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MANAGING EDITOR:

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

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

A DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

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"THE LEFT" AND THE DEMOCRATIC
PARTY IS NOT JUST IMPORTANT
FOR LEFT-PROGRESSIVES.
EVERYONE IN THE DEMOCRATIC
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BY
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TDS STRATEGY MEMO: ADOLPH REED'S CRITIQUE OF "THE LEFT" AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IS NOT JUST IMPORTANT FOR LEFT-PROGRESSIVES. EVERYONE IN THE DEMOCRATIC COALITION CAN BENEFIT BY SEEING THE RANGE OF "LEFT" OPINION ON HOW TO RELATE TO THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY.

By JAMES VEGA

Adolph Reed's article in this month's *Atlantic*, provocatively titled *Nothing Left: The long, slow surrender of American liberals*,¹ has set off an important discussion within the "left" that he criticizes. It has generated responses from a wide range of individuals including Harold Meyerson in *The American Prospect*, Michelle Goldberg in *The Nation*, Richard Eskow at the *Campaign for America's Future* and Armando at the *Daily Kos*. Their responses are reasonably representative of the reactions of both the national politics and policy-oriented left and the left's more "movement oriented" or "grass-roots" sector.

Interestingly, although the four individuals above all consider themselves part of "the left" that Reed quite bitterly berates, they each draw distinct conclusions about how the left should participate in electoral politics and relate to the Democratic Party. Everyone in the Democratic coalition—centrists, progressive Democrats and the left itself can benefit by observing the range of views and the strategic debate that has now come to light.

Two different debates

In order to understand the debate, however, the first thing to note is that Reed actually makes two fundamentally distinct arguments in his article.

Reed's first argument is that the Democratic Party has become so totally committed to conservative "*neo liberal*" policies that there is no longer any genuinely meaningful distinction between it and the GOP. There is therefore no reason for anyone who considers themselves at all "left" to invest any significant time and effort in electing Democratic candidates rather than engaging in alternative forms of political action.

Reed's second argument is that the American left has allowed itself to become wildly overinvested in short-term electoral politics rather than concentrating on grass-roots organizing and rebuilding the labor movement which are the only meaningful strategies for social change.

While these two propositions are related, they are nonetheless sharply and essentially distinct. Most notably, all of the commentators mentioned above agree to some degree with the second critique but none agrees with the first. It is therefore necessary to consider the two arguments separately.

¹<http://harpers.org/archive/2014/03/nothing-left-2>

The Return of “A Plague on Both your Houses”

Reed’s analysis firmly embraces the *“there’s no real difference between the two major parties”* perspective that was at the heart of the 2000 Ralph Nader campaign and, far from reconsidering that stance because of the huge damage done to America done by the presidency of George W. Bush, Reed remains firmly committed to this same basic view. As Michelle Goldberg noted:²

Reed has been making a version of this argument for many years in many different elections. In 2000, he voted for Nader and dismissed the importance of the Bush vs. Gore election. During the primary in 2007, he wrote a column titled “Sitting This One Out,” saying, “This time, I’m not going to acquiesce in the fiction that the Presidential charade has any credibility whatsoever.”

The largest part of Reed’s article in Harpers is, in effect, an attempt to demonstrate that the fierce condemnation of the Democratic Party that he expressed in 2007 has been proven entirely correct by events since that time. In a recent interview he expressed this view in the starkest possible manner saying:

...on 80 percent of the issues on which 80 percent of the population is concerned 80 percent of the time there is no real difference between them [the Democratic and Republican parties].³

To defend this view the large majority of Reed’s article in Harpers is devoted to offering examples of first Bill Clinton’s and then Obama’s failure to embrace genuinely progressive policies and their commitment to conservative *“neo liberalism”* instead.¹

Reed summarizes his completely negative view of Clinton by saying that he essentially continued to enact the agenda of Ronald Reagan:

Bill Clinton’s record demonstrates, if anything, the extent of Reaganism’s victory in defining the terms of political debate and the limits of political practice... It is difficult to imagine that a Republican administration could have been much more successful in advancing Reaganism’s agenda

His view of Obama is even more negative than his view of Clinton and is indeed openly contemptuous and scornful.

Obama represents *“a triumph of image and identity over content.”*

¹In left discussion the term *“neo-liberalism”* is often used to refer to a particular pro-free market economic perspective and set of policies that conservatives developed in the 1970’s and 1980’s as an alternative to the New Deal and European social democracy. As Reed uses the term, however, it is generally synonymous with any perspective or policy that supports capitalism in general.

