
Why the Democrats Keep Losing

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THE AFTERMATH befitted the morrow of a civil war. Tens of thousands of Americans visited the website of the Canadian immigration service to learn how they could take themselves into exile. A Florida psychotherapist reported treating more than a dozen people for sudden depression. “Hard times, brutish times, lie ahead,” intoned the *New Republic*.

The *New York Times* turned its op-ed page into a kind of wailing wall, where a procession of mourners poured forth their laments and imprecations. Garry Wills: “We now resemble [Europe] less than we do our putative enemies . . . al Qaeda [and] Saddam Hussein’s Sunni loyalists.” Thomas Friedman: The Bush people “have used . . . religious energy to promote divisions and intolerance at home and abroad.” Maureen Dowd: “jihad in America. . . . One party controls all power. . . . One nation dominates the world.”

The proverbial visitor from afar might have been astonished to learn that all of this rhetorical tearing of hair and rending of garments was occasioned

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by nothing more than the results of a presidential election, and not even the wailers themselves could have doubted that this election would be followed by another four years hence. Clearly something else was going on.

To be sure, George W. Bush was hated. He had been the object of a startling amount of contumely during his first term of office, a phenomenon that had already occasioned much comment in the public prints. Some of this strong sentiment was presumably due to the taint of illegitimacy that had attached to his victory in the 2000 election. Leaving aside the contested, court-ordered outcome of the vote-counting in Florida, Bush had received fewer votes nationally than his opponent and had acceded to the presidency thanks only to an anachronism in our political system. Although this had happened twice before in our history, the last time was in the 19th century, and to many it appeared excruciatingly unfair, not to mention undemocratic.

But in November 2004, the fact that Bush’s second term would now be legitimate beyond any doubt seemed only to compound the hatred. Several of the President’s detractors hastened to suggest that his relatively narrow margin of victory—amounting to 3 percent of the popular vote—should not be taken as a “mandate.” Whether they would have said the same had Bush’s Democratic opponent won by a like amount is doubtful.

The *New York Times*, for example, has regularly questioned the presence of a mandate in recent elec-

tions—but only when the winner has been a Republican. In 1980, when Ronald Reagan bested incumbent President Jimmy Carter by 10 percentage points, the paper's editors observed that his "mandate," a word they themselves put in suspicion-arousing quotation marks, had "little policy content," a position they reiterated four years later when Reagan won reelection over Walter Mondale by a whopping 18 percentage points (a "lonely landslide" and "a personal victory with little precise policy mandate"). Nor could the 8-point victory by Bush's father over Michael Dukakis "fairly be called a mandate," asserted the paper in 1988.

Whenever a Democrat has won, by contrast, the *Times* has perceived things differently. After Bill Clinton's first victory (by 6 percentage points) in 1992, the editors commented: "The test now will be how quickly President-elect Clinton can convert his mandate into momentum." When he won reelection (by 8 points) in 1996, it repeated the thought—"There can be no question about his mandate"—and added a little civics lesson: "The American people express their clearest opinion about what they want government to do through their choice of chief executive."

II

EVEN AS the Democrats and their friends in the mainstream media minimized the import of Bush's victory in 2004, it seems likely that their pained response was due precisely to the fact that the Republican victory, if not deep, was undeniably broad. In addition to winning the presidency with an absolute majority of the popular vote (something no Democrat has achieved since Lyndon Johnson in 1964), the Republicans solidified their majorities in the Senate and the House of Representatives. This will be the sixth successive Congress since 1994 in which the Republicans will have controlled both houses.

Nor is the pattern likely to be broken in the short term. Republicans now hold a 30-vote margin in the House; since the advantage of incumbency usually results in to the victory of more than 90 percent of those standing for reelection, this will not be easy to reverse. In the Senate, the Republicans hold a ten-vote edge. There, reelection is a less sure thing, but in the midterm election of 2006 more incumbent Democrats are thought to be at risk than Republicans. Meanwhile, the GOP continues to enjoy a lead of 29 to 21 in governorships, including those of the four most populous states: California, Texas, New York, and Florida.

