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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.

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A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
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"ESTABLISHMENT" MODERATES.**

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In the last few days a wide range of journalists and political commentators have joined in the discussion of the suddenly open split between Karl Rove's new initiative, the Conservative Victory Project, which is aimed at funding and supporting more "electable" Republicans and the substantial sector of the GOP that supports the candidates and issue positions of the Tea Party. Many quickly moved to portray the conflict as representing something more than simply a tactical split over campaign strategy and messaging. Rather they characterized it as also reflecting a basic ideological battle between the "extremists" and "moderates" within the GOP.

To put it simply, this is nonsense. The current split within the GOP isn't between Tea Party extremists and "Establishment" moderates. It's between one group of GOP extremists that wants to restore the Bush strategy of running parallel covert and overt agendas versus another group of GOP extremists that wants to openly assert a radical right-wing agenda. In the period leading up to and including the administration of George W. Bush, sophisticated conservative strategists (preeminently Karl Rove) perfected a "dual track" strategy of running two parallel political agendas. One track was an overt, "*moderate*" agenda designed for the press and general electorate. It included slogans like "compassionate conservatism" aimed at softening media and public perceptions of "movement conservatism, along with policies designed to appeal to specific "swing" constituencies (e.g., No Child Left Behind for married women; Medicare prescription drug coverage for seniors; comprehensive immigration reform for Latinos). At the same time, however, there was also a parallel covert agenda aimed at the religious and social conservatives who comprised a large section of the Republican base. This second agenda was executed by providing special high-level access for conservative base leaders, "below the radar" administrative and executive actions supporting conservative issues and policies and continual "dog whistles"—the use of coded words and phrases to assure the conservative base that deep down Bush and other Republican leaders were really "one of us." This strategy was successfully deployed first in 2000, when Bush managed to secure the universal support of the conservative movement during the presidential primaries, yet still competed aggressively with Al Gore for swing voters during the general election, without changing his policy positions.

The dual track strategy continued to work quite well (with some assistance from post-9/11 fears over national security) through the 2004 elections. But by 2008 the Republican base and the movement conservative leadership had become deeply frustrated with being taken for granted and given relatively minor, symbolic victories rather than major social and political changes. The financial crisis then exposed the incredible fiscal irresponsibility from a traditional conservative point of view of the Bush administration's big-spending, "give big business everything it wants" economic policies and brought the whole dual track strategy tumbling down. The bailouts and fiscal stimulus measures initiated by Bush in his final days

in office not only outraged and infuriated the grass roots Republican base but also convinced a powerful group of right-wing multimillionaires to move from their previous approach of supporting narrowly focused conservative cause groups (and leaving electoral politics to the RNC) to a new approach of energetically providing financial and organizational support for the “new” Tea Party Movement—actually just radicalized movement conservatives removed by only five years from lionizing Bush as a world-historical titan—to organize against the Bush-era establishment.

Said establishment quickly snatched up any three cornered hats and muskets they could lay their hands on and meekly subordinated their oratory and issue stances to the Tea Party/right-wing money axis. By 2010, most GOP candidates either identified themselves with the new all or nothing rhetoric or went down to defeat in Republican primaries. To a remarkable extent, the rigid ideology and harsh partisan rhetoric that was once associated with southern conservatives or national extremist groups dominated the GOP, representing the culmination of a half-century movement conservative struggle to control the party. The Bush forces went along without protest because they hoped that the energetic fury of the base voters would allow the GOP to retake the presidency in 2012 which would give them the opportunity to hash out a compromise with the Tea Party upstarts “behind closed doors.” But Romney’s defeat and Obama’s initiatives since his reelection have forced the two wings of the GOP into an open split.

But the critical fact is that this split is emphatically and categorically not a split between “extremists” and “moderates.” The traditional Republican moderates like George Herbert Walker Bush and Bob Dole were shoved aside a long time ago or else changed their public positions to swim with the tide. The split today is between the new “*all or nothing*” Tea Party right-wingers and the Bush era veterans who want to go back to running a two track “overt/covert” strategy.

It is a perversion of the English language to describe this second group as “moderate” in any meaningful sense of the word. In point of fact, every one of the disturbing “extremist” tactics that are decried today—attempts at voter suppression, undermining key foundations of the New Deal/Great Society legacy, undermining Democratic organizations and institutions and sabotaging the operation of Democratic inspired government programs—can be traced back to initiatives launched under the direction of Karl Rove and Bush’s other political strategists

(Note: this assertion may sound overstated, but, as a simple matter of fact and data, it is not. A skeptic need only read Tom Edsall’s 2006 book, Building Red America and London Economist Editors John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge’s 2004 book, The Right Nation to find quite comprehensive documentation.)

The division between these two kinds of extremists within the GOP—the Tea Party/ultraconservative big money wing of the GOP that advocates an uncompromised, “*full-throated, all or nothing*” conservative message and agenda and the Bush-era wing that prefers a “dual track,” approach that combines separate overt and covert strategies—can be clearly observed in both the GOP’s overall political strategy and across virtually the entire range of specific political issues.

At the most general level, the division between the two flavors of extremism can be seen in the debate between Republicans who insist that the loss in 2012 was the result of Romney's failure to present a full and uncompromised conservative position versus those who hold that the party must soften its image and rhetoric.

Beneath this disagreement, however, there is a shared conviction that the GOP platform, which is an entirely consistent and clear expression of the conservative base ideology, is absolutely fine and absolutely does not require the slightest adjustment away from extremism and toward "moderation".

