

WHY ARE THE DEMOCRATS SUCH LOSERS?

Robin V. Sears

Political strategist Robin Sears, who knows something about losing from chairing several NDP national campaigns, attended the Democratic convention in Boston and watched the Republican convention in New York. As occasions entirely scripted for television, US conventions offer little in the way of excitement, but they sure draw a crowd — thousands of delegates and their families, thousands of lobbyists and many thousand more journalists, not to mention demonstrators, who descend upon the convention cities. There's no shortage of celebrities and no shortage of parties. But while Bush got a big convention bounce and moved out to a double-digit lead in September, the Kerry convention bounce was measured in decimal points. On reflection, Sears believes the Democrats have deeper, longer-term problems than the struggling candidacy of John Kerry. Only once since 1936 (with Bill Clinton in 1996) have they successfully re-elected a Democratic president. And many of those first-term wins have been largely accidents of history. The last governing Democratic coalition was the one built by Franklin Roosevelt, "one with an appeal to ordinary middle-class Americans that FDR's vision had three generations ago," writes Sears.

Le stratège Robin Sears, qui a une certaine expérience de l'échec pour avoir dirigé plusieurs campagnes nationales du NPD, a assisté aux conventions démocrate et républicaine tenues à Boston et à New York. Entièrement scénarisés pour la télévision, ces événements offrent peu de surprises mais attirent des foules énormes : milliers de délégués et leur famille, autant de journalistes et de représentants de lobbies, sans compter les manifestants qui se donnent rendez-vous sur place. Célébrités et réceptions à foison complètent le tableau. Et si George W. Bush a fait un bond d'une dizaine de points dans les sondages au lendemain de la convention de septembre, John Kerry s'est contenté avant lui d'une infime hausse de popularité. Mais selon l'auteur, les démocrates sont aux prises avec des problèmes autrement plus graves et récurrents que la difficile campagne de Kerry. Depuis 1936, ils n'ont réussi qu'une fois (en 1996 avec Bill Clinton) à faire réélire un président. Et nombre de leurs victoires pour un premier mandat ont pour ainsi dire été accidentelles. En fait, la dernière coalition démocrate ayant exercé le pouvoir remonte à celle mise en place par Franklin D. Roosevelt car elle offrait une vision dans laquelle se reconnaissait la classe moyenne américaine. C'était il y a trois générations.



Looking back, one can see the landscape created by the shifting of politics' grand tectonic plates. As they are slowing grinding into new alignments it is almost impossible to understand the changes underway.

As Conrad Black delineates in his powerful new biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt, it was only by the beginning of the war that one could see how dramatically he had altered America's political geography. It was only after his death that one saw the genius of his plan for a post-war world.

Today we can look back to the Republican convention in 1964 and see the first cracks in Democratic control of

American political life. Some might point to Ronald Reagan's hard right challenge to Gerald Ford — which came amazingly close to victory — in 1976 as the next big crack in the fundament.

Thirty years from now, presidential historians might point to the split between the socons and the neocons, between the Buchananites and the Wolfowitzers, as the beginning of the end to the GOP lock on the presidency and power.

But today this much at least is certain: the Democrats are in decline and may be in peril. It is incredible to reflect that no Democratic presidential candidate has won an elec-

tion without divine or illicit human intervention since FDR in 1944.

Bill Clinton in 1996, the first re-election of a Democratic president in 60 years, is the exception that proves the rule. This is the record of the party that dominated every level of American politics for half of the 20th century. It is an appalling record in a two-party system where the electoral college system is biased towards large

only Democrat to be re-elected since FDR.

(Kvetchers may complain that George W. Bush was only “elected” by Ralph Nader and Clarence Thomas in 2000. That Al Gore’s appalling campaign came as close as it did to winning is surely further proof, however, of the Dems’ call on divine intervention.)

Depending on assassination, scandal and ballot-stuffing is not perhaps the

and you lose 10 votes on key bills. Lose the governorship of California and you lose thousands of patronage jobs, and millions of donor dollars. Lose control of both houses of Congress but hold all the key cities and states, and you’ll recapture everything again soon enough.