As if all this were not unnerving enough, the Republicans won in a year when many things had seemed promising for Democrats. The war in Iraq was proving to be much tougher sledding than originally hoped, and throughout the year Bush was buffeted by unfavorable headlines—a mounting insurgency, intelligence failures about weapons of mass destruction, prisoner abuse, the withdrawal of allies, and more. Although it is supposedly difficult to oust a sitting President in wartime, both Johnson and Harry S. Truman, two incumbents saddled with wars on distant shores that were not going well, declined to seek reelection, presumably in part out of fear they would not win. Nor was the news from the home front particularly good for Bush. The economy was recovering from recession, but the rebound was weak, generating few jobs and no more than guarded optimism.

Adding to the pre-election expectations—and post-election frustrations—of Democrats and liberals was their low regard for the man who beat them. Howell Raines, the former executive editor of the *Times*, had captured this sentiment in a pre-election essay: "There are signs of the fierce conviction of some voters—and the secret fear of a quieter and perhaps larger group—that George W. Bush is not smart enough to continue as President." One of these voters apparently was John F. Kerry, who vented to an aide within earshot of an "embedded" *Newsweek* correspondent: "I can't believe I'm losing to this idiot." By contrast, most Democrats felt, with reason, that unlike Mondale or Dukakis or Al Gore before him, Kerry had proved to be an effective, if uncharismatic, campaigner.

Other political factors appeared to be breaking in favor of the Democrats as well. Only two weeks before the election, these were summed up by the Democratic strategist James Carville:

If we can't win this damn election, with a Democratic party more unified than ever before, with us having raised as much money as the Republicans, with 55 percent of the country believing [the U.S. is] heading in the wrong direction, with our candidate having won all three debates, and with our side being more passionate about the outcome than theirs—if we can't win this one, then we can't win [anything]!

III

CARVILLE'S ENUMERATION of Democratic advantages left out an important one—the palpable tilt toward Kerry on the part of the mainstream

press. In October, the political director of ABC News—inspired, he said, by the *New York Times*—sent a memo to the network staff exhorting them *not* to be strictly evenhanded with respect to the two campaigns:

We have a responsibility to hold both sides accountable to the public interest, but that doesn't mean we reflexively and artificially hold both sides "equally" accountable when the facts don't warrant that.

I'm sure many of you have this week felt the stepped-up Bush efforts to complain about our coverage. This is all part of their efforts to get away with as much as possible with the stepped-up, renewed efforts to win the election by destroying Senator Kerry at least partly through distortions.

It's up to Kerry to defend himself, of course. But as one of the few news organizations with the skill and strength to help voters evaluate what the candidates are saying [we have a duty] to serve the public interest. Now is the time for all of us to step up and do that right.

Around the dial from ABC at CBS, an edition of the magazine show *60 Minutes*, presented by star anchor Dan Rather, revealed hitherto secret documents showing that Bush had been truant from his National Guard duties as a young man and had benefited from favoritism. Within a couple of days, most news organizations, goaded by alert bloggers, recognized that these were clumsy forgeries; they turned out to have been furnished to the network by a well-known Bush-hating crank. Although CBS and Rather belatedly and grudgingly acknowledged their error, the network was not done. Eager for a second bite at the apple of electoral influence, *60 Minutes* planned a bombshell for the Sunday night before election Tuesday, a slot that would leave no time for the facts to catch up with a dubious story.

This time, the network was going to expose the ultimate example of dereliction in handling the occupation of Iraq, namely, that the administration had allowed 377 tons of extremely high explosives, useful for detonating a nuclear bomb, to disappear. In the event, however, the *New York Times* scooped CBS, running the story on its front page a week earlier. Subsequent polls showed that this story did swing some votes to Kerry, but not as many as it might have done had there been less time to rebut it.*

This was but one of several stories in which the *Times* revealed its slant on the election. The paper's "public editor," Daniel Okrent, denied any such bias; he published two counterbalanced critiques of the

paper, one complaining that it favored Kerry, the other that it favored Bush. To make the latter case, Okrent found Todd Gitlin, an unreconstructed leftist and former head of the 1960's radical group, Students for a Democratic Society.