²<http://www.thenation.com/blog/178598/adolph-reed-and-electoral-nihilism>

³http://www.salon.com/2014/03/09/we_are_all_right_wingers_now_how_fox_news_ineffective_liberals_corporate_dems_and_gop_money_captured_everything/

He was “sold, even within the left, as a hybrid of Martin Luther King Jr. and Neo from *The Matrix*.”

He uses “*rhetorically pretentious, jingoist oratory*,” and “*hackneyed conservative stereotypes*.”

He has a “*reflexive disposition to cater first to his right*.”

“*His commitments to an imperialist foreign policy and Wall Street have only more tightly sealed the American left’s coffin by nailing it shut from the inside*.”

Reed’s conclusion is damning:

Barack Obama has always been no more than an unexceptional neo liberal Democrat with an exceptional knack for self-presentation persuasive to those who want to believe, and with solid connections and considerable good will from the corporate and financial sectors... his election is most fundamentally an expression of the limits of the left in the United States — its decline, demoralization, and collapse.

Reed’s profound contempt for Obama extends to everyone who supported him as well as the man himself.

People who worked for either Obama or Clinton he dismisses as self-interested careerists:

Anticipation of jobs and “access” — the crack cocaine (or, more realistically, powder cocaine) of the interest-group world — helps to make this scam more alluring, especially among those who have nurtured their aspirations in elite universities or the policy-work left or both.

But more surprisingly he also extends his scorn to the youth who supported Obama’s candidacy:

Again and again, perfectly sentient adults cited the clinching arguments made on the candidate’s [Obama’s] behalf by their children. We were urged to marvel at and take our cues from the already indulged upper-middle-class Children of the Corn and their faddish, utterly uninformed exuberance.

The vitriol of this attack suggests that something more than dispassionate analysis is at work and none of the four commentators mentioned above endorsed the degree of bitterness Reed displays. As *Richard Eskow, a leading commentator in the publications of the progressive/left umbrella organization the Campaign for America’s Future*,⁴ for example, notes:

Reed is unsparing in his criticism of liberals who identify with Democratic politicians. While this is a valid concern (and one I’ve expressed myself), the harshness of his rhetoric suggests an element of score-settling. He takes special pains to eviscerate any liberal who ever felt enthusiasm for the first Obama campaign... Reed’s contemp-

⁴ <http://ourfuture.org/20140228/has-the-left-surrendered>

tuous dismissal of Obama's supporters – and Sen. Clinton's, for that matter – [is] overly harsh and caricaturish. Identification with political candidates is a form of idealism. It seems wiser to try channeling that idealism than it does to mock it.

In fact, the arguments that Reed presents for viewing the Democratic Party as only minimally different from the GOP are a perennial feature of a particular type of left perspective—one that can be traced back to the beginning of the 20 century in the thinking of socialist and Marxist political parties. That perspective viewed support for any party that advocated a platform short of socialism as objectively conservative and indeed ultimately destructive because it would “mislead the masses” and distract them from realizing the need for fundamental social change. Reed himself does not explicitly identify socialism as the alternative he favors but rather endorses a more amorphous “*radical idea of a new society*” as the alternative to “*expanding the options within the existing society*.” His critique of leftists becoming involved with the Democratic Party, however, is framed in essentially the way noted above. He says, for example that supporting Democratic candidates “*can feed illusions that voting for ordinary Democrats means more than it does and is open to criticism as a vehicle for corralling insurgent political tendencies for the mainstream party.*”

The essential fact about this perspective is that while it is possible for a person to reject it, it is also impossible to directly refute. If one accepts the premise that promoting “*the radical idea of a new society*” is the one and absolutely only appropriate goal for the left, then a refusal to support or work with reformist parties follows logically.

In responding to **widespread criticism**,⁵ Reed very slightly backtracked from the fiercely negative view of electoral politics that he expressed in his Harpers article and concedes that on some very infrequent occasions a leftist might conceivably be justified in voting for Democrats as a lesser evil. But at the same time he **also staunchly maintains**⁶ his view that the two parties are essentially identical in their basic neo liberal conservatism, which inevitably makes voting for Democrats a necessarily futile and ultimately counterproductive act.

