

God and Politics

Contributed by MWC News
Friday, 16 December 2005

What Democrats Must Do to Take Our Country Back

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Political Views,

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by John Graham

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Let's start with the obvious: the political power of conservative Christians has become formidable.

30 years ago conservative Christians were a political fringe element in this country. They practiced their faith and kept pretty much under the political radar, even though they numbered in the tens of millions. Then, as we all know, the Republican Party successfully began to woo conservative Christians, leading with hot button social issues like abortion and homosexuality. The marriage benefited both sides.

The GOP got votes generated by the power of grassroots organizing in churches across the country, votes that in a short amount of time gave them control of the federal government and, in many instances, state and local governments as well. Conservative Christians got more political power behind their social agenda.

Democrats have always been a little cynical about this alliance, observing that clever pols in the Republican Party promise the moon to conservative Christians then, when the time comes to deliver real policy shifts, offer up far less.

Now it seems that the Republicans may have created their own Sorcerer's Apprentice. Radical extremists like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and James Dobson have gained enormous influence over Christian conservatives in this country and now would lead them on a campaign-and the radicals are very clear about this-to force the social and cultural fabric of this nation into a strict Biblical mold.

To these extremists (call them the Christian Far Right), not only is the Bible the literal word of God, what it says trumps any other religious, social or political thought or belief. Their opponents are not only wrong-they are with the anti-Christ, and doomed to eternal damnation. The commitment of the Christian Far Right to intolerance is complete. It's clear they will keep up their assault on America until they are stopped. They have become our Taliban.

Democrats still seem confused and uncertain about how to deal with this threat. I offer these thoughts:

1. The Democratic Party should finally take conservative Christians seriously. Too many Democrats, even after the 2004 election, still tend to roll their eyes and snicker: "Do you believe those yokels in Kansas?" they ask. "They not only want to teach their kids that the earth was made in a week-they've written a whole new, Bible-friendly definition of science!"

Conservative Christians see contempt from Democrats as both an insult and a threat. It makes them listen more attentively to their own extremists, it drives them to continue to vote against their own economic interests, and it stimulates them to work even harder for Republican candidates.

Whatever Democrats may think of the religious beliefs of conservative Christians, they've got to get smarter about dealing with them in the political sphere. Otherwise Democrats will snicker themselves right into more electoral defeats.

2. Extreme Christian views are as American as apple pie. They didn't start with Jerry Falwell-they landed with the

Pilgrims. Forget the myth of that first Thanksgiving Day. The Pilgrims were Pat Robertsons in funny hats.

They came with their Bibles turned to the Book of Exodus. They were the new Israelites, fleeing the English Pharaoh. America, overflowing with milk and honey, was the Promised Land. Just as the first Israelites under God's guidance conquered the heathen in laying claim to their Promised Land, so too would these new Israelites conquer the heathen natives. The Pilgrims and the Book of Exodus laid the basis for the concept of Manifest Destiny, the rationalization for the ruthless expansion of American power.

The Bible's Book of Revelations is another pivotal component of the belief system of conservative Christians, and especially of the Christian Far Right. The Revelations story has been recently popularized in the so-called Left Behind books, which have sold tens of millions of copies.

Briefly, it's a story of how the world will end. As the process starts, a few who unswervingly obey God's laws will be physically "raptured up" directly into heaven. Those who remain will be subject for seven years to the reigning power of the Anti-Christ. Finally, there will be a great battle in which Christ returns, not as gentle savior but warrior king. He slays the anti-Christ (and all the rest of the skeptics) in a bloodbath that makes the Holocaust look mild.

The Left Behind series makes it plain that American believers will predominate among the saved and will be key allies of Christ in the battle with the Anti-Christ. Conservative Christians believe that America is the obvious site for the 1000 years of peace and glory that Revelations says will follow Christ's victory.

In Revelations, as in Exodus, America is where the Bible is said to play out in our times. All anyone has to do to be saved is read the Bible to find God's will (or listen to preachers eager to find it for them)-and then carry out His mandates. Tens of millions of Americans have held this belief for almost 400 years, and it won't disappear anytime soon. And now it's the source of enormous political power.