Gitlin's argument was absurd, as was the equation of critics from the Left and the Right. The *Times* fervently backed Kerry in its editorials, and almost all of the paper's correspondents are Democrats. A clearer reflection of the paper's attitude could be seen in an op-ed by Howell Raines, whose imprint was still evident even after his 2003 departure as executive editor. "If George Bush wins the presidential election," wrote Raines in the *St. Petersburg Times*, "Americans can mark it down as a triumph of thug politics."

In a similar vein, *Newsweek* "reported" after the election that the outcome had validated Karl Rove's strategy "even if it turns [the] country into a battle zone, and validates smash-mouth politics for a generation." And the *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne asserted: "The fervent opposition to President Bush is rational, and its intensity is a direct response to Bush's own efforts to discredit all opposition to his policies." But these indignant comments on Bush's tactics only revealed partisan blinders, for exit polling showed that a plurality of voters believed it was Kerry, not Bush, who had attacked his opponent unfairly.

Nor is the evidence of media bias only impressionistic. A study of coverage during two weeks in October by the non-partisan Project for Excellence in Journalism found (according to a report in the trade journal *Editor & Publisher*) that "59 percent of stories that were mainly about Bush told a mainly negative story, while 25 percent of Kerry stories played out that way. One in three stories about Kerry were positive, one in seven for Bush."

IV

AFTER THE vote, the *Times* reported that some Democrats felt their loss "presaged a period of Republican domination." As Donald Fowler, a former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, put it, "I think we have come to an ending point

* What the rebuttals showed was that, contrary to the *Times*'s assertion that the explosives were "supposed to be under American control," they had been unwatched and might have disappeared during the weeks immediately preceding the arrival of American forces. Since a stockpile of this size amounted to scores of truckloads, it is hard to imagine that looters or even small terrorist bands could have moved it all. A much more plausible explanation was that it formed a part of the cache of material that Saddam Hussein's regime was known to have moved—some of it into Syria—in the weeks before its demise.

in a long transition that began in 1968. . . . I think we live in a country that is majority Republican now.” According to this view, the *Times* reported, “the present national divide, between the narrow but solid Republican majority and a Democratic party seemingly trapped in second place, may be hardening into a pattern that will persist for years to come.”

Is this true? Not according to polls, or at least not yet. In the main exit poll sponsored by a consortium of news organizations, each of the major parties was named by 37 percent of the voters, leaving a sizable swing group.* This did reflect a trend toward the Republicans, who previously had trailed the Democrats, but scarcely dominance.

Still, there is evidence that the momentum lies with the GOP. The long-term population trend in the U.S. shows an outward flow from the “blue” states to the “red” states of the South and West, and with that flow go seats in Congress and the Electoral College. At the two parties’ 2004 national conventions, 14 percent of Democratic delegates told surveyors they had once been Republicans; 28 percent, or double that proportion, of Republican delegates had once been Democrats. In other words, a substantial slice of the Republican leadership consists of converts, reinforcing the impression of a trend. Moreover, whereas Democrats had once been the party of grass-roots activists, several news organizations reported that the party was now paying its canvassers; for their own get-out-the-vote operation, the Republicans were able to rely on volunteers.

That the Democrats *could* pay their foot soldiers was itself evidence of a remarkable fact about the 2004 election, and one that makes the Republicans’ success all the more striking. In alluding to the parity in fund-raising capabilities, James Carville understated the case: in fact, the Democrats outspent the Republicans for the first time in memory. They did this by means of “527 committees,” named after a loophole in the campaign-finance reform laws that allows “independent” political organizations to raise and spend money without limit.

This loophole was especially useful to labor unions and to persons of large means, and both of these constituencies turned out to be on the same side. Although Republicans remain the party preferred by the upper class, the Democrats are favored by the super-rich. A number of these extremely wealthy individuals, led by multi-billionaire George Soros, poured millions into 527’s like MoveOn, ACT (Americans Coming Together), and the Media Fund, whose main purpose was to defeat George Bush. Since 2000, according to the non-partisan

Center for Public Integrity, Democratic and liberal 527’s spent \$292 million while Republican and conservative groups spent \$113 million. In addition, labor-affiliated groups spent \$192 million compared to a mere \$17 million by business-affiliated groups.

