

ED KILGORE,
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A DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

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TDS STRATEGY MEMO: THERE ARE TWO PROFOUNDLY DIFFERENT POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES WITHIN THE BLACK LIVES MATTER COALITION. IT'S VITAL THAT DEMOCRATS UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEM IN ORDER TO SUCCESSFULLY RELATE TO THIS IMPORTANT SOCIAL MOVEMENT.

By JAMES VEGA

It is understandable that at this moment liberals and Democrats feel substantial confusion about how to relate to the Black Lives Matter coalition.

This confusion is emphatically NOT because of the sudden burst of accusations that exploded in the conservative media last week which argued that the movement is really a "hate group" that encourages violence against the police. In fact, since Black Lives Matter (BLM) began there have been well over 100 large, organized marches, candlelight vigils, demonstrations, "die-in's" and other actions in cities across the country under the BLM name during which absolutely none advocated violence against police.

The only specific "evidence" the conservative media has actually offered for this accusation is an inflammatory anti-police chant shouted by some demonstrators at a recent protest at the Minnesota State Fair and the social media statements of a handful of individuals who use the phrase Black Lives Matter but actually have no direct connection to the active participants or organizers of the BLM movement itself. Other than that, the conservative accusation essentially boils down to the claim that any public speeches or demonstrations that forcefully and passionately criticize and protest police mistreatment of minorities necessarily represent the encouragement of riots, rock and bottle throwing and even the cold-blooded assassination of police officers because such speeches or demonstrations do not express appropriate respect and appreciation for law enforcement personnel.

The actual source of the very substantial liberal and Democratic confusion right now arises instead from the seemingly hostile response that Black Lives Matter issued recently when the Democratic National Committee drafted a resolution commending the coalition.

When the Black Lives Matter coalition issued its statement in response to the DNC, the conservative media immediately overflowed with gleeful, gloating descriptions of it as a deeply "insulting" and "humiliating" snub that Black Lives Matter (BLM) had delivered to the Democrats. The mainstream media's description was only slightly less pejorative, characterizing the BLM statement as an embarrassing "rebuff" or "rejection."

This very negative media characterization of the Black Lives Matter response compounded the already deep confusion that many Democrats felt about the protest group as they observed the striking differences in tone and approach that were expressed in different BLM events – the difference between the openly belligerent attitude of the protesters who disrupted Bernie Sanders' speech in Seattle, for example, and the firm but respectful behavior of the group that met and debated with Hillary Clinton. For many Democrats it seemed that there was no clear and coherent position or perspective within BLM with which they could try to engage.

Ironically, however, although the BLM statement has been widely interpreted as a categorical rejection of liberals and Democrats, it is actually something that is profoundly more responsive and useful. It is a clear attempt to express a set of basic “ground rules” or principles that establish how BLM will deal with the Democratic Party – a set of rules that represent a consensus position of the organization. The fact that this is the first attempt to establish a clear coalition-wide position is emphasized by the way the statement is explicitly described as one that “*can be attributed to the Black Lives Matter Network, including our 26 chapters nationwide.*”

The basic set of “ground rules” the statement lays out are the following:

1. *That BLM must be completely independent of the Democratic Party and be fully willing to pressure it as much as necessary to respond to the critical issues facing Black America.*

As the BLM statement expresses it:

A resolution signaling the Democratic National Committee’s endorsement that Black lives matter, in no way implies an endorsement of the DNC by the Black Lives Matter Network, nor was it done in consultation with us. We do not now, nor have we ever, endorsed or affiliated with the Democratic Party, or with any party. The Democratic Party, like the Republican and all political parties, have historically attempted to control or contain Black people’s efforts to liberate ourselves. True change requires real struggle, and that struggle will be in the streets and led by the people, not by a political party.

2. *That BLM will not be satisfied with empty rhetoric. The Democratic Party and individual Democratic candidates must offer meaningful substantive proposals and programs to address the interconnected series of crises facing Black America.*

As the BLM statement expresses it:

The Black Lives Matter Network is clear that a resolution from the Democratic National Committee won’t bring the changes we seek. Resolutions without concrete change are just business as usual. Promises are not policies....We demand action, not words, from those who purport to stand with us.

3. *That BLM will not subordinate its priority focus on the critical issues facing black America to accommodate or advance the needs of any political campaign.*

As the BLM statement expresses it:¹

While the Black Lives Matter Network applauds political change towards making the world safer for Black life, our only endorsement goes to the protest movement we’ve built together with Black people nationwide – not the self-interested candidates, parties, or political machine seeking our vote.”