Here is how *Politico* recently described the current consensus:¹

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – The Republican Party honchos who huddled here for their first big gathering since the election devoted lots of time talking about the need to welcome Latinos and women, close the technology gap with Democrats and stop the self-destructive talk about rape. But the party's main problem, dozens of Republican National Committee members argued in interviews over three days this week, is who delivers its message and how, not the message itself. Overwhelmingly they insisted that substantive policy changes aren't the answer to last year's losses.

"It's not the platform of the party that's the issue," RNC Chairman Reince Priebus said Friday after being easily reelected to a second, two-year term. "In many cases, it's how we communicate about it. It is a couple dumb things that people have said."

...New Hampshire chairman Wayne MacDonald said party leadings need to work on "not being sour-pusses on television or the radio"—that there is a way to be firm and assertive without being mean-spirited.

"Nobody is saying the Republican Party has to change our beliefs in any of our platform planks," he said.

In short, there is a division within the GOP as to whether there is a need for changes in rhetoric and image but no debate about any need for changes in basic social and economic policy.

The division between the two extremist strategies is equally evident in the management of individual political campaigns. In this area there is a clear distinction between candidates like Allen West or Michelle Bachmann who believe conservatives should clearly and proudly run on a full and uncompromised extreme conservative agenda versus "stealth candidates" like Scott Walker in Wisconsin or Rick Snyder in Michigan who do not champion unpopular conservative positions during their campaigns but suddenly unveil them once they are elected. It is obviously inaccurate to describe either one of these strategies as more "moderate" than the other. Their objectives are identical; they differ only in their tactics.

This same basic distinction—between openly and proudly proclaiming radical conservative goals versus seeking to clothe the extremist wolf in moderate sheep's' clothing—is equally evident across a wide range of specific issues:

¹<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/01/gop-leaders-insist-no-overhaul-needed-86757.html>

Medicare: The division between the two varieties of extremist strategy can be seen in the split between GOP candidates and strategists who favor openly denouncing the system as an evil form of “socialist medicine” versus those who want to “strengthen it for future generations” by drastically reducing benefits and ultimately converting it into a limited subsidy for purchasing private insurance.

Taxes: In this area the division between the two strategies can be seen in the split between Republicans who want to directly attack and cut funding for a wide range of specific programs (ranging from scientific research and infrastructure support to assistance for the poor) versus those who want to create the same outcome indirectly via abstract limitations on federal domestic spending, “block grant” schemes, and arbitrary limits on federal revenues.

Social Security: The split between the two extremist strategies can be seen in this difference between conservatives who want to see an explicit attack on Social Security as a financially bankrupt program that inevitably creates a parasitic class of dependent “takers” from government and those who seek to use moderate rhetoric such “Strengthening Social Security for future generations” while actually supporting the shrinking and privatization of the system.

Voting: The split in this area is between Republicans such as those in the state legislatures in Maine and Wisconsin who have expressed support for explicitly disenfranchising groups like college students on the grounds that they are immature and irresponsible versus those who try to conceal any anti-Democratic motive by claiming they only want to avoid voter fraud.

Government Shutdown: In this area the split is between conservatives who wish to extort a major reduction in spending by creating a dramatic government shutdown versus those who deny a desire to actually shut down the government or throw the nation into default on its debt but who nonetheless support a stealth campaign of sabotaging the government by blocking a huge number of administrative appointments and hamstringing the operation of agencies of which they disapprove.

Abortion: The split in this area is between conservatives who openly advocate eliminating all abortions as morally equivalent to murder and genocide versus those who seek to subtly extinguish the practice by hemming it in with restrictions (such as obligatory ultrasounds) or setting impossible standards for the operation of birth control clinics.

Unions: The division in this area is between Republicans who openly and vocally oppose unions in principle versus those who make strategic attacks on public-sector benefits or bargaining rights, or federal enforcement of labor laws.

Environment: In this area the split is between conservatives who attack all environmental measures as a mere subterfuge for a sinister and covert radical totalitarian agenda and those who express verbal support for protecting the environment but oppose action on climate change and other environmental challenges as incompatible with economic recovery and growth or insufficiently supported by scientific research.

In short, in almost every area that one can one examine, a split appears between “all or nothing” extremists and advocates of a “two track, covert/overt” strategy to achieve the same ends.

The one seeming exception to this near-universal pattern that is in all the headlines right now is, of course, immigration. In this area there is indeed a genuine split between Republicans who are prepared to support a “path to citizenship” for illegal immigrants versus those who reject any such reform as a totally unacceptable form of “Amnesty.”

Yet, ironically, this one apparent exception is actually consistent with the larger pattern, since, as noted above, support for immigration reform was a pillar of the original Rove strategy for making the GOP’s conservative “base” sufficient for electoral victory with marginal improvements in performance among Latinos. The only thing that has changed is that a growing number of conservatives of every variety now acknowledge the growing size of the Latino vote as a serious obstacle to the success of “base”-oriented electoral strategies focused on energizing older white voters.

As a result, it is really now indefensible for journalists and commentators to continue to describe the two broad Republican strategies as representing a choice between “extremism” and “moderation.” The old fashioned Republican moderates like George Herbert Walker Bush and Bob Dole who followed the pre-Newt Gingrich rules of political behavior have now been reduced to a literal handful. The current split within the GOP is between two different flavors of Republican extremism: the blatant Tea Party, John Birch-like approach that believes the party should loudly and proudly declare its radical agenda and the Bush-era approach that seeks to reinstate the dual track strategy of *“one story for the press and mainstream, dog whistles and below the radar policy victories for the base.”* MSM commentators who persist in labeling the split between the two groups as a split between “extremists” and “moderates” need to face the fact that using such terms represents intentional and deliberate pro-GOP partisan advocacy aimed at improving the party’s image and not honest journalism or political commentary.