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

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

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

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DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST  
STRATEGY MEMO

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BY  
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By ED KILGORE, JAMES VEGA AND J.P. GREEN

In recent days the mainstream media has been rapidly converging on a new common wisdom—a set of clichés that they will use to frame the rest of the campaign for the Republican nomination and the election of 2012. This new common wisdom portrays the intra–Republican struggle as one between more moderate and extreme wings of the party, with “pragmatic” Republican elites seeking a candidate who can beat Obama in opposition to the more “extremist” fringe elements and candidates of the grass-roots Tea Party.

It is inevitable that the mainstream media will find this image utterly irresistible. It not only serves their personal and professional needs but also reinforces their ideological preconceptions.

The image of “*Republican elites as pragmatic, the tea party fringe as extreme*” suits commentators’ personal and professional needs because it allows them to be publicly disdainful of “extremism” without ever having to actually use the term to describe any powerful and significant figure in the Republican coalition who might be in a position to retaliate. A suggestion of “extremism” directed against anyone in this latter group is a social—and possibly career-damaging—faux pas that mainstream journalists will take every imaginable step to avoid.

At the same time, the “*Elites as pragmatic, grass roots as extreme*” image also validates mainstream commentators’ essentially condescending view of political life, in which “extremists” are always scruffy, largely disreputable individuals on the lower rungs of society—the kind of people who live in trailer parks and rant incoherently about the second amendment. Wealthy, powerful and influential “movers and shakers” within the Republican world, on the other hand, regardless of their actual views, are still invariably accorded respect as essentially serious and sensible individuals.

There is nothing new about this pattern of behavior among the mainstream media. It follows the same pattern as the “*both sides are equally to blame*” clichés about partisan gridlock and “*dysfunctional government.*” Writers and commentators who, in private, will cheerfully concede that, of course, the crisis is fundamentally the fault of Republican intransigence will then fall back on “*both sides are equally to blame*” clichés in their public writing—not only to avoid charges of liberal bias but also to portray themselves as impartial and intellectually superior observers of all career politicians.

There is, unfortunately, one major problem with this “*elites as pragmatic, fringe as extreme*” view: it is deeply, profoundly and fundamentally wrong. The most dangerous group of political extremists today is not the grass roots supporters of the Tea Party. It is the major

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sector of the Republican financial and ideological elite who have embraced the philosophy of “politics as warfare.”

To see why this is so, it is necessary to very clearly distinguish between two entirely distinct meanings of the term “extremism.” On the one hand, it is possible for a person or political party to hold a wide variety of very “extreme” opinions on issues. These views may be crackpot (e.g. “abolish paper money”) or repugnant (“deny non-insured children medical care”). But as long as the individual or political party that holds these views conducts itself within the norms and rules of a democratic society, this, in itself, does not lead such groups or individuals to be described as “political extremists” by the media or society in general.

Libertarians and the Libertarian Party offer the best illustration. Vast numbers of Americans consider many libertarian views “extreme.” But, because the libertarians conduct themselves within the norms and rules of a democratic society, they are virtually never described by the media as “political extremists”.

The alternative definition of the term “political extremists” refers to political parties or individuals who do not accept the norms, rules and constraints of democratic society. They embrace a view of “*politics as warfare*” and of political opponents as literal “*enemies*” who must be crushed. Extremist political parties based on the *politics as warfare* philosophy emerged on both the political left and right at various times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in many different countries and circumstances.

Despite their ideological diversity, **extremist political parties share a large number**<sup>1</sup> of common characteristics, one critical trait being a radically different conception of the role and purpose of the political party itself in a democratic society.

In the *politics as warfare* perspective a political party’s objective is defined as the conquest and seizure of power and not sincere collaboration in democratic governance. The party is viewed as a combat organization whose goal is to defeat an enemy, not a governing organization whose job is to faithfully represent the people who voted for it. Political debate and legislative maneuvering are seen not as the means to achieve ultimate compromise, but as forms of combat whose objective is total victory.

This basic conception of the role of political parties leads to the justification and use of two profoundly anti-democratic strategies.

First, in the *politics as warfare* perspective it is a legitimate strategy for a political party to paralyze the workings of government in order to prevent a democratically elected government of an opposing party from implementing the platform on which it was elected. In the *politics as warfare* perspective the extremist political party accepts no responsibility for stability—engineering the failure of the existing government is absolutely paramount and any negative consequences that may occur in the process represent a kind of “collateral damage” that must be accepted as inevitable in warfare.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_Kilgore\\_Vega\\_Green.pdf](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Kilgore_Vega_Green.pdf)

Historically, the Republican Party never embraced this strategy at any time during the Democratic administrations of Truman, Kennedy or Carter. The strategy first made its appearance when Newt Gingrich engineered the shutdown of the government in 1994. After Obama's election in 2008 the use of this "paralyze the government" tactic accelerated dramatically with the conversion of the filibuster into a minority veto of virtually all majority-sponsored legislation and a Republican bar to the huge numbers of judicial and administrative appointments. Previous generations of Republicans would have been scandalized by the notion of crippling the administration of justice by leaving courts grotesquely understaffed in order to prevent the appointment of individuals who did not strictly adhere to conservative orthodoxy.