¹<https://www.facebook.com/BlackLivesMatter>

4. *That BLM seeks not only changes in specific policies and programs but also to force a fundamental recognition by white Americans that unconscious attitudes of white privilege and white supremacy are deeply rooted and pervasive in American society and must be consciously confronted and combated.*

As Patrisse Cullors, one of the founders of BLM expresses it:²

The goal of Black Lives Matter is to transform America's systemic hatred against Black people. Yes, we will fight for policy reform, but we know that every gain in this area can be retracted if we do not change the anti-Black culture in this country.

Beyond these explicit points the social movement activists in the Black Lives Matter movement also all share a deep and unique sense of brotherhood and sisterhood that comes from the experience of "putting their bodies on the line" in street demonstrations, "die-in's" and other potentially dangerous confrontations with the police. This creates a bond and solidarity among the participants that is intense and unbreakable.

Although the position statement makes clear that BLM forcefully insists upon its independence from the Democratic Party and is strongly critical of many aspects of progressive and Democratic behavior, this approach and perspective is nonetheless one that progressive Democrats can accept and respect and with which they can constructively engage, even if they disagree on various matters. In fact, all of the positions noted above were also part of the ethos and philosophy of the young protesters in the Civil Rights Movement who participated in the sit-in's and freedom rides. Their relationship with the leading Black leaders and organizations and the Democratic Party was actually no less fractious than that between BLM and liberals and Democrats today but, in retrospect, it is now recognized that they made a major, irreplaceable contribution to social progress in America.

At the same time, however, Liberals and Democrats must also be prepared to deal with a variety of protests and actions that will seem to be basically in conflict with this perspective and to actually be aimed at deliberately provoking tension and discord between BLM and the Democratic Party.

The reason is simple. Because Black Lives Matter is a loose umbrella coalition of many groups and individuals there are actually two very distinct—and basically incompatible—political perspectives that exist within the broad alliance. While the first perspective sees liberals and the Democratic Party as deeply lacking in genuine understanding and complete commitment to addressing the urgent needs of Black America, it nonetheless also sees them as potentially useful actors in the national political process.

The second perspective, on the other hand, holds a fundamentally different view. It does not simply assert that Democrats and liberal-progressives hold unconscious attitudes of racial superiority or are insufficiently committed to the urgent needs of Black America but holds the very stunning view that they are *actually the “real enemy” of Black America – that they are in a very genuine and meaningful sense “just as bad” or indeed even worse than right wing conservatives and the GOP.*

²<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/08/18/opinion-blacklivesmatter-will-continue-to-disrupt-the-political-process/>

Here for example is a statement from one of the participants³ in a roundtable featured on the Black Lives Matter Facebook page:

We must smash the shackles that hold black folks hostage to the Democratic Party. In the same way the Sanders' base has been polarized, the Democratic base in general must be. And any rift that is caused will not easily be fixed. The Democratic Party is not progressive nor is it pro-black. It is a leech that perpetually drains the actual left of resources, activists and rhetoric.

Another, even more dramatic example of this second perspective is the following position statement⁴ that is highlighted on the home page of Outside Agitators 206, the organization to which Marissa Johnson, the leader of the group that seized the microphone from Bernie Sanders in Seattle, belongs. It is worth quoting from this statement at some length in order to clearly demonstrate that the opinions it expresses about the Democratic Party are central to its perspective and not in any way peripheral or “off the cuff”:

...The movement that is emerging under the banner Black Lives Matter is not yet one year old, but it will be dead before it reaches the age of two if the Democratic Party has anything to say about it.

...the nascent Black-led movement for social transformation poses a grave threat to the Democratic Party's chock-hold on Black politics. Therefore, the movement is inevitably on a collision course with the Democratic Party, although this may not yet be clear to many activists.

...the Democratic Party sits atop the Black polity “like a grotesque Sumo wrestler,” squeezing out the Black radical tradition.

...Blacks in the U.S. cannot move forward, cannot resist the mass incarceration regime, cannot forge truly effective alliances with other groups in the U.S., or join the struggling peoples of the world, except to the extent that they break the internal stranglehold of the Democratic Party and its operatives in Black civil society.

...To succeed, the Black Lives Matter Movement must transform the politics of Black America. By definition, that means declaring war on the Democratic Party, and forcing Black politicians and activists to choose between the Party and the people's struggle. The Democrats understand the logic, and have mounted a systematic cooption-repression response that will intensify as the election season – and Black cities – heat up.

