

---

# Rallying the Democrats

*James Nuechterlein*

---

THE DEMOCRATS have every reason to look forward confidently to November's off-year elections. The polls look good, electoral history is overwhelmingly on their side, and their opponents have succumbed to the internal grumbling and murmurs of disaffection to which majority parties in trouble are prone. The Iraq war, long a burden to the Bush administration, shows signs of becoming its albatross. More generally, the public seems caught up in a widespread if inchoate discontent, expressed in the frequently reported view that the country is headed in the "wrong direction." This is a mood that those in power have reason to fear.

Of course, Democrats have difficulties of their own. Attempts to exploit Republican weakness have been hobbled by internal divisions among foreign-policy doves, ultra-doves, and (the few) semi-hawks—and, more fundamentally, between partisans and ideologues. The former simply want to win at the polls and tend to concentrate on what winning will take; the latter, for whom politics is a venture in virtue, disdain any compromise of principle as a mark of shame.

There are, however, some Democrats who combine an interest in principle with an almost desperate desire to help the party regain the congression-

al power that has long eluded it. One of them is Peter Beinart, the former editor and now the editor-at-large of the *New Republic*. Beinart's recent book, *The Good Fight: Why Liberals—and Only Liberals—Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again*,<sup>1</sup> argues for a principled Democratic politics that, in his view, will also commend itself to majority opinion. In making this argument, Beinart goes against much of what now passes for liberal orthodoxy—a point that in itself speaks volumes about the present disposition of forces within the Democratic party.

TO MAKE sense of this controversy, a bit of history is in order. Beinart begins by noting that the liberal persuasion he favors is currently "so reviled that its adherents dare not speak its name." When pressed, people of the Left tend to call themselves "progressive," before going on to explain that "they don't really like labels." In thus declining to identify themselves as liberals, he explains, they "cast off decades of disappointment and failure."

Such embarrassment was not always the case. When, in the late 1930's, Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed to redefine the Democrat-Republican divide as one between liberals and conservatives, he clearly assumed that the choice of terms would favor his own party. And he was right. In the 1950's, it was still considered an audacious act for Dwight

---

JAMES NUECHTERLEIN is a senior fellow of the Institute on Religion and Public Life. He has written extensively on politics and culture, and for many years was a professor of American studies and political thought at Valparaiso University in Indiana.

<sup>1</sup> HarperCollins, 304 pp., \$25.95.

Eisenhower to urge an assembly of Republicans not to be ashamed of the term “conservative.” Today, however, things are different. Conservatives take pride in their self-description, while liberals maneuver to avoid theirs.

As Beinart balefully recounts, liberalism fell apart politically in the 1960’s, having become identified with Great Society programs mired in overreaching ambition and racial antipathy, and with a war in Vietnam that tore the nation apart. It has never fully recovered either its fortunes or its good name. The Democrats have suffered accordingly, so much so that many Americans who grew up with a sense of the party as the nation’s natural majority still find it difficult to comprehend the degree to which things have been turned around, or how long ago. Had Richard Nixon not handed Democrats the political gift of Watergate in the early 1970’s, the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress would likely have occurred much earlier. Democrats have lost seven of the last ten presidential elections. Their standings in the House of Representatives are the worst since the days of Harry Truman, and in the Senate since the presidency of Herbert Hoover.

It was largely Ronald Reagan who in the 1980’s managed the remarkable feat of rewriting the terms of our national political debate. The New Deal dichotomy—compassionate liberals pitted against heartless conservatives—was transformed by him into a struggle between, on the one side, statist ideologues and economic sentimentalists and, on the other, Americans sensibly attuned to market realities and committed to an ethos of personal responsibility. Although Democrats still poll better than Republicans on issues of economic security, even in this area they have increasingly had to play by conservative ground rules. It was thanks to conservative pressure that Bill Clinton was brought to declare, memorably if not quite accurately, that the era of big government was over. The dramatic reduction in dependency brought about by Clinton’s most notable domestic achievement, the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, has easily overshadowed the defections of those on the Left for whom the New Deal paradigm still defines political reality.

Democrats have also suffered from the perception that they are on the wrong side of a whole range of social issues: crime (the death penalty in particular), gun control, late-term abortion, affirmative action, school prayer (and the overall role of religion in public life), same-sex marriage. On at least the first two of these, and possibly the third, they have largely given up the struggle. The latter three they mostly prefer not to talk about, or they

re-describe them as “wedge issues” that should not be allowed into public discourse. More ambiguous is the political resonance of other social issues—abortion in general, assisted suicide, stem-cell research—but no serious analyst doubts that in general the culture wars, as they have come to be called, work against the Democrats.