Philadelphia’s Democratic mayor is expected to turn out workers and voters for the national ticket, as is the governor of Pennsylvania if they expect any favours from a future White House. And a Canadian politician would drool at the power these machines have.

A Canadian political delegation visiting Chicago City Hall to meet the original Mayor Daley on Democratic primary day in 1972 inquired naively why the

vast Stalinist pile was so empty. They were informed with a snicker that all the municipal employees were out “assisting” election officials. The 26,000 workers main task was handing out “disability voting cards” to wobbly Democrats so that they could be “assisted” in voting the Daley ticket by a supervisor.

This power has faded only somewhat. The Democratic mayor of a large US city, berating his fellow mayors for their failure to work hard enough for the 2000 ticket, at a lunch at this year’s convention, reminded them jocularly of their vote-delivering power: “Why I remember a couple of campaigns ago, being a poll captain in Philadelphia where they have very “special” election rules. We turned out thousands of voters, 96 percent of the list, in one housing project — which was an achievement, as the project was still under construction.” (Much guffawing.)

Indeed, the corruption of voting practice revealed in Dade and Broward counties in Florida, essentially Miami and Ft. Lauderdale, last time came as little surprise to those expert in the machinery of American elections. Not only do the voting machines “mal-function,” and voters of certain back-

One in five Americans called themselves Republicans when Carter was elected; today Republicans have edged into a clear national majority. Among middle-class voters, the group that votes most heavily, party ID has slipped by nearly 20 percent. However, even this decline in partisan ID is misleading, for solidly “Democratic” cities and states — New York, Los Angeles and California — have elected and re-elected Republican mayors and governors.

Democratic states, and where on most major issues, a majority of voters nominally support the Democratic position.

The list of anomalies that have disguised this disgrace is impressive:

- Harry Truman squeaks to victory in '48 on FDR's legacy and a little post-balloting assistance from the big city machines in St. Louis, Chicago and New York.
- John F. Kennedy gets an illicit leg up as Boss Daley of Chicago stuffs an extra 50,000 votes downstate. Richard Nixon contemplates an injunction, then concedes, recognizing that, in Illinois, co-operative witnesses rarely survive.
- Lyndon Johnson shamelessly milks the JFK assassination, the nation's grief, and his “partnership” with the beloved dead president. It helps in 1964 that Barry Goldwater is the worst candidate ever nominated.
- Jimmy Carter is delivered to power by the flood of revulsion at Watergate in 1976 and proceeds through total ineptitude to kill Dems chances for a decade.
- Bill Clinton is elected by Ross Perot's vote-splitting in 1992. But he goes on in 1996 to become the

most reliable strategy for a serious party seeking power. Even worse, despite these “tilt” election victories, the Dems have been able to hold the White House for only 20 of the past 50 years. Nor is it easy to explain GOP success in terms of their strategic brilliance: the venality, vulgarity and racism of many Republican campaigns was less responsible for their victory than the Dems’ incompetence.

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Until 1980, the Dems never held fewer than 30 of the 50 governorships, and in many years held all but a dozen. Today the GOP has reversed those standings. Similarly, the Dems held control of 34 state legislatures as recently as 1982; today that number has been cut in half.

These defeats are catastrophic for the future. Lose 10 congressmen

grounds get erased from voters' lists routinely, turnout levels rise and fall like storm tides from election to election in the same districts.

But Democrats can hardly point to "Republican corruption" as the source of their failures. Sure Republicans lied, cheated and stole some recent campaigns, but few of their shenanigans were original. They had only copied, and occasionally improved, what they had endured from big city Democrats for decades previously.

So why are the Democrats such losers?

It is a cliché among pundits and political scientists to bemoan the irrelevance and Disneyesque shallowness of American political conventions. It has become a more universal piece of conventional wisdom each election cycle.

It begs two questions however:

How then do parties attract nearly 50,000 participants to these meaningless and boring events? (5,000 delegates, 10,000 family, friends and alternates, 5,000 lobbyists and staff, 15,000 journalists, 15,000 security, not counting the 200,000 demonstrators in New York.)

And why do American businesses and interest groups spend nearly \$50 million on parties, gifts, and more stretch limos than Hollywood on Oscar night, at each one?

