are unable to do this, they lose a central rationale for asking voters to elect them.

As Mike Tomasky notes:⁴

Even for those who don't blame Obama for Washington's paralysis, the mere fact of the dysfunction—the dismal relentlessness of it, the realization that it will not change—has led most people to throw in the towel to one extent or another.... It's been no secret that the GOP's basic m.o. for the last six years has been to oppose everything Obama proposes. ...the real reason for the wall of total opposition, especially among the savvier obstructionists, is to make Obama look feckless and weak, like a president who can't pass a kidney stone.

You see, they know very well that the average American knows very little about how Washington works and just assumes that the president, simply by virtue of being president, can more or less tell Congress "this is what I want done," and it gets done.... And the Republicans know further that all this dysfunction, while it makes both parties and Washington as a whole look bad, inescapably makes the Democrats look worse, because the Democrats are the party of government, so when government fails, that breakdown bleeds its way into the collective public consciousness as more of a Democratic failure than a Republican one.

It's a great racket, and it has worked like a dream.

⁴<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/09/03/is-the-gop-finally-scorching-itself.html>

The conclusion is inescapable. Until Democrats figure out how to beat this deeply cynical “racket,” the problem of demoralized or unenthusiastic Democratic voters will not be solved.

“Stealth” campaigns and preventing the expansion of the Democratic coalition

The GOP’s extremist strategy is also at the base of the Democrats inability to expand the Obama coalition. Although most intra-Democratic discussions today focus on either the need for more robust populist proposals or more extensive pro-Democratic messaging to attract new Democratic voters, there is also another major factor involved.

The overwhelming majority of recent opinion polls and the results of many referenda show that the specific planks of the conservative extremist agenda are, in fact, basically unpopular and the main Democratic policies substantially more well-liked. The opinion data leave little doubt that if given a direct head to head choice between the specific social and economic policies of Ted Cruz and Hillary Clinton today, most voters would find Clinton’s specific agenda more popular. This is true both for the major social issues (support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, support for gay marriage, support for basic reproductive rights, support for legalization of marijuana) and the major “hot button” economic policy issues (raising the minimum wage, opposing the privatization of Social Security and Medicare, support for the main policy elements of Obamacare (i.e., coverage for prior conditions, guaranteed coverage, etc.) as well as for a range of other specific policy issues.¹

This has been true in the past as well. However, the GOP has successfully maintained its political support over the years with two strategies:

First, by campaigning with appeals based on broad general statements of conservative ideology – opposition to “*big government*”, support for “*free enterprise*” and the defense of “*traditional values*.”

Second, by campaigning on an intense, conservative form of identity politics. GOP candidates present themselves as authentic representatives of “the ‘Real America’” – white, small town and Red State. They describe Democrats, in contrast, as buying the support of minorities by promising to take benefits away from whites in order to redistribute them to minorities and as elitists and educated snobs who want to impose alien, un-American values on decent real Americans.

Ordinarily, one could trust the voters to reject a clearly expressed right-wing extremist agenda with which they strongly disagree, even if it is gift-wrapped in a pleasing rhetorical package. But the extremist strategy of “stealth campaigning” puts traditional Democratic strategy in a bind. Democrats desperately want to run against the extremist rightwing

¹Of course carefully crafted variations in question wordings can produce results that appear more favorable to conservative views. But a substantial majority of opinion polls using the most simple and direct “approve/disapprove” questions regarding all of the issues above consistently shows significantly greater support for the Democratic position than for the conservative extremist agenda.

agenda but during political campaigns GOP candidates emphatically deny they support such a platform and even claim to support progressive goals instead. In the 2014 elections, for example, various Republican nominees endorsed *same-sex marriage, over-the-counter access to birth-control pills, increases to the minimum wage, legalizing medical marijuana and granting in-state college tuition to some illegal immigrants*. Yet in every case these were positions the same candidates had opposed only a short time before. The candidates were cynically relying on the past experience that the press would not consider them dishonest for “moving to the center,” no matter how hypocritically, and that voters will not hold them responsible in the next election if they dump these campaign trail promises the moment after they are elected because, given the two and four year intervals between elections, only voters who follow politics quite closely will remember the deception that was practiced in the previous contest and hold the candidate accountable for his or her fundamental dishonesty.