The accusation that the left does accept: “electoralitis”

Reeds second argument resonates far more deeply with the four commentators noted above. Here's how Reed states it:

Objectives that cannot be met within one or two election cycles seem fanciful, as do any that do not comport with the Democratic agenda. Even those who consider themselves to the Democrats' left are infected with electoralitis. Each election now becomes a moment of life-or-death urgency that precludes dissent or even reflection. For liberals, there is only one option in an election year, and that is to elect, at whatever cost, whichever Democrat is running.

All of the four commentators agree with this critique to one degree or another. Michelle Goldberg says: “*Nothing Left*” *has some very incisive things to say about the broad collapse of the left as a political force. He's right about how the absence of a positive, fully articulated*

⁵<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/03/michelle-goldberg-goes-to-washington/>

⁶http://www.salon.com/2014/03/09/we_are_all_right_wingers_now_how_fox_news_ineffective_liberals_corporate_dems_and_gop_money_captured_everything/

vision of the future has been paralyzing.” *Harold Meyerson says:*⁷ “Reed is on to something, however, in his discussion of Democratic presidential politics” and Richard Eskow opines: “Mr. Reed is also almost certainly correct when he diagnoses many in the liberal community with “electoralitis,” an over-emphasis on elections (and, by implication, on politicians and their personalities).”

But once Reed moves on to explaining his specific view of how this problem developed and what should be done about it, the degree of agreement declines.

Reed’s narrative of how the left failed: a chronology with a 20 year gap

Here’s how Reed explains what went wrong:

For nearly all the twentieth century there was a dynamic left in the United States grounded in the belief that unrestrained capitalism generated unacceptable social costs. That left crested in influence between 1935 and 1945, when it anchored a coalition centered in the labor movement, most significantly within the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). It was a prominent voice in the Democratic Party of the era ...

...The labor-left alliance remained a meaningful presence in American politics through the 1960s. What have become known as the social movements of the Sixties — civil rights activism, protests against the Vietnam War, and a renewed women’s movement — were vitally linked to that egalitarian left. Those movements drew institutional resources, including organizing talents and committed activists, from that older left and built on both the legislative and the ideological victories it had won.

But during the 1980s and early 1990s, fears of a relentless Republican juggernaut pressured those left of center to take a defensive stance, focusing on the immediate goal of electing Democrats to stem or slow the rightward tide... The sources of this narrowing of social vision are complex. But its most conspicuous expression is subordination to the agenda of a Democratic Party whose center has moved steadily rightward since Ronald Reagan’s presidency.

It is easy to notice the fact that there is a missing period of over 20 years in this narrative, a period during which four important things occurred.

- First, the trade union movement and the anti-war and civil rights movements became deeply split beginning with the Democratic convention in 1968 and deepening during the 1972 campaign of George McGovern. This split was formalized by the 1974 Democratic bi-convention which changed the delegate rules to reduce the role of labor and increase that of the groups now called the Rising American Electorate. At the same time there was a widespread and intense white working class reaction against bussing, affirmative action and other responses to racial discrimination, a reaction embodied in the phrase “the white backlash.”
- Second, during the entire decade of the 1970’s the trade union movement experienced a massive decline in membership due to the export of industrial jobs to other countries,

⁷<http://prospect.org/article/what-left>

outsourcing and weakening of federal labor law. This radically reduced the unions' social and political influence as well as their ability to provide manpower and financial support for political campaigns.

- Third, beginning in the early 1970's, the business and financial community united on a coordinated plan to reverse the social trends of the 60's and reestablish the primacy of business in American society. This was a vast multi-million dollar effort that combined and coordinated massive lobbying, public relations and advertising campaigns, the creation of "Astroturf" organizations and the establishment and financial endowment of major conservative think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation and a range of others.
- Fourth, the wide popular support for active government and economic stimulus that first arose as a result of the great depression among working class Americans was deeply undermined by the rampant and seemingly uncontrollable inflation of the late 1970's. It was, in fact, the inability of the Carter Administration to control this inflation that was the most important single factor in Reagan's 1980 victory.

As a result, by the mid-1980's when Reed portrays centrist "New Democrats" and the philosophy of Neo liberalism as suddenly seizing control of the Democratic Party (and the left as meekly submitting to its leadership) the reality was that the labor-left alliance had already become a distant memory, the trade union movement was a shadow of what it had been in the 1960's and business had reestablished its ideological domination of the political system. Reed suggests that the proximate "source" or cause of the rise of Neo liberalism was the sudden surrender of the left to the Neo liberals in the Democratic Party, but it is more realistic to see the decline of traditional New Deal liberalism as also being to a substantial degree the result of social and political trends that had been developing over the previous two decades.