Americans are not short of other forms of summer diversion. Convention attendance surely cannot be an alternative to Vegas or the cottage. American business executives and Israeli lobbyists may be many things, but perennial stupidity wasting

millions of lobbying and entertainment dollars is not among them.

No, the conventional wisdom is not only wrong, it gets more wrong with each cycle. The conventions' importance to American political culture grows every four years, as the power of local party organization continues to fade, as primaries become ever more candidate- and not party-driven exercises, and as American interest in politics at all levels continues to waste away.

For a young Democratic activist from Utah, there is no way to connect to her party as quickly, emotionally, and in many cases permanently, than the euphoria of a convention week: the blur of parties, famous people up close, flirtation and friendship, and transcendent group celebration. Yes, the networks give only an hour of primetime



CP Photo

Former US president Bill Clinton fires up delegates to the Democratic convention in Boston. Clinton's re-election in 1996, the first of a Democratic president in 60 years, is the exception that proves the rule of the party's minority status in modern America. In a sense, Clinton successfully re-created the Roosevelt coalition of the middle-class and working-class voters.

to the strange staged celebrations these days, but the “echo coverage” on newscasts and in print lasts for days.

Imagine the thrill to a new political enthusiast to be greeted at a state delegation breakfast, by name by a future president. The memories of steamy convention flings are endlessly relived by middle-aged delegates at subsequent convention encounters. Delegates learn political technique, meet mentors, assess allies and competitors, and get drunk, all for free and under the glare of television.

For the Cranberry Growers’ Cooperatives of America, spending \$200,000 on a party that attracts Bill Clinton, Walter Mondale, Jimmy Carter and George McGovern and several hundred assorted senators, stars and hangers on, to meet their execs and hear their problems selling cranberries is a very good investment indeed. (This correspondent sipped appalling cranberry vodka cocktail mixtures and, along with the rest of the crowd, stared wide-eyed at Ben Affleck’s new lady.)

To stand hot and squeezed on the floor on a “big night,” as a Clinton or a Rudy Giuliani is whipping the 10,000 partisans to an orgiastic promised land, as the high-tech “son et lumière” magnifies every bead of sweat and blazing smile, and as the hustling young sign crews spew thousands of new signs and flags to the sometimes frail, always eager, often frenzied hands — to know that the “whole world is watching” — is to see American political passion, logistical brilliance, group solidarity, and technology-whipped storytelling rhetoric in its glory.

Yes, the conventions are rather like Nuremberg on occasion: that sadistic growl, and the cruel Dick Cheney sneer, syncopated by the hideous chant of “USA, USA, USA,” does understandably give pause to refugees from totalitarian mob violence. But to critics of the “empty show” of American con-

ventions one might observe that there was little “policy deliberation,” or “leadership selection” at Goebbel’s Nuremberg celebrations. As attention-getting, movement-building, enemy-terrifying demonstrations of power they worked pretty well.

American political conventions are not fascistic slogan fests. But neither are they without great impact in party building, influence peddling, and in shaping the image and therefore the choice of an American president.

Democrats throw the best conventions. Their skill in the subsequent

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campaigns, as this year’s election media star Jon Stewart likes to say, is “Well, not so much.”

This is not a coincidence.

Democratic conventions and their delegates have been transformed since the disaster of Chicago in 1968. They now attract the most stars: Hollywood, rock and athletic. This year the contrast was painful: the GOP’s “stars” were known to Christian rock radio listeners and NASCAR video fans only. The Dems hold the best parties: 950 officially this year — a tireless party crasher could slurp free champagne and munch huge shrimp

around the clock for five days. (Republican activists taste in music and food entertainment seemed to extend to food and dress as well: too much chiffon in cake form and under dresses, to the snickering bemusement of New Yorkers.)

A Democratic party convention looks more like America, racially and ethnically, than almost any other event one can attend in that increasingly divided society. To see young affluent blacks, laughing and hugging young Texan women, Asian-American lesbians hysterical with joy at Barack Obama’s “we’re all Americans message,” is to see an America that does not exist in very many places.