It is important to note that stealth campaigning will play an absolutely central role in the 2016 presidential race. It is entirely certain that unless the GOP nominates an outspoken right-wing candidate like Ted Cruz, other candidates like Scott Walker or Paul Ryan will furiously deny they support the extremist agenda during the campaign but will then be entirely willing to implement it through maneuvers like the budget reconciliation process if they are elected.

In fact, conservative extremists fully and confidently expect that the budget reconciliation process will be the method by which their deeply unpopular anti-New Deal agenda will actually be imposed. During the 2012 elections, for example, influential conservative strategist Grover Norquist proudly and clearly explained why Mitt Romney was an entirely acceptable candidate from the point of view of extreme conservatives like himself. **During a speech to the American Conservative Union:**⁵ he said, “*We don’t need a president to tell us what direction to go. We already know. We don’t need someone to think this stuff up or to design it. It already exists. We just need a president with enough working digits to handle a pen*”.

The tremendous power and effectiveness of the GOP’s extremist strategy lies in the synergy between the two tactics of legislative paralysis and stealth campaigning. Legislative paralysis prevents Democrats from achieving popular results that would win them political support while stealth campaigning obscures the real differences between the issue agendas of the two parties. The result is that political campaigns become vacuous, TV commercial driven battles over “Real American” identity and rhetorical ideology, areas where the GOP has always had an advantage.

The implication for Democratic political strategy is clear. The extremist political strategy of the GOP—reflected particularly in legislative paralysis and stealth campaigning—is a central force behind the two major challenges that face Democrats today: the enthusiasm gap and the inability of Democratic candidates to expand the current Democratic coalition. The challenge that this strategy presents must be clearly and directly confronted.

What Strategy Should Democrats Employ to Confront this Challenge?

Since the extremist conquest of the GOP lies at the base of both the problems noted above,

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wYYX0mZsQA>

the essential Democratic response must be to focus directly on this reality. In order to do so, however, there are distinct political strategies that are required for three separate social groups:

Drop-off base voters:

The essential problem this group presents for Democratic strategy is that while they clearly see the consequences of extremist strategy—near complete legislative paralysis and gridlock—they still apply out-of-date concepts to interpret the causes of this problem rather than clearly perceiving the new and unique role of GOP extremism. Some, more leftwing drop-off voters, for example, perceive both political parties as equally capitalist in nature and dismiss all Democratic and Republican politicians as equally puppets of big business. Other less radical drop-off voters blame more amorphous notions of “corrupt politicians” and “special interests” in general. Still others assume the fault lies in an ethical failure of all politicians as a class to be willing to put aside their personal hubris and to compromise for the greater good. In each case the result is a cynicism about politics in general rather than an energetic opposition to the extremist strategy of the GOP.

As a result the key to overcoming this problem is to convince drop-off base voters that today’s GOP extremism is indeed a radically new and entirely distinct threat—a coherent radical right-wing ideology with a covert and genuinely sinister national agenda. It will be necessary to convince drop-off voters that the many seemingly separate outrageous local actions – shutting down virtually all abortion clinics in Texas, revoking collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin, allowing the “open carry” of assault rifles in Georgia, denying gay men and women the right to marry in various states, the closing of polling places in African-American neighborhoods in South Carolina and so on are not separate, isolated events. On the contrary, they are reflections of a coherent national agenda that is propagated through a collaborative network of right wing organizations of which ALEC (The American Legislative Exchange Council), Americans for Prosperity and the other parts of the Koch Brothers political empire are only one part.

As Mike Tomasky says:⁶

We may keep electing Democratic presidents and it will certainly be better to have a Democratic president than not. At least she or he will try to do something about the minimum wage (aside from abolish it), will support same-sex marriage, will tolerate and maybe even occasionally attempt to help trade unions, will accept that climate change is a legitimate concern for the species.