This substantial discrepancy more than offset the modest spending advantage enjoyed by the Bush campaign and the Republican National Committee. To have at last overcome the Republicans’ financial dominance, and to have lost nonetheless, no doubt deepened the Democrats’ sense of post-election misery—all the more so since the Republicans are unlikely to allow this spending coup to repeat itself.

V

IN ADDITION to the specter of long-term status as an opposition party, another root of Democratic distress lay in the prominent role played in the campaign by “born-again” or evangelical Christians, a constituency with whom Bush identified himself. Hence the numerous overwrought references to the looming dangers of theocracy, fundamentalism, and even “jihad.”

According to the standard version, Karl Rove, the tactical genius behind Bush, had contrived to mobilize large numbers of these religious zealots whose votes, explained the *Times* columnist Paul Krugman, were “motivated, above all, by their opposition to abortion and gay rights (and in the background, opposition to minority rights).” The primary devices for rousing these Americans from their previous political lethargy were federal and state initiatives against gay marriage; once gotten to the ballot box, they could be counted on to pull the lever (or press the screen) for Bush and the GOP ticket.

For those subscribing to this analysis, Rove’s master plan was vindicated when the main exit poll revealed that a larger proportion of voters (22 percent) named “moral values” than any other issue as the one that most determined their ballot; these same voters chose Bush over Kerry by a ratio of 80 to 18. But the analysis turns out to be faulty in almost every respect. It is probably true that more evangelicals voted in 2004 than before. But more people in all religious and other demographic categories did, too, and the evidence strongly suggests

* In light of the notorious error of exit-poll reports on election day that showed a win for Kerry, one may wonder about the validity of such polling. But the problem had arisen from the release of early and partial results. The full, final poll yielded a result (51 percent for Bush and 48 percent for Kerry) closely mirroring the actual outcome. I owe a special thank-you to my astute colleague, Karlyn Bowman, who generously shared her extensive polling data with me.

that evangelicals increased their vote no more than the rest of the population.

It may be impossible to know for sure, because the 2004 exit poll was the first to ask voters specifically whether or not they considered themselves “evangelical or born-again.” But the proportion identifying themselves as Protestants or other non-Catholic Christians—54 percent—remained exactly the same as in the last two elections. In theory, one might posit a significant increase in the evangelical share of the vote in 2004 counterbalanced by an equivalent *decrease* in the non-evangelical Protestant share, but there is no evidence of this, and the hypothesis is far-fetched.

Nor can we know what to make of the datum that 22 percent chose “moral values” as their most important issue—a choice not on offer before. For one thing, as Charles Krauthammer has pointed out, the term was a catch-all, less specific than the other domestic issues—the economy/jobs, taxes, health care, education—listed individually on the menu presented to respondents. Had the list offered gay marriage, abortion, and crime as discrete choices, the “moral-values” group would have fractured, and none of the individual pieces would have loomed so large. Iraq and terrorism were listed separately, and were chosen respectively by 15 and 19 percent. Had *they* been aggregated, as in previous elections, into the single category of “foreign policy” or “world affairs,” then the 34 percent presumably choosing this category would have overshadowed the “moral-values” group. (None of this, of course, is to deny that moral values were important, as they always are.)

It also seems untrue that ballot initiatives barring gay marriage activated voters to the advantage of Bush. Yes, Bush’s share in the eleven states offering such referenda increased over 2000, but it increased in almost all other states as well—as one would expect from the overall outcome. In six of those eleven states, moreover, Bush’s improved showing *trailed* his average improvement in other states. This was markedly so in Ohio, the crucial swing state where Bush garnered only 1 percent more than he had in 2000.*

VI

IF THE principal claims about the role of evangelical voters were false, it does seem that this group participated in the election with more élan and self-confidence than in the past. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a sizable contingent of Bush volunteers was drawn from their ranks, perhaps buoyed by a President who has testified to being one of them.