To a Canadian who loves Americans and their culture, but whose own culture has grown in a more integrated direction, it takes a few days to figure out what is strange about this. Then it dawns: instead of the “normal” American sight of black garbage sweepers making way for a gaggle of white male lawyers in a convention hotel lobby, or young hispanic waiters making themselves scarce amid tables of loud young white party goers, one sees a more “Canadian” sight, a more colour-blind mix of races and roles. Puff Daddy’s limo rolls up behind Hillary’s, and out pour young and old, black and white from each.

Democrats in convention do not, however, look like white America.

They are too rich, too tanned, too skinny, and too well dressed. They reek of New York — New England liberal grandee. Sadly, nothing epitomized the divide more than the sight of the prospective First Daughters’ convention appearances: the young Kerry women, all Radcliffe, Anne Klein clean lines and gentle curves, soft-spoken, self-deprecating, and demure.

The giggly, jiggly Bush girls appear in Wal-Mart outfits as a cross between Hooters waitresses and suburban housewives late on their

karaoke girls' night out. However, as the biting satirist Lewis Black put it, "Hey, don't be mean. Anytime the Bush girls appear in public — standing — that's a victory!"

Commenting on the 14 percent of Republican delegates who were not white, he also deadpanned, "We treasure our minorities, unlike Democrats. That's why they get the best seats in front of the cameras, that's why we get

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them to talk so much, that's why they get all the closeups. Those Democrats they have so many minorities they just treat them like dirt, you know..."

It's hard to describe the Republican delegate demographic without descending to unfair social stereotype. Suffice it to say that the WB, Fox News, and *Us* magazine are probably the majority news sources. *USA Today* would be "a big read." In this, the Republican activist model is closer to its core voter than the Democrat's equivalent by far. After all, most Americans, and for that matter most Canadians, do care more about the winner of the latest Canadian/American Idol contest than they do about any election. Most voters, unlike Democratic party delegates, are not too thin, too rich and too sophisticated to care about the fate of Paris Hilton or her dog.

Republican conventions are all about pounding home a simple message: "We are tougher, meaner, stronger, better Americans than Democrats!" Clinton's fabulous slur on this street punk approach to statesmanship, "Strength and wisdom are not opposing values," was a hit among the Dems, but far too subtle for a Texas bumper sticker.

After all, who can remember a great Republican convention speech?

Perhaps Reagan in 1976 or 1984, at a stretch. John McCain this year, if you give more points to drafting than delivery, perhaps. The list is not long since Teddy Roosevelt passed. Yet there has not been a Democratic convention in living memory without at least one display of soaring oratory: Mario Cuomo, Hubert Humphrey, Henry "Scoop" Jesse Jackson, Barbara Jordan, Adlai Stevenson, JFK, LBJ, Clinton,

Ann Richards, even George Wallace. This year alone: Jimmy Carter, Obama, Al Sharpton, Clinton. Even Kerry and his daughters outshone every blood-thirsty, insult-filled, rant from the GOP stage.

So what is the problem?

These powerful crowd pleasers leave little in the way of voter impact even hours later. The Kerry convention "bounce" was not in double digits, it was in decimal points.

As one media veteran of both parties' quadrennial "product launches" put it, "You leave a Democratic convention with a nice champagne buzz, a bit overfed, but feeling good about yourself and your colleagues, certain that the world really can be a better place. You leave a GOP event with your ears ringing, on an adrenalin high, Red Bull in your veins and blood in your eye, keen to rip the arms off any girlie man who disses your car, your party, your candidate or your country."

Functionally, the latter "takeaway" is more useful than the former, as Bush's ten-point post-convention bounce amply demonstrated. As one GOP wag put it, at the end of their successful invasion of New York, "They have the rich and the poor now. We have the super-

rich and all the ordinary folks." As a crude summary of the American political divide, it's not far wrong.

Recent studies of the "red/blue" divide in American political culture underline this puzzling divide: if you are old, white, a high school dropout and small town, you are a Republican; if you are a "coast American," Catholic, with a university degree and affluent, you are more likely a Democrat. If you are black or Hispanic in the west, or Asian in the east, you are a Democrat.

