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A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

A LETTER TO A "MIDDLE OF THE ROAD
MODERATE" NON-LATINO FRIEND
ABOUT THE MORAL
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS.

BY
JAMES VEGA

A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

A LETTER TO A “MIDDLE OF THE ROAD MODERATE” NON-LATINO FRIEND ABOUT THE MORAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS.

By JAMES VEGA

Dear _____ ,

I've just read your letter in which you criticize my “lack of objectivity” about the upcoming elections and assert your view that *“I don't believe the people who dominate the Republican Party now are really any less moral or empathic toward minorities, the poor and disadvantaged than are the people who dominate the Democratic Party. I find much to disagree with in the orthodoxy of both political parties but I simply do not believe either one is genuinely less moral than the other.*

I've heard many “middle of the road moderates” like you express this kind of perspective. Often it is presented as a kind of affirmation of faith in the basic decency of most ordinary Americans rather than as an empirical statement of fact about *“the people who dominate”* a particular political party, one which might be right or wrong.

But in your particular case, I'm genuinely stunned and dismayed by your statement because—as you know perfectly well—even though my own grandparents came from southern Europe, my wife is Mexican, my children are Mexican and the only family that for 40 years I have considered my own were all born in a small town on the Gulf Coast of Mexico. And yet you seem totally and blissfully oblivious to everything that this implies.

Let me start with the simplest possible example. Back when your son was driving around the country doing gigs with his band last year, I am sure you and your wife were worried about his safety. You were probably worried that he might be in an auto accident somewhere on the road or that he might run into a motorcycle gang.

But I'll bet you didn't spend any time worrying about what roads and counties he should avoid because they were literally dangerous for *“people who look like him.”* I'll bet you didn't warn him to plan his route so he didn't have to try to rent a hotel room in certain counties in states like Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma because they had a reputation for turning *“people who look like him”* away.

You didn't have to do these things because your son is white.

When my oldest son drove across the country recently he had to do these things. When my brother-in-law who is a U.S. citizen and a skilled pipeline welder who works on projects around the oil belt has to go to a new job, he now avoids driving through Arizona, Alabama and parts of Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma where the rumors are that not only the police

and the state troopers but nasty locals will *“try to make his life miserable so he goes back to Mexico where he belongs.”* At his last job he had to stay in a motel 75 miles away from the job site because the entire county around the refinery was known as a “no Mexicans zone.”

Things didn't use to be this bad. They became radically worse when Republican Governors and Republican state legislatures in Arizona, Alabama, Georgia and a number of other Republican states (and not a single Democratic one) began passing bills that were publically and proudly described by their authors and supporters as being designed *“to make life so miserable for illegals that they would pack their bags and go back where they came from.”*

They succeeded spectacularly in making life miserable. In Alabama, Mexican and other Latino parents who did not have papers became afraid to send their children to school even when their children had been born in the U.S. Many became afraid to go downtown to pay their water bills, and began to get along without running water. They became afraid to go to work in many of the jobs they previously held where document checks and local police visits have become extensive. Many Latino parents, both legal and illegal, have become afraid to take their kids to a park or a museum or a library for fear they would be harassed.

This *“make their lives miserable”* strategy has filtered up from the Republican-controlled states to become essentially the official national Republican agenda. It is now enshrined in the Republican platform with the delicate euphemism *“humane procedures to encourage illegal aliens to return home voluntarily.”* Romney (the so-called “moderate” Republican candidate) came up with the cynical phrase “self-deportation” to describe it. *“Self-deportation.”* What a charming little phrase. By including the muscular word “deportation” it suggests a macho, “get-tough” kind of attitude but is at the same time so much nicer than saying *“we're gonna make their lives so miserable that they leave”* even though, in practice, it means the same thing.

Naturally, this *“make their lives miserable”* strategy has in the last three years also filtered down and mobilized the Republican activist “grass-roots,” resulting in a vast increase in the “under the radar” harassment that my brother-in-law and vast numbers of other Latinos now confront in many places in America.

To get a flavor of what people like my brother in law now increasingly encounter from the self-appointed citizen enforcers of the *“make their lives miserable”* policy, take a look at some of the terms they use for Mexicans: *“border bunnies, cockroaches, crimigrants, field rats, gravel-bellies, greasers, latrinos, mexcrement, mexicoons, roaches, Spicaninnies and taco-monkeys.”* On websites created to support the laws in Arizona, Alabama and Georgia, the most common adjectives used for the children of immigrants are *“whelps”, “spawn”* and *“mongrels.”*

I very freely confess that I take this very personally. As a result of the “trickle down” effect of this grotesque Republican social policy members of my family have been harassed by racists for the first time in the 40 years that I have lived in the South. My son, who was your son's closest friend when they were children, was recently harassed by a group of whites in a nightclub. *“Show us your papers”* they chanted, a phrase that is the official slogan of the supporters and grass-roots mafia enforcers of the *“make them so miserable they leave”* policy. *“Send your gardener back to Mexico”* they shouted at his white girlfriend.