But this, even if true, does not suffice to explain the vituperation aimed at them. For that, the cause seems to be twofold. First, to the liberal pundits, the religiosity of Bush and many of his supporters is in itself disturbing or repugnant: they are seen as utterly close-minded and impervious to reason. “We’re entering another dark age,” worried Maureen Dowd, adding that religious voters were motivated by “the fear of scientific progress.” “It’s scary,” confessed her fellow *Times* columnist Bob Herbert. “How do you make a rational political pitch to people who have put that part of their brain on hold?”

The second reason had to do with the palpable need of the Democrats to blame their defeat on the shortcomings not of themselves but of the electorate. Some of them have done this quite regularly in recent decades. Reagan’s victories in the 1980’s were ascribed to the personal and economic venality of the voters: “selfishness, this greed, this new championship of caring only for yourself,” as Mondale put it in the closing days of the 1984 election. Now, Bush’s triumph was ascribed to another base characteristic: religious primitivism. Blind to the irony, some liberal commentators in 2004 even began to bemoan the electorate’s *lack* of selfishness. “Many of these formerly nonvoting white evangelicals are remaining true to their unworldliness,” commented the *New Yorker*’s Hendrik Hertzberg sardonically. “In voting for [Bush] they have voted against their own material (and, some might imagine, spiritual) well-being.”

VII

WERE THE voters voting against themselves? And if so, why? Hertzberg’s assertion leads back to the fundamental question of the election: why, when the Democrats had all the advantages enumerated by Carville, and when the bad news from Iraq was continuing to roll in, did Bush win? And why did Kerry lose?

Bush did win—and not merely as a result of the artful maneuverings of Karl Rove. “From the beginning,” reported Matt Bai in the *New York Times Magazine*, “Kerry’s advisers said that the election would be principally a referendum on Bush,” whose job-approval ratings hovered around 50-50 throughout the campaign. That such a referendum would work to

* Do those who voted down gay marriage bear an animus against homosexuals? Some may, but it seems likely that most were motivated by a wish to defend the battered institution of marriage rather than a wish to injure homosexuals. All the less is there any evidence for Krugman’s gratuitous assertion that evangelicals or “values voters” were motivated by racial prejudice. In making this charge without a shred of sustaining proof, Krugman illuminated not their bigotry but his own.

Kerry's benefit was reaffirmed by Bill Clinton, the Democrats' most astute politician. "If you're the issue in this campaign, you lose," Clinton told Kerry. "If he's the issue . . . you win."

The exit poll showed this to be false. To the question of whether they had voted mainly "for your candidate" or "against his opponent," the pros outnumbered the antis by a ratio of 69 to 25 percent. Within the group that cast a ballot for negative reasons, more than two-thirds went for Kerry (that is, against Bush), while those who voted for positive reasons favored Bush over Kerry by 59 to 40. Put another way, four-fifths of Bush's voters felt they were voting mainly in his favor; only one-fifth felt they were in essence voting against Kerry.

Voters citing the economy or Iraq as their main issue went overwhelmingly for Kerry; those naming terrorism or moral values went no less overwhelmingly for Bush. Asked about the qualities of their preferred candidate, those saying he "is intelligent," "cares about people like me," and "will bring about needed change" went in large proportions for Kerry; those saying he "has strong religious faith," "is honest and trustworthy," "is a strong leader," "has clear stands on the issues" heavily favored Bush.

Alas, the poll did not ask whether voters had based their choice mostly on issues or on individual qualities, but there is some evidence to suggest that Bush benefited from positive feelings toward him personally. The *Times* distributed a team of reporters to roughly a half-dozen venues around the country to talk to voters (not to poll them or draw a scientific sample). The conclusion of their pooled experience was this: "The voices of American voters the day after the election fairly shouted that the outcome was not about electoral tactics or issues, but about a fundamental question of character." There was something most people liked about the President.

There was also something many disliked about Kerry. For all his effectiveness in the debates or on the stump, Kerry's patrician demeanor was a liability. If Bush's folksy style and religious conviction put him at one with a large part of his constituency, Kerry spoke to his supporters across a great class divide. "I will fight for you," he said again and again, inadvertently underscoring the gulf between himself and them. *Newsweek* recounted one effort to get around this at a campaign stop in Wisconsin, where Kerry "earnestly told the crowd that he knew how hard it was to find the right financial options because he had two children and three stepchildren. His audience," reported *Newsweek*, "mostly farmers and laborers and small businessmen, audibly laughed at him."