"The view from Outer Space"

Reed then argues that very little has changed since the Clinton era—a view so indifferent to the myriad changes that have indeed occurred that **Meyerson describes his view**⁸ as both "frozen in time" and a "view from outer space":

Reed's characterization of the Democrats as neo liberal NAFTA-ites seems frozen in time, that time being the 1990s. As Bill Moyers pointed out to Reed when he hosted him on his show in February, both Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi have ruled out any support for Obama's bid to resurrect fast-track—in essence, killing any chance for passing the latest iteration of corporate-backed trade agreements, the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Reed's view of the Democrats takes no account of the popularity of Elizabeth Warren and Bill de Blasio within the Democratic base, of the movement of fast-food workers and the spillover effect their campaign has had on efforts to raise the minimum wage. He didn't get the news that Senate Democrats rejected Obama's effort to make Larry Summers the chairman of the Fed precisely because of Summers's role in deregulating finance. He seems not to have heard of the successes of groups like New York's Working Families Party, which has built an electoral left in New York, or the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, which has won higher wages, union recognition and environmental victories by uniting labor and enviro groups in L.A.

⁸ <http://prospect.org/article/left-viewed-space>

He seems, in short, to have missed the rise of a left that is doing pretty much what Reed says a left should be doing.

Eskow makes the same point:

Just as liberals aren't unremittingly gullible, things today aren't unremittingly grim. While neo liberalism may be ascendant, there are also signs of a nascent but potentially vibrant left. A case in point: As Moyers noted in his questioning, grassroots activism for more than 500 organizations threw a monkey wrench into Obama's plans to "fast track" the Trans-Pacific Partnership through Congress.

Here's another: The minimum wage, which had languished in the political process for years, was given renewed energy after fast food workers rose up to demand it. That attracted both institutional and rhetorical support and gave this critical issue new momentum. Local organizing has led to minimum-wage increases in a number of states and to a dramatic \$15 minimum wage initiative in SeaTac, Washington.

And here are a few more: Effective organizing around the issue of Social Security has shifted the Beltway dialogue away from a "bipartisan" consensus bent on cutting the program and toward proposals for expanding its benefits. Occupy Wall Street, despite its sudden (and never fully explained) implosion, shifted the national debate in a matter of weeks.

What's more, despite all the media talk to the contrary, public opinion supports the left on a number of key issues: Most Americans support higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations. 69 percent believe the government has a role to play in reducing the gap between the rich and everybody else. Nearly three out of four supports a significant increase to the minimum wage. Seventy-seven percent support hiring people to make urgently needed infrastructure repairs. In many ways we live in a surprisingly populist country.

In a response to these critiques, **Reed goes one by one**⁹ through many of the items mentioned above and minimizes each one of them in turn as either "small-scale, localist initiatives", "rudimentary or fragmentary phenomena" or "empty chatter." He insists that they do not collectively add up to a serious social movement or demonstrate any significant change as a result of left engagement in Democratic politics since 2000.

Reed's prescription for the future: "building an extra-electoral left that is independent of the Democrats"

Here is how Reed expresses it:

The crucial tasks for a committed left in the United States now are to admit that no politically effective force exists and to begin trying to create one. This is a long-term effort, and one that requires grounding in a vibrant labor movement. Labor may be weak or in decline, but that means aiding in its rebuilding is the most serious task for

⁹ <http://prospect.org/article/what-left>

the American left.... It requires painstaking organization and building relationships with people outside the Beltway and comfortable leftist groves.

... admitting our absolute impotence can be politically liberating; acknowledging that as a left we have no influence on who gets nominated or elected, or what they do in office, should reduce the frenzied self-delusion that rivets attention to the quadrennial, biennial, and now seemingly permanent horse races.

In fact, Reed presents the relationship between political campaigning in favor of Democratic candidates and grass-roots organizing on economic and social issues as a rigidly zero-sum situation with every effort on behalf of political candidates directly detracting from and competing with the amount of grass-roots labor organizing.