But he or she won’t be able to do much of anything about any of these matters until the Democratic Party finds a way to communicate to its core constituencies that they must vote in off-years. What is needed here is a massive and very well-funded public education campaign that is ongoing—I mean that never stops—and that explains to people why they can’t elect a president and just sit back and expect that he or she can wave a wand and make change happen.

⁶<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/31/the-dems-midterm-performance-anxiety.html>

You'd think people would have learned that from these Obama years. I don't think they have. In fact I think they've learned a lesson, but an incorrect one. We talk about the president in personal terms in this country all the time; we imbue him with powers he doesn't actually have. We attribute his successes or failures to the presence or lack of some special sauce that he does or does not possess...But that's a jejune and delusional view of today's Washington. Obama can't get his agenda through because the Republicans in Congress have no structural incentive to compromise and in fact have every structural incentive to obstruct. I needn't go into all the reasons for that now; I suspect you know them. But this is the reality. Obama could be Lyndon Johnson on steroids and have Republican legislators over to the White House for bourbon every night, and it wouldn't change a thing.

Making this case is not an impossible task. Polling and focus groups conducted by pollster Celinda Lake among Democratic drop off voters in five key states found the following:

The drop-off voters were positively disposed to Obama (70% favorable, 25% unfavorable) and to Dem candidates (53% favorable to Democratic candidates, 13% for GOP candidates). She concluded that "If these voters turn out, they will vote Democratic."

The research found that messaging about the extremist national agenda had a significant effect. Providing convincing information that the GOP agenda included such things as cutting access to health care for 8 million people, defunding programs for students financial aid, reversing a range of women's rights measures, privatizing Social Security and Medicare and defunding K-12 education produced an 8% increase in support for Democratic candidates—from 53% to 61%—and a 20% increase in "enthusiasm"—from 59% of the sample expressing interest in voting to 82% expressing such interest.

The communications challenge is admittedly complex because different base groups in the Obama coalition have different "hot button" issues which alienate them from the GOP. But the key to successful persuasion will be precisely to show that the apparently separate individual issues are all connected by a covert and coherent national extremist agenda that directly threatens all progressive values and goals.

Traditional Republicans

Polling by Democracy Corps suggests that as many as 25 percent of the voters who identify themselves as Republicans would prefer representatives who would return to more traditional GOP conservatism. They find themselves confronted, however, with a forced choice between an extremist-controlled GOP and the Democratic Party. The percentages vary from state to state but in Kansas, for example, 15 percent of voters identified themselves as moderate Republicans. Percentages like these are sufficiently large to decisively shift the balance in a number of elections.

Up until now the combination of stealth candidates concealing the extremist nature of their agenda until elected and the 40 year campaign to discredit the Democrats as culturally alien representatives of minorities and the educated elite has left more moderate Republicans with what they perceive as an completely unsatisfactory choice—to vote for Democrats they deeply distrust or else for GOP candidates with whom on many issues they disagree.

In the 2014 election, however, As EJ Dionne has noted, moderate Republicans began to fight back, a trend reflected in the emergence of independent candidates in a number of current campaigns. As he noted:

The missing component in the machinery of American politics has been moderate-to-liberal Republicanism, and the gears of government are grinding very loudly.

Because of the revolution in Republican politics spearheaded by the tea party, [the rise of independent candidates in several states] should not be treated as isolated episodes. They are signs that moderates, particularly moderate Republicans, are fighting back.

The safe journalistic trope is that both of our major parties have become more “extreme.” This is simply not true. It’s the Republican Party that’s veered far off center. To deny the fact is to disrespect the hard work of conservatives in taking over the GOP.

As for the Republican “establishment,” it may have overcome many tea party challenges this year, but it is increasingly captive to the right wing. This summer, conservative writers Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru... argued correctly that the establishment candidates who triumphed did so largely on the tea party’s terms....