This may have been one more reason why Kerry

chose to emphasize his Vietnam record at the party's national convention. His military service not only demonstrated courage and patriotism; it was also the one episode of his life that situated him with the common man. But this tactic backfired as well, since Vietnam was a formative experience not only for Kerry but also for contemporary American politics, and its legacy has been distinctly harmful to the Democrats.

VIII

THE ERA of Democratic dominance in the 20th century was shaped by the muscular presidency of Franklin Roosevelt—activist at home as well as abroad. FDR's New Deal defined a domestic liberalism that consisted of government intervention in the economy to provide jobs and social insurance. Its constituency was blue-collar, and its exemplars, after Roosevelt, were Presidents Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson.

This tradition was ruptured in the late 1960's and early 1970's when the movement against the Vietnam war redefined liberalism around the issues of peace, race, and freedom of "lifestyle," and on behalf of a new constituency of college students and graduates. The new liberalism was effective in defeating the old liberalism in the battle for control of the Democratic party, but it proved pitifully weak against the Republicans.

In the 30 to 40 years following this transformation, only two Democrats captured the White House. The first was Carter in 1976 and the second was Clinton. Both were governors from the South who were taken for conservatives and who labored to reinforce that impression. Carter, as one of his long-time associates explained at the time, liked to "campaign conservative and govern liberal." It was a formula that could work for one election with any given electorate. He used it to become governor of Georgia, then forsook reelection to run for the presidency. For this it also proved successful, but when he sought reelection, his true colors having been revealed, he was roundly trounced by the upstart Reagan.

Clinton's was a more complicated story. He campaigned in 1992 as a "New Democrat," code for "not a liberal." Once in office, he too shifted abruptly to the Left, but, perhaps to his good fortune, retribution came down on him faster than on Carter. In the mid-term elections of 1994, the Republicans, led by Newt Gingrich touting his "contract with America," won a stunning sweep, impelling the agile Clinton to execute a sharp turn back to the center. Announcing that "the age of big

government is over,” he signed conservative legislation on welfare reform and the “defense of marriage, and spoke out for stronger anti-crime measures,” V-chips on televisions, school uniforms, and restrictions on teen smoking. In short, he made himself the champion of what were then called “family values,” more or less the same issues that in the 2004 exit polls acquired the label “moral values.”

Liberals, like one-time Kennedy aide Richard N. Goodwin, protested that “the venerable principles of the party . . . have been abandoned.” But few Democratic politicians were willing to argue with Clinton’s success. “We’re all New Democrats now,” declared the then House minority leader Richard Gephardt.

One lingering illustration of the change was the bipartisan support for the war against terrorism following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Not only did most Democrats support the Republican President in using force to oust Afghanistan’s Taliban regime, but Senate Democrats voted to authorize the more controversial war in Iraq by 29 to 21. By comparison, when Bush’s father had sought authorization for war in 1990 in the face of Iraq’s outright aggression against Kuwait, only ten Democratic Senators had voted “yea” to 45 “nays.” (In the House, Democrats opposed the recent war by a ratio of three to two; they had opposed the first Gulf war by more than two to one.)

IX

BUT NO sooner had the presidential sweepstakes opened than the Democrats’ newfound hawkishness started to fade. Howard Dean, an obscure Vermont governor, leaped to the head of the pack by positioning himself as the party’s antiwar candidate. Conversely, contenders like Gephardt and Senator Joseph Lieberman, who supported the war on terror and in Iraq, soon saw their campaigns founder. Only Kerry managed to withstand the Dean momentum and eventually subdue it. He tilted his message toward the antiwar camp by voting in the Senate against an \$87-billion appropriation of funds for the occupation and reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq, and, much to the relief of the party establishment, succeeded in besting Dean in the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary.