**G**RANTED, IT would be a mistake to exaggerate the depth of the turnaround. Even leaving aside foreign policy and national security, where at least until now Republicans have enjoyed a decided advantage, the contest at the polls can be close-run. Although Republicans generally win national elections, they win, as George W. Bush can testify, by narrow margins. Bush aside, moreover, Republicans have reason to be grateful that the 22nd Amendment precluded the otherwise entirely plausible prospect of a Bill Clinton now entering the late phases of his fourth term. The same holds true for Congress, where consistently tight margins offer no grounds for conservative complacency. America is today a center-Right society, but it would not take a political earthquake to nudge it back to the center-Left.

Still, even such a center-Left government would be constituted on essentially negative grounds. Clinton’s success, based first of all on his extraordinary personal appeal, also depended on a skillful politics of triangulation. Clinton presented himself as a commonsense progressive whose policies were aimed primarily not at those requiring semi-permanent custodial care but at those who, while “working hard and playing by the rules,” needed a temporary helping hand. He made the Left viable again by redefining it modestly rightward.

Thus the liberal dilemma. Liberal and left-wing Democrats supported Clinton, but they did so because he was a winner (and also because, due to acts of astonishing personal recklessness in the later stages of his presidency, he needed to be defended against conservatives determined to bring him down). But Clintonism was not and is not where their hearts are. Their problem is that they cannot expect to make a comeback if they allow themselves to say what they really think. This leads to frustration, which leads in turn to curious forms of rhetorical excess.

I say “curious” because, in historical terms, actual disagreements between liberals and conservatives are less pronounced today than they have been for most of our post-1960’s past. George Bush, as Republican Presidents go, is not all that conservative, while congressional Democrats, for their part, are less likely to flirt with outright radicalism, foreign

or domestic, than was the case with their counterparts during the Reagan years. Yet it often seems that mutual animosity between the parties—and between liberals and conservatives in general—has never been more strenuous.

The reasons for this are various. Most obviously, the defection of the South to the GOP has made both parties more ideologically monolithic, thus weakening instincts of accommodation and compromise. This partisan hardening has rippled through the politically informed electorate, and has been reinforced by the echo-chamber effects of proliferating talk radio, cable TV, and Internet sites that regularly practice politics as a blood sport. On the Democratic side, the effects have been intensified by the bitterly controverted presidential election of 2000 and the disappointing vote four years later. Compounded as it is by the drift toward partisan polarization, the agony of those defeats has issued in the seemingly irresistible impulse to demonize not only George Bush but also those within Democratic ranks who are seen to be insufficiently invested in the cause. The internecine assault on Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman, primarily on account of his support of administration policy in Iraq, is a salient case in point.

There is yet another element at play in the rhetorical vehemence displayed by many liberal Democrats. Recent election results notwithstanding, liberalism retains a prestige status in American society and culture. Our educational, media, and intellectual elites are mostly liberal elites, and it puzzles and galls them that their otherwise secure control of leading American institutions no longer extends to the political arena as well. Instead, the reins of power have slipped into the hands of those lacking either the traditions, the competence, or the wisdom to manage the country's affairs. Conservative rule, in this reading, is illegitimate rule by definition, and all the more infuriating for that.

THIS ATTITUDE is reflected even in Beinart's *The Good Fight*, which, as ideological commentaries go, is only moderately inflammatory. But for the most part Beinart's concern is less with conservatives than with liberals, in whose ranks he hopes to instill a renewed rigor and purposiveness concerning national security and foreign policy. Democrats suffer electorally, he writes, because they lack a unifying grand narrative, "a vision of national greatness in a threatening world." Precisely such a narrative, however, is to be found in the tradition of cold-war liberalism, and it is this that he aims to revive under today's post-cold-war conditions.

*The Good Fight* is thus, in effect, a rewrite for the early 21st century of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s influential 1949 manifesto, *The Vital Center*. Schlesinger wanted a tough-minded liberalism, firmly Left-leaning on domestic issues and thus vigorously anti-conservative, but also unapologetically anti-totalitarian and thus vigorously anti-Communist in foreign policy. Mutatis mutandis, Beinart wants the same two things today.

On the domestic side, where arguably the greatest upheavals have occurred in what was once the conventional liberal wisdom, Beinart's updating of Schlesinger offers little that is new—a trick he accomplishes by skirting many of today's most controversial social issues. Instead, sounding New Deal themes, he calls vaguely for a reinvigorated public sphere that will countermand private power and further social justice and economic equality. Only an America strong and idealistic at home, he insists, can be strong and idealistic abroad.