As usual, the Democrats will try to make Black people more angry at the terminally racist Republican Party than at the police and local administration of their (typically) Democrat-run city. Hillary Clinton is already making noises of empathy with Blacks suffering under the urban police state. However, the Black

³<http://www.colorlines.com/articles/interrupters>

⁴<http://blackagendareport.com/print/4521>

Lives Matter movement has no institutional stake in the victory of either party, but is, in fact, locked in mortal political struggle with other Black people in the Democratic Party.

These Black Democrats will insist on a truce, a cessation of agitation against national or local Democrats, until after the election. As with the Occupy movement, this will be accompanied by intensified police pressures against activists. At the end of the process, the Black Lives Matter movement is meant to go the way of Occupy, lost in the electoral Mardi Gras – killed by Democrats, not Republicans.

This statement is unusual in its length and specificity, but shorter statements expressing similar views can be found in many blog comments, posts and commentaries on BLM affiliated websites and social media platforms

Among the supporters of this second approach this startlingly vitriolic antagonism toward the Democratic Party is matched by an equal antagonism toward white liberals and progressives as individuals, an antagonism that sees them as equal, willing participants in the oppression of Black Americans who are in absolutely no way any better than right-wing conservatives and overt racists.

In [the following commentary](#)⁵ for example, one can observe how a refusal to accept that the Democratic Party is simply a “*tool of the ruling class*” automatically becomes proof that a white liberal holds “*paternalistic attitudes of white superiority, dehumanizing tokenism*” and unconscious racism that are actually more pernicious than overt bigotry.

...many white liberals remain oblivious to the depth and breadth of anti-racist work, opting to hide behind the delusion that anyone who votes for Democrats and doesn't have a pointy hood in the closet is “a good guy” in the movement toward greater social justice (as though the Democratic Party is some bastion of progressivism and not one of two hands strangling US polity on behalf of the ruling class and the corporate-political establishment which sponsors its power).

*Some might be surprised to learn that when people of color talk about racism amongst ourselves, white liberals often receive a far harsher skewering than white conservatives or overt racists. Many of my POC [people of color] friends would actually prefer to hang out with an Archie Bunker-type who spits flagrantly offensive opinions, rather than a color-blind liberal whose **insidious paternalism, dehumanizing tokenism, and cognitive indoctrination** ooze out between superficially progressive words. At least the former gives you something to work with, something above-board to engage and argue against.*

This same view of liberals as in absolutely no way better than right-wing conservatives and racists can also be seen in [the press release](#)⁶ that summarized Seattle protest leader Marissa Johnson's speech during the interruption of Bernie Sanders outdoor meeting.

⁵<http://zuky.tumblr.com/post/903970904>

⁶<https://outsideagitators206.org/blog/seattle-says-bowdownbernie/>

The problem with Sanders', and with white Seattle progressives in general, is that they are utterly and totally useless (when not outright harmful) in terms of the fight for Black lives. While we are drowning in their liberal rhetoric, we have yet to see them support Black grassroots movements or take on any measure of risk and responsibility for ending the tyranny of white supremacy in our country and in our city.

White progressive Seattle and Bernie Sanders cannot call themselves liberals while they participate in the racist system that claims Black lives... Presidential candidates should expect to be shut down and confronted every step along the way of this presidential campaign. Black people are in a state of emergency. Lines have been drawn in the sand. You are either fighting continuously and measurably to protect Black life in America or you are a part of the white supremacist system that we will tear down in the liberation of our people.

The roots of this second “*Democrats and liberals are basically no better (or perhaps even worse) than right wing conservatives and the GOP*” philosophy can be traced back to a long radical tradition that was not in the past specifically related to race. Its essence was the idea that the Democratic Party was a greater enemy of progress than the GOP—and that liberal-progressives were worse than right-wing conservatives and avowed racists—because they fostered the illusion that liberal reform was possible within “the system” and would “mislead the masses” away from realizing that the only meaningful solution was radical revolution .

The Socialist Party at the beginning of the 20th century championed this view as did various Marxist and Socialist parties in the 1930’s. In the early part of the student protest era of the 1960s this perspective was most energetically promoted by the university-based Young Trotskyists who refused to endorse Lyndon Johnson against Barry Goldwater in 1964 on the grounds that the Democratic and Republican Parties were both equally “capitalist” and thus equally tools of the ruling class. As the new left supplanted the old left in the latter part of the 60’s this view spread into SDS and other radical groups through the writings of Herbert Marcuse who argued that the liberal establishment was the real enemy because it perpetuated the notion that meaningful progress within the system was possible and thus short-circuited the search for more meaningful change. More recently, this view of the Democratic Party as no better than the GOP was at the heart of the 2000 Nader campaign, a view that continues to be expressed by Nader himself and other radicals like Adolph Reed in his widely discussed 2013 Harper’s Magazine article.