Academics are divided about how deep and how real this shift in party ID is. Some argue that it is far less a permanent GOP advantage than it appears, and is demographically tilted by an aging population. Be that as it may, the trend line is clearly in the wrong direction for Dems. But they have an additional serious problem.

Nowhere is politics a demonstration of how civilized, well dressed, smart, or nice you are. Demolish your opponent or be crushed. "Motivate your base" as the current cliché has it, or lose. At this, the Dems have failed consistently and the Republicans have become expert.

American presidential politics has become as ferocious and viciously partisan as any in the democratic world. If Adlai Stevenson was "too pointy-headed" to survive 1950's US political culture, Al Gore was a joke as a political gladiator half a century later. Another pundit cliché is to bemoan the "increasing negativity" of presidential campaign tactics, to which the political historian can only roll his eyes and say study 1912, 1932, or 1944, and then tell me about civilized discourse.

Lyndon Johnson was after all the inventor of the classic "back against the wall" political tactic: "Then call him a pig 'lover' and watch him deny it" (the original Texan is too ripe for repetition). Joe Kennedy had no qualms about using his mob connec-

tions on behalf of young Jack in the West Virginia primary. It was Carter's southern Christian operatives who recycled Nixon's line that Gerry Ford had played "a little too much football without a helmet," in response to his habit of stumbling over his feet and his lines. Not exactly Marquess of Queensbury rules.

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As Chris Matthews, the former Democrat turned television host of the aptly named *Hardball!* put it, "I have never seen a better campaign team than the Bush team this time: tougher, meaner, smarter, more focused and more disciplined than ever." High praise indeed given that he knew the infamous Reagan heavies, and Lee Atwater, creator of the infamous Willie Horton revolving door parole ad that worked so well for the first George Bush against Michael Dukakis in 1988.

This presents at least three problems for Democrats: how to rebuild an activist coalition that more resembles the electorate, how to motivate its own non-white base to vote without scaring off white swing voters, and how to deliver a powerful competing message without descending further into the political gutter.

Policy differences on a wide range of traditional issues between the two parties, even in today's bitterly partisan era, are really not that wide. There is little distance between Dems and the GOP on trade issues, on agriculture, on taxes, or even foreign affairs. The rhetorical battles heighten the gap, but the substantive difference on troop deployment or softwood lumber is notional. The real divide is cultural: gays, drugs, guns, abortion and God.

America has not often been a warrior state; indeed, until recently

Republicans regularly attacked the "Democrat wars" — the First and Second World Wars, Korea and Bosnia. Nor has it been a culture obsessed with its own internal security, barring the madness that was McCarthy.

The 1960s and now 9/11 have changed all that, if not forever, certainly into the foreseeable future: the

Vietnam war, blacks, suicide bombers, gays, women and drugs all combine to assault old verities. The apparent calm that settles for periods of time about these battles is never real. Whether the trigger is gay rights, a particularly vicious racial killing, a new drug hysteria, or another terrorist attack, the wounds are ripped apart along now conventional lines repeatedly.

For the Democrats the tragedy is that they are bewitched by the conviction that they are on the wrong side of each of these divides, that they need therefore to disguise their weakness. Cynically, or out of conviction depending on your point of view, Republicans have been masterful at exploiting this weakness: from Willie Horton to flag-burning, from gays in the military to Swift Boat slurs.

Democratic counter-attacks have sometimes seemed laughable (Dukakis in a tank) and sometimes adroit (Kerry surrounded by his mates on stage). But in few cases have they been as merciless and effective as Republican attack and counter-attack.

If you, as a television producer, received a script featuring a beloved senator, a Vietnam vet with one functioning limb, being ambushed by a smear campaign trashing him as weak in support of "the homeland" and depicted in TV ads as a silent partner

of Osama Bin Laden, you'd file it, unread. Yet that is the story of the defeat of former Senator Max Cleland, whipped in just such a campaign by Karl Rove's Georgia protégés.

But — this just in — the right lost the culture wars. The forces of tolerance and liberalism in social values won.

In the immortal words of the California statesman: "Don't be such girlie-men!"