In foreign affairs, Beinart again sees continuity—not so much in the threat (Communism then, Islamist fascism now) as in the enduring temptation on the part of many liberals to avoid or deny it. In 1948, soft-minded liberals supported Henry Wallace's effort to defeat Harry Truman and thus reverse American opposition to Soviet expansionism. Wallace's enthusiasts identified Western imperialism as a greater strategic and moral threat than Communist totalitarianism. Today's liberals, although not soft on terrorism in the way that Wallace supporters were soft on Communism, are so obsessed with the perfidy of George Bush as to be similarly in danger of forgetting where the real threat lies. Bush is a legitimate adversary, Beinart allows, but that should not lead liberals into minimizing or dismissing the dangers posed by jihadist Islam to the values they cherish.

For Beinart, cold-war liberalism is the usable past that Democrats now lack—and that America needs. For, in those days, a substantial number of liberals believed wholeheartedly in American strength and assertiveness, even as they tempered that belief with a sense of reserve and modesty typically lacking among conservatives. Recognizing the nation's own "capacity for evil," these liberal cold warriors accepted restraints on American power and encouraged the development of countervailing international institutions. They were patient in their ends, urging the containment of Communism, not immediate rollback. And they insisted that anti-Communism be allied with economic development: the Truman Doctrine wedded to the Marshall Plan.

As for post-cold-war liberalism, that, in Beinart's

account, is mostly a sad tale of declension from the “moral realism” that characterized the earlier era. In turning against the Vietnam war, many liberals were persuaded by George McGovern to turn against the anti-Communist impulse behind it. Worse, they gave every appearance of losing faith in America itself. Beinart agrees that Vietnam was a mistake (the cold warriors, he concedes, were not always right), but regrets the over-interpretation that led such emblematic liberals as Senator William Fulbright to conclude from it that America had become a “sick society.” He regrets as well the subsequent years of drift, equivocation, and reflexive opposition to any sign of muscularity; by 1991, 45 out of 55 Senate Democrats would vote no to George H. W. Bush’s stand against Saddam Hussein’s aggression in Kuwait.

What rescued Democrats from accountability for their post-Vietnam dithering was the end of the cold war and the subsequent turn of attention from international affairs. Bill Clinton won the presidential election of 1992 in a campaign focused on domestic priorities. “Foreign policy,” he said shortly after taking office, “is not what I came here to do”—though, Beinart points out, he was compelled to do more of it than anticipated as the 90’s wore on. But by the turn of the 21st century the holiday was over.

BEINART DEVOTES the last part of his book to applying the lessons of his historical sketch to the post-September 11 world. How should an engaged liberalism confront our current dilemmas? Here the key question is Iraq, and Beinart immediately finds himself on awkward ground. In 2003 and for a while thereafter, he gave strong support to the decision to oust Saddam Hussein, a position that put him increasingly at odds with the liberal community. In *The Good Fight* he repents of that support:

I was too quick to give up on containment, and I did not grasp the critical link between the invasion’s credibility in the world and its credibility in Iraq. . . . I overestimated America’s legitimacy. . . . I could not see that the morality of American power relies on the limits to American power.

Such contrition may or may not help repair Beinart’s relations with mainstream liberal opinion—his book has aroused impassioned opposition among many of its intended readers—but it raises serious questions about the coherence of his thought. At issue is not the legitimacy of opposi-

tion to the Iraq war—there are good if not necessarily compelling arguments against the decision to invade—but rather the basis for Beinart’s backtracking. Invoking Harry Truman’s containment doctrine is particularly inapposite: given the Soviet Union’s military strength, and especially its possession of nuclear weapons, containment was the best the West could then muster, at least in the short run. Had Stalin’s Russia lacked a nuclear deterrent, the U.S. would have had many more forceful options with which to check its aggressive conduct.

Next, Beinart’s complaint about the war comes down essentially to the fact that Bush acted without the explicit approval of the United Nations or the support of such major allies as France and Germany. With regard to the UN, however, he also concedes that although its approval is desirable, it is not necessarily a prerequisite for American military action. That leaves the unforthcoming approval of France and Germany—and the suggestion that military initiatives deemed by our leaders to be morally justified and vital to the national interest should be subject to veto by a handful of nations whose concern for American interests is often less than obvious.

It also leaves Beinart with what might be termed his Tony Blair problem. In *The Good Fight*, and even more so in articles he has published in the *New Republic*, Beinart has lavished unstinting praise on the British prime minister’s response to the threat of terrorism in our unprecedentedly interdependent world. As he describes it, Blair urges a vigorous interventionist policy, military where necessary—but one that, in contrast to George Bush, recognizes that success requires effective multilateral institutions and a “legitimate, rule-based international order.”