In the particular context of the Black Lives Matter coalition this “*Democrats are as bad or worse than Republicans, liberals are as bad or worse than conservatives*” perspective has now been given a specifically racial dimension that it did not previously contain (other than in the writings of the Black Muslims) but its basic essence is unchanged.

It can be argued that this second perspective is not the dominant view within the Black Lives Matter movement and that it should therefore be ignored. But Democrats must be prepared for the fact that the adherents of this second perspective are very likely to continue to provoke dramatic and ugly confrontations with Democratic candidates and events that seize the headlines in order to get their minority views and unknown

organizations maximum media attention. It is also likely that at some point FOX News will find some group of these “*Democrats are as bad or worse than Republicans*” ideologues (who will then cynically describe themselves as national spokesmen for Black Lives Matter) as the replacements for the New Black Panthers as the designated “fall guys” for Fox’s conservative commentators. Once this occurs, the second perspective will filter into the mainstream media discussion of the 2016 campaign.

In fact, the “*Democrats are as bad or worse than Republicans*” advocates are fully aware that their best tactic is to deliberately incite and provoke the maximum degree of division and hostility between Black Lives Matters and the Democratic Party. Protests that disrupt and shut down Democratic events and provoke angry reactions from grass-roots Democrats represent a victory for these advocates because the angry reaction can then be pointed to as evidence that liberals and Democrats are enemies of Black people and can never be their allies. In contrast a firm but mutually respectful debate such as the one between Hillary Clinton and BLM represents a terrible defeat for this perspective because it demonstrates that dialog and collaboration is indeed possible. The basic political goal of the “*Democrats are as bad as the GOP*” advocates makes deliberately fomenting the maximum degree of conflict between Democrats and Black Lives Matter a logical and necessary strategy.

But how should Liberals and Democrats respond to this challenge?

First, both liberals and Democrats should clearly and indeed ferociously insist on distinguishing between two perspectives. As noted, the first, dominant perspective within BLM is one that Democrats and progressives can respect and work with, even when it is sharply critical of them. The second perspective on the other hand, is one that explicitly rejects any possibility of cooperation. With the second group, Democrats and liberals must draw a clear line in the sand and say: “No. Whatever our weaknesses and limitations may be, we are not the same as right wing conservatives and the GOP. If you believe otherwise, you are simply mistaken.”

Second, Liberals and Democrats must recognize that the accusation that they are no better or even worse than conservatives and the GOP is inherently and inescapably an argument for the formation of a third radical political party. Many of the young activists in the Black Lives Matter movement have not devoted much attention to the long-term implications of the second perspective but the ideologues behind the view know the history of radical third party movements perfectly well. It is a history that, since the 60’s can be traced from the Black Muslims and Trotskyist political parties like the Socialist Workers Party (a radical party to which Malcom X was increasingly drawn after he split from Elijah Muhammad) and more recently to the post-Clinton era third party advocacy of Adolph Reed and Ralph Nader. The simple fact is that criticizing liberals and Democrats is very easy to do while making serious arguments for a radical third party is not. Liberals and Democrats should insist that advocates of the second perspective either honestly explain what their alternative is or admit that no such alternative exists.

Third, liberals and Democrats must recognize that the argument against the second perspective is an argument that they must make for themselves. The Black Lives Movement will not disavow or enter into intense internal debate with the third party advocates unless they

are absolutely forced to. From their point of view maintaining the solidarity of their movement is far more important than making life easier for Liberals and Democrats. They will correctly view this ideological struggle as one that liberals and Democrats must wage for themselves.

It is important to note that the tensions between BLM and liberals and Democrats will inevitably decline as the Black Lives Matter movement evolves and progresses. A critical step has already been taken as **BLM has just released a thoughtful and carefully designed policy proposal**⁷ called “Campaign Zero” to deal with police killings, excessive force, profiling and racial discrimination, and other problems in law enforcement. As BLM’s strategy and tactics increasingly focus on building support for policy proposals like Campaign Zero, the need and opportunities for alliance and collaboration with liberals and Democrats will grow.

In the interim, however, liberals and Democrats need to be prepared to face bitter aggressive and uncompromising attacks from the proponents of the second perspective. In response, they must be ready to stand up and say clearly and confidently: “No. We are not the same as right wing conservatives and the GOP. We are better than them. If you believe otherwise, you are wrong.

⁷<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2015/08/25/the-black-lives-matter-policy-agenda-is-practical-thoughtful-and-urgent/>