This wimpy stance in the face of Republican attack has caused much muttering in the corridors of the Democratic party leadership. The failure of the Kerry campaign to hit hard enough fast enough is agonizing for

its friends to watch. Where are the hard-hitting TV messages that show we are a party as ferociously determined to win as the Republicans, is the quiet moan of many activists. With the election clearly slipping away from him, Kerry finally moved to shake up his campaign in September, bringing in the battle-hardened strategist James Carville, who crafted Clinton's rapid response reactions in 1992 on everything from bimbo eruptions to his draft deferments.

A campaign is no time to be subtle. Morning in America might have worked for Ronald Reagan in 1984, but it won't work for Kerry in 2004. By wrapping himself in the flag, and bringing out his band of brothers, he has been playing to Bush's strength rather than his own. Kerry should be making it about Bush, not about himself. He should be making it about the economy and Bush's job creation record — the first negative job growth record, and the worst, since Herbert Hoover, father of the Great Depression. He should be making it about health care, and how 44 million Americans have no coverage in a nation that spends 15 percent of its GDP on health care. He should be making it about Bush's half-trillion dollar deficit, after the Democrats balanced America's books. He should be making it not about the war in Iraq, but about post-war Iraq, and the bun-

gled US occupation. More US troops have died since Bush declared mission accomplished than died during the war itself. He should be making it about Bush. The real Democratic bumper sticker is "Beat Bush."

In the past, Democratic party consultants often used money as the excuse — we don't have enough of it to go negative. This time, by some measures, Kerry/Edwards and associates have more money than Bush.

Another wooden leg in previous lost campaigns was "we won't descend to their level." To which the sharp retort should be, "Fine, just don't be wimps." None of the campaign messages above is close to Swift Boat sleaze, but each could be more damaging than the flag-waving foolishness of much of the Kerry campaign.

The American media, like their counterparts in each of the democracies, does have a liberal tilt. How could it be otherwise when journalists are schooled on, "Afflict the comfortable, comfort the afflicted"? Fox News and the codeine-addled Rush Limbaugh are infamous because they are successful, and rare. Reporters do, however, have a macho enthusiasm for winners, and a visceral disdain for wimps. "Wimp attacks" are far more often behind the savage coverage Kerry gets than right wing conspiracy.

But the most astonishing failure of the Democrats since the disastrous campaign of George McGovern in 1972 is continuing to misunderstand the power of the 1960s revolutions.

To the generation of voters borne since 1960, who will be a majority of voters by the end of this decade, equal treatment for women, gays and non-white Americans is history. For a majority of the post-70s generation, tolerance about recreational drug use, alternative life styles, and body piercing,

combined with skepticism about corporate power and its respect for the environment or third-world citizens, are values as integral as respect for sexual freedom and openness.

The GOP hardliners, the Christian right, Fox News and Pat Buchanan are so angry and frothing because they know they lost. So why is this victory not part of Democratic political leadership armour today? It is in many other democracies: the German foreign minister is a former anarchist and proud of it; Tony Blair was a youthful peacenik.

Democratic counter-attacks have sometimes seemed laughable (Dukakis in a tank); and sometimes adroit (Kerry surrounded by his mates on stage). But in few cases have they been as merciless and effective as Republican attack and counter-attack. If you, as a television producer, received a script featuring a beloved senator, a Vietnam vet with one functioning limb, being ambushed by a smear campaign trashing him as weak in support of "the homeland" and depicted in TV ads as a silent partner of Osama Bin Laden, you'd file it, unread. Yet that is the story of the defeat of former Senator Max Cleland, whipped in just such a campaign by Karl Rove's Georgia protégés.

Heck, even in Canada, the finance minister of our largest province was a committed BC hippie for years.

Clinton came closest to playing effectively on the difference that his generation and his values meant, until his self-indulgence almost ruined him. But in grinding their teeth about his confusion of sexual freedom with stupidity, the Democrats need to recall the power of his broader message and appeal. The president playing a saxophone on television and dancing to Fleetwood Mac at his inauguration

communicated subtly but effectively who won the culture wars. It was part of what made him such a hated target of the right.