It may well be that Blair has stronger multilateral instincts than Bush. But in the defining case of Iraq, he subordinated those instincts—as, at the outset, did Beinart—to what he concluded was the imperative to act. Unlike Beinart, moreover, Blair did not change his mind when things did not go as well as had been anticipated. Caught between admiration for Blair’s unwavering determination to fight terrorism and his own reconsidered opinion that we should not be fighting in Iraq—and must in no case be fighting alone—where now will Beinart turn?

Another curiosity: in discussing the war on terrorism, Beinart places extraordinary emphasis on economic development and in particular on the need for an updated Marshall Plan for the Middle East. Like that earlier initiative, he says, this one

should come with minimal requirements: “The only conditions would be that Arab countries themselves develop a plan that enjoys clear popular support, conforms to broad democratic and market principles, and is completely transparent.” Not only do few experts on the sources of Islamic radicalism think that economic deprivation is anywhere near the heart of the matter, but “naïve” is almost too charitable a term for Beinart’s notion of how things work in today’s Arab world.

NONE OF this is to derogate from the value of Beinart’s appeals to his liberal peers. His warning against moral fastidiousness is certainly well taken; politics, Beinart understands, is never pure. Similarly praiseworthy are his reminders that serious enemies exist elsewhere than on the domestic Right, that terrorism must be fought in the name of liberal values, that the U.S. ought actively to encourage the spread of democracy around the world, and that there are good reasons why the Michael Moore, MoveOn.org, *Nation*-magazine wing of the Democratic party reminds voters of the McGovernite tradition they have overwhelmingly rejected.

Yet Beinart’s sobriety deserts him when, turning his attention to the Right, he invents a false conservative ideology to set himself against. From the cold war onward, he maintains, the essential dividing line between Left and Right has been this: liberals, following the lead of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, accept that their nation does not “embody goodness.” Conservatives, unacquainted with subtlety, claim that “America’s actions, simply by virtue of being American, are beyond moral judgment.”

This is too absurd to merit rebuttal; one wonders what lone significant conservative could be mustered as an example of what Beinart says all conservatives believe. Nonetheless, it does make a kind of point. Although conservatives consider America neither perfect nor perfectible, they *are* generally predisposed to think well of it. They also instinctively assume what to liberals, in Beinart’s telling, needs constantly to be demonstrated: that, all in all, America is a force for good in the world.

As Beinart intermittently senses, and as his potter history of the post-Vietnam period demonstrates, many liberals have in fact overlearned their Niebuhrian lessons: they regularly assume the worst about their nation’s motives and behavior, and often speak more as citizens of the world than as citizens of the United States. That has political costs: Niebuhrian humility is a fine thing, but in circumstances that require decisive action it can

serve only as a caution, not as a guide to policy. It also has electoral costs: the most effective Republican ad in the 2004 campaign may have been the one featuring John Kerry speaking before the Senate Foreign Relations committee in 1971, testifying, with what seemed like perverse relish, to American atrocities in Vietnam. The implied lesson was obvious: the mindset this man would bring to the White House was skepticism about his nation’s fundamental decency.

Nor is Kerry unrepresentative. Quite the contrary. A Democratic party unillusioned about power relations, unembarrassed by the concept of the national interest, and unbeguiled by neo-pacifist temptations would indeed be a great national benefit, but that is not the Democratic party that exists today. Henry M. Jackson, the last great national representative of that earlier party, departed the political scene a long time ago, and left no successor generation. Some authors preach to the choir; Beinart seems to be addressing an empty loft. The real, existing Democratic party agrees with him only in his unrelenting opposition to all things conservative.

IS THAT enough? In the short run, perhaps. For a variety of reasons, people are undeniably unhappy with the Bush administration and the Republican Congress, and this unhappiness could conceivably suffice to carry Democrats to victory in the upcoming mid-term elections. Sixty years ago, in 1946, a minority Republican party won back the Congress simply because voters had accumulated a number of grievances and finally took them out on a Democratic party that had held power for a long time. The successful Republican slogan that year—“Had Enough?”—could well be replicated by Democrats this November.

But that mid-term victory in 1946 did not reconstitute the Republicans as the majority party. And one suspects that a victory by the Democrats in 2006 would be similarly limited in its effects. However narrowly, the Republicans have been able to gain majority status in America because they succeeded in refurbishing the underlying conservative philosophy that sustains them. If the Democrats are to take things back, they too will have to learn to define themselves not simply by what they oppose but by a reimagined liberalism whose name they can speak with clarity and pride. The wrecking of liberalism in the 60’s wrecked the Democratic party; for now—even all these years later—rehabilitation does not seem a likely prospect.