The most dramatic escalation of this approach, however, occurred after the elections of 2010 and was reflected in the rejection of the very substantial reduction in federal spending that Obama offered the Republican house majority. Observers concurred that the deal was far more favorable to conservatives in terms of policy than the deal Ronald Reagan accepted in 1986 on tax reform or that Newt Gingrich accepted on welfare reform in 1995. But public statements by Republican leaders indicated that the deal was rejected in substantial part on the explicitly political grounds that any legislative agreement that produced a "victory" for Obama was unacceptable. In effect, the political objective of weakening the president had actually become a higher priority than the achievement of the most fundamental long-sought conservative policy goals.

It is almost impossible for anyone who does not remember previous eras of American politics to realize how extraordinary this transformation actually is. It would have been literally inconceivable to the Republican senators and congressmen of the 1950s and 1960s.

The second, even more directly and profoundly anti-democratic strategy that directly flows from the *politics as warfare* philosophy is the calculated attempt to disenfranchise likely pro-Democratic voters.

There were no systematic Republican initiatives to disenfranchise voters during the Nixon, Reagan or Gingrich eras. But after the 2008 elections Fox News began promulgating the notion that massive voter fraud had occurred. Fox News featured a video of two members of the New Black Panthers at a single polling site more than 100 times on its national programs, asserting that they had intimidated voters in order to insure Obama's election. Even after it was **conclusively demonstrated**<sup>2</sup> that sworn eyewitness testimony had been intentionally falsified in order to fabricate this charge, Fox continued to air the accusations and to assert that they were the tip of the iceberg of similar incidents. In parallel, accusations were also made that massive numbers of fraudulent votes had been cast in the election.

The result of these charges was a widespread grass-roots effort by local tea party groups to police polling places and record incidents of intimidation and fraudulent voting during the 2010 elections—an effort that produced *not a single documented case* anywhere in the country. Nonetheless, there is now a major, nationally coordinated and massively funded effort to prevent pro-Democratic constituencies from casting their ballots. TDS managing editor Ed Kilgore accurately summarized the situation as follows:

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<sup>2</sup>[http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/01/central\\_eyewitness\\_testimony\\_i.php](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/01/central_eyewitness_testimony_i.php)

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In the wake of the 2010 elections, Republican governors and legislatures are engaging in a wave of restrictive voting legislation unlike anything this country has seen since the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which signaled the defeat of the South's long effort to prevent universal suffrage. This wave of activism is too universal to be a coincidence, and too broad to reflect anything other than a general determination to restrict the franchise.

Millions of voters are affected.... As Ari Berman explained in an excellent recent summary of these developments for *Rolling Stone*, restrictive legislation, which has been introduced in 38 states and enacted (so far) in at least 12, can be divided into four main categories: restrictions on voter registration drives by nonpartisan, nonprofit civic and advocacy groups; cutbacks in early voting opportunities; new, burdensome identification requirements for voting; and reinstatement of bans on voting by ex-felons.

While new voter ID laws have clearly been coordinated by the powerful conservative state legislative lobbying network ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), other initiatives have spread almost virally. Virtually all of these restrictions demonstrably target segments of the electorate—the very poor, African-Americans and Hispanics, college students, and organizations trying to register all of the above—that tend to vote for Democrats.

In previous decades large sectors of the Republican elite would have been extremely uncomfortable with such measures and a significant group would have been vocally critical. Today, however, there is literally not a single significant figure in the Republican universe who is publicly objecting. The overwhelming influence of Fox News and talk radio have converted the notions that Obama represents a threat as massive as the rise of Hitler did in Germany, and that massive voter fraud is occurring all across the country, into passionately held urban legends that Republican elites no longer dare—or indeed even wish—to challenge.

There are two profoundly disturbing conclusions that must be faced:

First, the paralysis of government and the disenfranchisement of citizens are not “business as usual” for American conservatism. They are not attempts to prevent or reverse the enactment of particular policies and bills to which conservatives object but are rather strategies that strike at the most basic institutions and operations of representative democracy itself. To put it bluntly, they are not the policies of conservatives—they are strategies of political extremism.

Second, these strategies are not the products of a disreputable fringe of grass roots conservative activists, but have been designed, executed, endorsed and financed by a major sector of the Republican and conservative financial and ideological elite. The extraordinary fact that there is no major group or individual within the Republican coalition vocally objecting to these measures, as would have occurred in the past, offers the most

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profoundly disturbing evidence imaginable of the widespread tacit approval by the Republican elite.

The problem will only become more severe and dangerous as the 2012 election approaches. If Obama appears to be winning as Election Day nears, the logic of the extremist view will drive its adherents to embrace a “by any means necessary” philosophy to prevent what they will consider to be nothing less than a cataclysmic social and political catastrophe. If reasonable people across the political spectrum do not speak up now the measures that have been introduced so far could easily become only the opening salvo in even more dangerous attacks on the institutions and operations of American democracy.