3. Not all conservative Christians are on the Christian Far Right, and Democrats should stop lumping them together. Tens of millions of Americans revere the Bible as the Word of God, even if they don't take every passage as literally true, or insist that all others must share their views. Conservative Christianity provides hope, comfort, support and guidance to many people. My mother was a conservative Catholic, and she died with a broad smile across her face, as she prepared to meet her Maker. Her Christian faith sustained her until the end, as it does for many.

When Democrats lump all religious conservatives together, and then, worse, are contemptuous of them as an undifferentiated lot, many conservative Christians see this as ignorant and prejudiced at best. At worst, they become easier targets for the Christian Far Right preachers who tell them that political opposition to Christian-favored policies is the work of the devil. Lumping all religious conservatives together can drive otherwise reasonable people into the arms of the unreasonable.

Democrats will never get the votes of the Christian Far Right. But they can and must get the votes of many conservative Christians by making them increasingly aware and uncomfortable with the company they are keeping. A key aim of Democrats must be to create a message and a vision powerful enough to drive a wedge between conservative Christians and the far-right leaders who now presume to speak for them.

4. Democratic candidates need to get more comfortable with God. Both the Republican Party and its Far Right Christian allies want to discredit Democrats as "Godless"-the Republicans because it increases their credibility with the Christians, and the Christians because they really believe it.

Democrats as a whole may go to Church less often than Republicans, but that's not the problem. The problem is that too many Democratic candidates look stiff and insincere if and when they do talk about their faith. Republicans tend to be much better at God-talk, and it wins them votes.

I'm not saying that Democrats must thump a book of scripture. Nor should they change their beliefs or fake them. But Democratic candidates need to get more relaxed in talking about issues of God and faith or, if they are non-believers, about the ethical frameworks that guide their lives.

That ease in talking about issues of faith, that kind of honest and personal reflection, will blunt negative knee-jerk reactions among conservative Christians and help make many of them at least comfortable enough with Democratic candidates so they can hear and evaluate a political message.

In Virginia, Democrat Tim Kaine this fall was candid about his faith and won the Governorship of a conservative state.

This year I spoke on the theme of moral leadership to the cadets at the Air Force Academy and to the Midshipmen at the Naval Academy. I told them that courage and discipline were not enough, that successful leaders had to have a moral context for their lives, a pole star connected to something bigger than they are. If they chose to call this something God, I told them, then it had to be a God they found themselves, not one they'd inherited or had shoved down their throats.

These young future officers stood and cheered. During the Q&A, one cadet at the Air Force Academy-which has been notoriously connected to the Christian Far Right-asked me if I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I told him that I did not, and then explained my personal spirituality with as much candor and completeness as I could. The next cadet's question was, "When are you going to run for President?"

So it's possible to talk about personal spiritual or religious views in ways that engage a broad audience. Democrats just have to have the confidence to do it.

5. Take back the Bible.

Conservative Christians tend to focus on the Old Testament and the Book of Revelations. But didn't Jesus come to bring a new message, one of compassion and forgiveness? I think the Christian Far Right finds the Sermon on the Mount deeply inconvenient. They much prefer Christ as the warrior of Revelations, coming as the God of vengeance to smite the unbelievers. Democrats need to support theologians like Jim Wallis who are working hard to remind people of what Jesus really was about. The title of Wallis's latest book says it all: *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*.

These five steps are just the preparation. They are what Democrats must do to even have a chance of countering the Christian Far Right.

Thus prepared, Democrats need to create positive themes that resonate with the electorate-including many conservative Christians-and then to draw from these themes a compelling vision for the future. From these themes and this vision, Democrats can then construct a domestic and foreign policy agenda for change.

These themes, vision and agenda become the wedge between conservative Christians and the Christian Far Right. They also become the basis for moving conservative Christians out of the Republican ranks and into the Democratic camp, where the social values of Christianity are better represented.

I think there are two core themes:

The first is national security, including not just physical security from terrorist threats and natural disasters-but also economic security, job security. The Republicans have done such a terrible job here that Democrats should have no problem in creating a blueprint for doing better. It's a huge discussion, but for another time.

The second core theme is identity: Who are we as Americans?

As a people, at our best, we are caring, confident, competent, fair, honest, hard-working, responsible, patriotic and more. Create your own list.

This is no idle puffery, no self-flattering distraction. Many Americans today are confused, fearful, angry, divided and losing confidence in our basic institutions. They will respond to leaders who-by reminding all of us of who we are and who we can be-help us forge the courage and confidence to answer the challenges of our times.