What’s happening in Kansas is particularly revealing of the backlash against the right from moderate Republicans. Incumbent Governor Republican Sam Brownback has championed an unapologetic tea party, tax-cutting agenda and has sought to **purge moderate Republicans**⁷ who opposed him from the state legislature. In response, many GOP moderates have responded by endorsing Brownback’s opponent, Democrat Paul Davis.

In fact, more 100 current and former Republican elected officials endorsed Davis, indicating the depth of the moderate “revolt.”

In most contests this year, however, the challenge came via “independent” candidates who took a variety of positions that combine elements of Democratic and Republican stances.

These independents varied in ideology. Some were libertarians who generally support “free enterprise” but who reject conservative views on a range of social issues. In future elections this group may very likely grow in importance since many educated

⁷http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ej-dionne-when-moderates-fight-back/2014/09/07/42c08a86-352b-11e4-9e92-0899b306bbea_story.html

voters consider themselves relatively conservative in their economic views but are increasingly uncomfortable with the social, racial and anti-scientific views of the Tea Party/ extremist forces who dominate the grass roots of the Republican Party.

But there is also a different group of independent voters—culturally traditional white working class Americans—who hold “old-fashioned” social views but who are simultaneously often strongly populist in their economic thinking. With both groups there will be a range of issues on which Democrats and these independents agree and others where they diverge.

It is too early to predict how this trend might develop and the degree to which Democrats will be able to work with independents with whom they disagree on some issues while agreeing on others. But the rise of independent candidates has the potential to drive a wedge between the extremists and the moderates within the GOP, an outcome which would be profoundly healthy for the future of America. In some cases it may be possible for Democrats to support independent candidates with whom they can work in the legislature and thereby defeat the GOP, reducing the extremists to a weakened minority. In other cases, the threat of independent candidates may allow moderates within the GOP to break the control the extremists now hold over the primary process. Right now, the extremists who participate disproportionately in GOP primaries can force all candidates to embrace their agenda because the candidates know that, regardless of how much they have to grovel and pander to the extremists in order to get the nomination, they can then be confident of winning the general elections in their heavily Republican states or districts. With the threat of independent candidates threatening to deprive them of a majority in the general election if the primary process forces them to move too far to the right, moderate GOP candidates will be forced to fight for control of the local parties once again.

The mainstream media

The most indefensible group of rationalizers and apologists for the new GOP extremism is the mainstream media. The extent of their journalistic “dereliction of duty” can be seen by comparing it to the behavior of the media in previous circumstances when right wing extremism posed a serious threat to America’s political institutions.

During the McCarthy era the mainstream media played a vital role in finally rallying public opinion against the “witch hunt” atmosphere and the hysteria that McCarthy’s false accusations generated. A critical moment came when broadcaster Edward R. Murrow directly challenged McCarthy on CBS television, an act that emboldened a range of other journalists and commentators to take a similar stance against the extremist trend.

Today’s mainstream media had a similar opportunity to take a firm stand against extremism in early 2012 after Tom Mann and Norm Orenstein, respected congressional scholars at the Brookings institution, published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* entitled “*Let’s face it, the Republicans are the problem*”⁸ in which they firmly outlined the unique and dangerous nature of the GOP’s extreme political philosophy. Until that time many mainstream

⁸http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lets-just-say-it-the-republicans-are-the-problem/2012/04/27/gIQAxCVUIT_story.html

commentators had practiced a “false equivalency” – criticizing both Democrats and Republicans equally for the legislative paralysis they knew perfectly well was actually caused by a carefully calculated Republican strategy.

For a brief period after the Mann and Ornstein article the mainstream media appeared to be moving away from false equivalence and toward at least incorporating a sentence or two in their writing that said, in effect “*of course, the GOP is more to blame for this problem than the Democrats.*” Since the 2012 elections, however, mainstream commentary has very dramatically returned to blaming both sides equally—or even placing greater blame on the Democrats for electoral paralysis than on the GOP.

Here are just a few examples from the *Washington Post* during the three weeks after the 2014 elections:

Here is Dana Milbank blaming both sides equally:

“The problem in Washington is less about ideology than the fact that lawmakers don’t trust each other enough to work together... Washington is broken because personal bonds have unraveled.”