Meyerson disagrees:

Perhaps the biggest hole in Reed's argument is that concerning labor and politics. Reed acknowledges that building a serious left requires a labor movement. But with the Republican Party fairly brimming with Scott Walkers and Bob Corkers—with politicians whose very mission is to stamp out what's left of the labor movement—the unions lack the luxury of downgrading their electoral work.

In fact, the single most striking development in recent American politics has been the transformation of the Republican Party from a traditional conservative party into an extremist political party more closely resembling the right-wing extremist parties of Europe. The essence of this change lies in the party's adoption of the philosophy of "politics as warfare" and opponents as literal "enemies". This transformation, which began under Newt Gingrich and dramatically accelerated after Obama's election has led to the use of a wide range of politically extremist tactics including the sabotage of the economy and the U.S.'s credit rating, the disenfranchisement of minority voters, the paralysis of necessary legislative activity and the creation of a right-wing echo chamber that systematically promulgates patently false and deeply inflammatory misinformation.

From the specific perspective of the American left, in fact, the most critical fact about this modern Republican extremism is that it has set the destruction of the left's major institutions as a clear and explicit political objective. Conservative organizations and publications openly discuss the benefits of "defunding" or dismantling the main institutions of the left—trade unions, progressive organizations, liberal foundations and others—and enthusiastically point to their recent successes such as the decertification of public sector unions in Wisconsin and elsewhere and the destruction of ACORN and other grass-roots progressive organizations. In intra-conservative discussion, this strategy is described with overtly military metaphors—"cutting the supply lines" or "attacking the rear-area bases" of the left and the Democratic Party.

In this new climate where the election of a GOP candidate can directly lead to the decertification and defunding of unions or the crippling of progressive institutions, the idea that trade union or other left political activity to oppose them is a distraction from "grass roots organizing" is, to say the least, questionable.

Reed, however, dismisses this objection. He says that: *“the imagined omnipresent threat from the Republican bugbear remains a fatal constraint on action and a pretext for suppressing criticism from the left.”* This is indeed a striking assertion; the threat posed by the GOP is “imagined” and represents a *“pretext for suppressing criticism”* rather than a reality.

So how should the American left relate to the Democratic Party?

Although the commentators noted above all reject Reed’s advice to “recognize our absolute impotence” in the electoral realm,” they display a wide range of views about how the American left should indeed relate to the Democrats.

Meyerson argues:

Wherever they can, labor, liberals, and the left should favor candidates and campaigns devoted to working people’s interests and power. But if the choice is between a Scott Walker Republican and a Democrat of limited virtues who nonetheless will support unions’ right to exist, labor, liberals and the left still have to mobilize for that Democrat

This is echoed by Goldberg:

The right understands [power]; it has simultaneously, over decades, systematically taken over the GOP from the bottom up, built a huge network of interlocking intellectual, legal and political institutions and mobilized every four years to try to elect a Republican president... Think of how much better off we’d all be if right-wingers had refused to support what they saw as the lesser of two evils. Instead, they spent decades organizing within the party until it had no choice but to do their bidding

So yes, for liberals, there is only one option in an election year, and that is to elect, at whatever cost, whichever Democrat is running. The rest of the time, those who find the current choices intolerable should join in the long, slow groundwork that would allow for better ones

Richard Eskow, on the other hand, like a very large number of people in the more grass roots, social movement sectors of the left, takes a much more aggressive position on how the left should deal with the Democratic Party. While Eskow says that *“I cannot agree that the abandonment of electoral politics, as Reed seems to advise, is wise,”* he also says:

It seems clear that a vibrant American left must view the Democratic Party, not as its home or its leadership, but as one of many tools it can use to build a more equitable and just society. That may require a psychological transformation on the part of its participants, who must no longer invest their emotional energy in personality politics – or personality politicians.

An independent left must never plead with Democratic leaders to be heard, as too many liberals have been wont to do. ...The future left must be willing to say “no” to these kinds of Democrats, with all that the word “no” implies.

This is a very widespread view in the “movement” left and informs the work of a number of significant progressive pressure groups within the Democratic coalition like The Progressive Change Campaign, Democrats for America and many others.

Others in the “movement” sectors of the left go beyond general rules of thumb and more systematically evaluate the available options. Armando, a respected writer at Daily Kos, for example, *carefully distinguishes between the strategy of the “inside game” and the “outside game” in dealing with 2016*.¹⁰

The Inside Game: *One approach is for some segment of the movement to try to persuade by getting inside the tent and exchanging early support for Clinton in exchange for concrete proposals (campaign proposals are worth the paper they are written on, of course, but they do allow for opening the political dialogue to progressive policies)...*

Can the inside game work? I think it can in terms of getting progressive positions adopted in policy papers. But what does that mean in terms of actual governance? Unfortunately, not necessarily a lot. But policy papers do set the terms of the debate.