Pete Townshend, who had always been very very careful about who gets to use the Who musical archive, was appalled when he heard that the Bushies' private celebration on the night of the Supreme Court decision in favour of Bush in 2001, was a loud playing and replaying of his great anti-totalitarian anthem, "Won't Get Fooled Again." But the drollery captures the broader irony of the two parties' approach to their histories and places in it.

The Dems may be saved by divine intervention once again. W's snorting a few lines off the Camp David pine furniture, or some other youthful indiscretion until now successfully covered up, may yet halt the waltz to reelection. In the long-term though, the GOP now has a serious problem: it's become too successful. This is the crisis that hits every party in power eventually. It has made too many compromises, spread its coalition-building a little too thinly, and opened itself to contradictions and conflicts that may yet tear it apart, just as similar pressures at the turn of the last century did when Teddy Roosevelt split the party, electing Woodrow Wilson.

There is no common cause between the Michael Bloombergs and the Tom Delays of this world. Except in sharing power, they wouldn't be seen in the same room together. Arnold Schwarzenegger is no more a social conservative than Al Sharpton. The rifle-toting, gay-bashing, born again, "illegal wet-back" hating, anti-free-trade Republican activist is as far from the convictions of the management of corporate America as Ralph Nader. That such activists and execs are both Republicans is as much a Democratic failure as a GOP victory.

The cracks in this coalition are emerging: former Nixon cabinet member and New York investment banker Peter Peterson is attacking “profligate deficit spending.” Southern activists are grumbling about Bush’s being “soft on illegal immigrants.” Anti-big-government conservatives are furious that the Bush administration has raised public spending — even excluding the Iraq spending sinkhole — more than any president since Johnson. Pat Buchanan, representing the venerable isolationist tradition in the party, is attacking the “wars of misadventure.” Log Cabin Republicans (the GOP’s gay caucus) are supporting only liberal Republican candidates and not George Bush.

But these fissures can be pried wide open by a more confident and assertive Democratic party. If the Kerry/Edwards team is able to squeak out a victory this year, party optimists will draw a line between the Clinton 1996 victory, the 2000 stolen election, and a win this year. This trajectory will allow some to claim that it points to a rebirth of the party’s coalition with new members and new possibility.

More realistic partisans might better breathe a sigh of relief and get down to the long-term slog of

party-building at the city and county level. Reconstruction based on a clear vision of a different America — one with an appeal to ordinary middle-class Americans that FDR’s vision had three generations ago. Whether that vision focuses on cleaner air or cleaner government, on full employment or full health care for all Americans is less important than that it is a distinctive, believable populist message of greater economic equality and fairness, delivered every day by credible candidates.

At the same time, at the local level in urban America, the party will need to replace its dependence on trade union money and muscle with its own organization and tools. The GOP has adroitly captured the zeal of Christian evangelists as organizational footsoldiers. Sadly, those zealots outnumber trade union members now by two to one. Tactical partnerships with the environmental movement, black and hispanic organizations are valuable, but nothing can replace the power of your own fulltime “feet on the street.”

Democratic party chair Terry McAulliffe has masterfully assembled in Washington a powerful edifice for fundraising, direct marketing and research, with an equally massive war chest. It is a little bit backwards, but

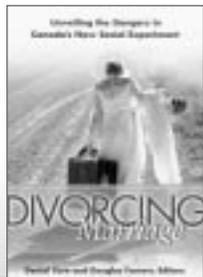
the same now needs to be done in places like Miami and Pittsburgh and Cleveland. That process will win local contests and train future national candidates.

Finally, the party needs to stop being defensive about its recent history, and be the first to attack and counter-attack. Republicans have carved out a new chunk of political geography for themselves — the traditional family, the aggressive use of force globally, tax cuts, the protestant right. That constellation excludes at least half of America, that rejected chunk of political geography and voters is waiting to be reclaimed by a renascent coalition such as that constructed by FDR.

His rebuilding took place in the face of far greater forces of opposition and with far fewer resources. Instead of whining about the conspiracies arrayed against them, today’s party leadership should study FDR’s organizational and political genius, take a deep breath and begin again.

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CHURCH and STATE



Divorcing Marriage
Unveiling the Dangers in Canada's
New Social Experiment

*Edited by Dan Cere
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