And here is Chris Cillizza, implicitly blaming Obama for the lack of trust:

Although most outsiders believe fights over immigration, climate and so on don’t get resolved because of deep policy differences its actually the lack of trust that makes any sort of progress on big issues impossible... What Boehner is saying is that he—and by extension, congressional Republicans—simply doubt Obama’s willingness to negotiate in good faith.”

And here, most dramatically, is the major “day after the elections” **editorial in the *Washington Post***⁹—an editorial that places blame subtly but primarily on the “*hyperpartisan control of Democratic boss Harry Reid*” and his “*obstructionist ways*” and only secondarily on “*His Republican nemesis, Mitch McConnell*”:

The roots of this election season’s discontent seem to lie not so much in the ebb and flow of events but instead in a spreading sense that national political institutions, beset with partisanship, no longer work well.... In the Senate, members from both parties are said to be chafing under the *hyperpartisan control of Democratic boss Harry Reid* (Nev.) and his Republican nemesis, Mitch McConnell (Ky.). They reportedly want to get things done on a bipartisan basis. Yet, with a handful of exceptions, their efforts have born no legislative fruit, and few have dared to speak out forcefully against their leaders’ *obstructionist ways*.

In short, the deeply disturbing fact is that the mainstream media has not only accepted without question the view that the unprecedented political extremism of the GOP is simply “the new normal,” a new normal that should be passively

⁹http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/can-voters-look-forward-to-a-congress-that-actually-governs/2014/10/29/168a3de6-5ed3-11e4-9f3a-7e28799e0549_story.html

accepted, but has even proceeded to blame Obama and the Democrats for failing to meekly accept and submit to this new reality.

In fact, there was actually a deep and unintentional sardonic irony in the timing of the *Washington Post's* editorial. It appeared one day after the funeral of longtime *Washington Post* editor Benjamin Bradlee. During the funeral services for Bradlee eulogy after eulogy praised his dogged insistence on exposing the dangerous political extremism of the Nixon White House and the threat to democracy that had been posed by the Watergate conspiracy. Many mourners commented on the degree to which, like Edward R. Murrow before him, Bradlee had played a crucial role in defending the traditional norms and institutions of American democracy from a dangerous right-wing political extremism.

By running an editorial that totally ignored the rise of the new and equally dangerous right wing extremism in the GOP only one day after Bradlee's interment, the *Post's* editorial board seemed to be making an almost deliberate attempt to demonstrate that, having successfully buried his corpse; his successors were now seeking to also bury his greatest legacy.

Conclusions:

There are a number of key conclusions that must be drawn from this analysis:

1. A new and disturbing extremist political strategy has now become the shared, commonly accepted political strategy of today's Republican Party.
2. This extremist conquest of the GOP has changed the American political "game" in ways that profoundly undermine and invalidate key elements of the traditional Democratic approach to both base mobilization and coalition expansion.
3. This extremist political strategy of the GOP—reflected particularly in legislative paralysis and stealth campaigning—is a central force behind the two major challenges that face Democrats today: the enthusiasm gap and the inability of Democratic candidates to expand the current Democratic coalition.
4. The key to successful persuasion and mobilization of Democratic base voters against the GOP will be to convince them that apparently separate individual issues that motivate them are all profoundly endangered by a coherent and coordinated national extremist agenda that directly threatens all progressive values and goals.
5. The new trend of independent candidates in GOP-dominated states has the potential to drive a wedge between the extremists and the moderates within the GOP, an outcome which would be profoundly healthy for the future of America.
6. The mainstream media has not only accepted without question the view that the unprecedented political extremism of the GOP is simply "the new normal," but has even proceeded to blame Obama for the legislative paralysis caused by the political strategy followed by the GOP. This means that in 2016 and beyond Democrats will find the mainstream media repeatedly excusing, supporting, justifying and enabling the profoundly dangerous extremism of today's GOP.