The Outside Game. *There are two plausible ways to play the outside game in a political campaign—support another candidate or support no candidate. There can be no doubt that an actual contested Democratic primary is the most effective tool for garnering public support from candidates. Certainly 2008 proves that. However, is it worth the trade-off of permitting the media to declare “progressivism” the loser in such a contest?*

Armando systematically tries to compare and evaluate the costs and benefits of both approaches. After doing so, he presents his own personal conclusion:

I have what is probably an unpopular view—I think progressive values and goals for 2014 and 2016 are best achieved not by “Stopping Hillary!” but instead by attempting, as best as possible, to present her with a Democratic Party that is firm in its progressivism. ...This is somewhat of an “outsider” strategy, looking to primary challenges and threats of them to push the Congressional delegation leftward... I would couple this with an “inside” strategy of persuasion and inclusion to coax the frontrunner to adopt a common-sense progressive agenda.

... [T]here is a particular benefit for progressives to a Hillary Clinton presidency, a less fettered ability to establish the left flank of politics outside a Democratic White House...A President Hillary Clinton will not be, nor be perceived, as the left flank of the Democratic Party. This permits, in my view, real arguments, initiatives and negotiation from strong progressive elements in Congress. There will be more room for independence, initiatives and influence. This was not possible in my view under the Obama presidency.

¹⁰ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2014/03/02/1280928/-The-surrender-of-the-left-Activism-and-electoral-politics>

In 2009, Chris Bowers wrote:

President [Bill] Clinton told the assembled bloggers that one of the best things they could do for elected Democrats is to function as a “countervailing” source of progressive pressure. That is, he encouraged us to offer left-wing criticism of Democrats on key policy areas, and that we should urge our leaders and elected officials to favor further reaching, more community-focused public policy. In fact, he indicated that he would have wanted more such progressive media pushing him during his time in office.

I think this is a much more likely approach under a President Hillary Clinton than it was to President Obama. In the longer term, increased independence and, hopefully, influence, from progressive segments in and out of Congress would be a good thing that could be produced by a Hillary Clinton presidency.

These quotes provide some sense of the range of opinions that exist on the left about how to relate to the Democratic Party in the quite unprecedented political environment of today.

Conclusions

There are three main conclusions that can be drawn from the debate over Reed’s Atlantic article:

First, neither the politics and policy-oriented left represented by publications like the Nation and American Prospect nor the more movement oriented left represented by the Campaign for America’s Future or Daily Kos accepts the propositions that the Democratic and Republican parties are essentially indistinguishable or that the left should treat elections as somehow a distraction from grass roots organizing. The conversion of the GOP into an extremist party that is fiercely attacking the core institutions of the left is a reality that cannot be ignored.

Second, while there are a range of opinions regarding exactly how the left should relate to the Democratic Party, the strategies proposed are entirely coherent and rational and provide a viable basis for cooperation. Moderate and conservative Democratic candidates would, of course, naturally prefer it if left progressives would make absolutely no demands on them whatsoever, but they can recognize that the basis for mutually beneficial negotiated political alliances with the left does indeed exist.

Third, there is a wealth of experience in the European social democracies that has not been internalized in the American debate. Because of the parliamentary systems employed in those countries the challenge of creating coalitions between left and social democratic parties is far more structured and institutionalized than it is in the US. The two stage elections where voters who support smaller left-wing parties vote in the first round for the smaller party of their choice and then in the second round for the candidate of the coalition who garners the most votes in the first round of voting actually institutionalizes a method in which left parties preserve their independent identity but also participate in broader electoral coalitions. When left of center coalitions win a majority, there are formal negotiations among the coalition parties over the common platform and allocation of key government posts.

The result is a broad understanding and acceptance of the concept of “critical support”—that left parties can recommend that their supporters vote for less radical coalition candidates without thereby “misleading” their supporters or “betraying” their principles.

The political system in the U.S. is quite different, but the notion and conceptual framework of “critical support” can clearly be adapted to American conditions and make it possible for the left to participate in political coalitions with other sectors of the Democratic Party while still maintaining their distinct platform, principles and identity.