This positive identity will prove far more persuasive than the identity the Republican Party and the Christian Far Right now try to foist on us, an identity based on fear and greed. This positive identity, powerfully voiced by Democrats in stories from our past and present, can overwhelm the steady siren calls from the Far Right that we should all be very afraid, and that survival of the fittest is how we should order our lives.

Reviving our positive identity as Americans is the keystone for everything else Democrats need to do to take back America.

Democrats then need to make this positive identity real and relevant to people by applying it to the arenas where we live our lives, including our families, our communities, our nation and our world.

There's broad agreement across the country on core family values of love and support, and on what we want for our kids. These values and aspirations are part of our identity as Americans, and Democrats need to voice them again and again.

There's also broad agreement in this country on who we are in communities, organized around respect, compassion, fellowship, mutual support and skill and ingenuity in solving public problems. Barn-raising and the community ethic behind them are part of our history we all value. Churches, synagogues and mosques all tend at least to take care of their own. There is enormous energy behind community identity and community work.

The problem comes when the community becomes big enough to include people distant from us. Then community values can begin to fade. Democrats must find ways to help people stretch their concept of community-first across town,

and then across the country and the world.

This stretching happens instantly after every natural disaster, no matter where it occurs. Democrats need to build on experiences like the national outpouring of support after Hurricane Katrina. The message is: our sense of community doesn't stop at the other side of the tracks or the town line or the water's edge; Americans have a practical, compassionate response to any pressing need because that is who we are.

Democrats need to speak louder than the cruel, heartless voice of social Darwinism. It's the Achilles heel of the Christian Far Right and the Republican Party because it's so directly counter to the American identity of generosity and fairness. The Christian Far Right says being poor means you have lost the favor of God. The secular Far Right says that if you are poor, you are lazy, stupid or lacking in discipline.

When it's pointed out to them, most people, including many conservative Christians, will acknowledge that there's a horrible emptiness to living life by such a cruel measure. They know that's not who they are. Democrats need to remind Americans both of our competence as problem-solvers and of our generous and open hearts. Americans will respond, not just because we recognize this truth of who we are, but because each of us remembers the personal satisfaction of helping someone else in need.

Democrats need to help people focus on the nation as an expanded community. In this national community we need to treat each other with respect, fairness and compassion. We need to be disciplined and to work hard to solve public problems. And we need to take care of our own. Democrats must speak for a social safety net based on clear thinking and open hearts. Let's talk about real choices. What would Jesus do with the tax dollars? Build a bridge to nowhere in Alaska, or help the victims of Katrina?

In international affairs, Democrats need to keep expanding the idea of community. How do we live in the world? How do we relate to other countries? How do we deal with global problems?

Democrats need to describe America:

- ~ in a position of leadership but not arrogance;
- ~ motivated by self-interest but recognizing the need for global partnerships;
- ~ proud of our nation but also proud of our membership in the world community; and
- ~ taking good care of our own but also responding to global needs.

Let Americans see what's possible. Let them see that just a tiny fraction of the wealth generated by a global economy can end waterborne diseases and halve poverty across the world. Reminded of our identity, Americans can and will rise to help meet these needs.

The core, compelling theme running underneath all these initiatives is identity. Americans need to do these things-in our families, communities, nation and the world-because it is who we are.

All of it comes together in a vision for the future. Democrats need to challenge every American to contribute to that vision. If this is who we are, then who will we be-and what will our nation become-in ten years? Fifty? A hundred?

The Republican Party has its vision for America. It's a pinched and fearful vision. The only reason it's captured so many is that there's been no vision put forth of an America as good as the best instincts of our people.

Democrats need to create a progressive vision based on who we are and the party's leaders must voice it. I'd match such a vision at the ballot box any day against the vision of the Republican Party and the Christian Far Right.

A caution: none of this can be political manipulation. If you choose to work for change, then you must truly accept these themes and this vision. You must hold them in your head and feel them in your heart. In an era of sound bites and poll-tested responses, this has got to be real. Americans will respond to that reality because we like straight-talk. We always have.

This is what we believe. This is our message. This is who we are. This is what we can be.

And this is how we take our country back.

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John Graham is author of *Stick Your Neck Out--a Street Smart Guide to Creating Change in Your Community and Beyond*