There has always been anti-Mexican prejudice in America but it has gained a profoundly new intensity and self-confident sense of official support and sanction ever since the Republican-sponsored state laws were passed. This new level of grass-roots harassment and persecution of Latinos did not begin at the lower orders of society—in trailer parks and biker bars—and then filter upward. Quite the contrary, it was designed at the highest levels of Republican state government and the Republican policy infrastructure and then filtered its way down. In their own minds the grass-roots harassers no longer feel like fringe “extremists.” They see themselves as supporting a policy designed and endorsed by the highest Republican officials in their state.

But wait, what about the vast numbers of moderate Republican politicians, leaders and grass roots Republican activists who have opposed this approach—what about all the “decent people” in the leadership and activist base of the Republican Party who would never tolerate this terrible kind of thinking? After all, in the 1950’s liberal Republicans and liberal Democrats joined together in signing full page ads and petitions that condemned racial intolerance. They took proud and passionate public stands denouncing segregation.

OK let’s count the modern totals:

Zero—repeat zero—major Republican organizations or state bodies that have officially condemned *“Make them miserable”* as a social policy.

Zero—repeat zero—petitions or public statements circulated and signed by leading “moderate” Republican politicians or party officials repudiating the *“make them so miserable that they leave”* philosophy.

Zero—repeat zero—full page ads denouncing this policy placed in major papers by “moderate” Republican politicians or party officials.

The truth is that someone could write a very detailed and substantial book about the response of the “decent people” in the Republican Party to the fundamental moral issue raised by the *“Make them miserable”* strategy. “Profiles in Cowardice” would be an appropriate title.

And let’s be very, very clear: this *“make their lives so miserable that they leave”* is specifically and distinctly a Republican policy. No Democratic Governors, Senators or Democratic state legislatures have supported it. No significant national figures in the Democratic Party have endorsed it. Democrats may be reasonably accused of many things but they have not deliberately and consciously crafted a policy whose explicit purpose is to inflict economic and social suffering on a virtually defenseless social group, including men, women and children, in order to make them leave a state or the country.

So, frankly, when I read your words saying that *“I don’t think the people who dominate the Republican Party now are any less moral or empathic towards minorities, the poor and disadvantaged than are the people who dominate the Democratic Party,”* I was genuinely appalled. You cannot believe this statement without also believing that the people who wrote the laws in Arizona, Alabama and Georgia and the national candidates who support them are *“no less moral and empathic”* toward minorities, the poor and underprivileged than are the Democrats who oppose them.

And we're not talking about the views of ordinary Republican voters here. There are vast numbers of ordinary "mom and apple pie" Americans who vote for Republicans and who are fine and decent people. They do want a solution to illegal immigration but absolutely not by "*making [illegal immigrants and their families and children's] lives so miserable that they are forced to pack and leave.*"

But you're not talking about them. You're talking about—and I quote—"The people who dominate the Republican Party"—the elected officials, the governors, the congressmen, the political party operatives and grass-roots activists.

As far as they are concerned, let me say it clearly:

This Republican-created strategy of consciously and intentionally "*making their lives so miserable they leave*"—of deliberately inflicting suffering as a social policy against men, women and children whose only crime is having migrated to America to seek work—is not simply "wrong" or "bad." It is in every profound sense of the word—*evil*. It is evil in the same way that racial prejudice is evil. It is evil in the same way that anti-Semitism is evil. It presents the starkest possible moral choice between right and wrong.

As a result I believe your facile equation of Republicans and Democrats is not simply wrong. I believe it is deeply and profoundly immoral and I believe that it is ultimately an act of cowardice. You have clear moral issue of right and wrong staring you directly in the face and, because it is ideologically inconvenient for your "reasonable, middle of the road" self-image, you are acting like a frightened child and covering your eyes to make it go away.

You remember as well as I do the countless times we stood together and watched our two sons play together as they grew up—as toddlers, as kids, as teen-agers and young men. On the walls of our homes and in our photo albums we have dozens of pictures of the two of them side by side. When the time comes to choose who to vote for, ask yourself how you can possibly support a political party that has made it their explicit goal to "*make the lives miserable*" of children whose only crime is that they look exactly like your own son's childhood best friend.