Kerry, however, was a peculiar standard-bearer for Democratic centrism. He was from Massachusetts, the only state that had voted for George McGovern in 1972, and analyses of congressional voting records, whether by non-partisan sources like *National Journal* or by liberal groups like Americans for Democ-

atic Action, showed him to be one of the Senate’s most liberal members. As *Newsweek’s* correspondent described it, Kerry was “a little hurt that Dean had run as the ‘movement’ candidate against” him, since he “still saw himself as the reform-minded antiwar protester who had . . . tossed away his ribbons.”

The reference was to a 1971 demonstration sponsored by Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), a radical group of which Kerry was the most prominent leader. In 1970 and again in 1971, he had traveled to Paris to meet with representatives of North Vietnam and the Vietcong, and he had returned as an ardent advocate of their official “eight-point peace plan.” While working hand in hand with the Communists, he accused American forces of war crimes “committed on a day-to-day basis with the full awareness of officers at all levels of command.”

The publicity Kerry garnered as an antiwar spokesman was his springboard to public office. He served first in local and state government, but on winning election to the Senate in 1984 he declared that his “passion” remained the “issue of war and peace.” As his first major foreign-policy cause, he championed the “nuclear freeze.” He sought cancellation of numerous American weapons systems, both nuclear and conventional, railing against what he called “the military-industrial corporate welfare complex.” He criticized the U.S. intervention in Grenada as “a bully’s show of force,” and made himself one of the two most implacable Senate critics of aid to anti-Communist guerrillas in Nicaragua.

This dovishness lasted throughout the cold war but did not end with it. When Saddam Hussein swallowed up Kuwait in 1990, Kerry was one of the Democrats voting no on the use of force against him. And in 1995, he was one of 29 Senators to oppose lifting the embargo on Bosnian Muslims facing ethnic cleansing at the hands of the Serbs.

A record like this would have been too much baggage to carry in a presidential race even in normal times, much less with the nation at war. But Kerry held a trump card of sorts—his four months of perilous service captaining a Swift Boat in Vietnam—and he played it artfully. First, he arranged for the respected historian Douglas Brinkley to publish a 500-page book at the start of the election year based on Kerry’s own war-time diaries, chronicling those intense days in vivid detail. Then, he made his service in the Navy the theme of the Democratic convention: the dais appeared designed to evoke a nautical setting, the stage was jammed with officers, and Kerry introduced himself with a salute and the corny declaration, “I’m reporting for duty.”

X

THE STRATAGEM seemed to be working perfectly. Unfortunately for Kerry, it also roiled a group of veterans still bitter over his antiwar declamations, including a few of his old mates and commanders who had come in for rough treatment in Brinkley's book. They organized Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, published a book of their own, and produced a string of TV ads impeaching Kerry's war record and decrying his antiwar activities. In the ads, former POW's testified that they had endured torture for refusing to make the kind of war-crimes accusations against American forces that Kerry had tossed around so blithely. While some of Kerry's fellow sailors appeared by his side at campaign stops, a larger number of the Swift Boat crewmen associated themselves with his detractors.

The response from Kerry's supporters in the press was quick in coming. The *New York Times* weighed in with a 3,500-word, front-page article debunking the claims of the Swift Boat ads as "riddled with inconsistencies" and revealing, as if this meant anything, that the group had received donations from some individuals who also helped finance Republican causes. Thereafter, *Times* news stories mentioning the Swift Boat group regularly carried the description, "whose past accusations have frequently been unsubstantiated," or similar words. But the *Times*'s indictment cast doubt only on what these veterans said about the battles in which Kerry had won his medals. The more important part of their case focused on his antiwar activities, and on this the paper was notably quiet.

In fact, no doubt fell on the Swift Boat veterans' charges on this score, whereas it was Kerry himself who misrepresented his record. He had, for example, denied being present at a climactic November 1971 leadership meeting of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, which debated whether the group should launch a campaign of assassination of U.S. political leaders. The proposal was voted down, but the very fact that it was seriously considered shows just how far out VVAW was. When FBI files (released under the Freedom of Information Act) revealed that Kerry had indeed been present at the meeting, he changed his story, admitting he may have been there but claiming he had "no personal recollection" of it. The FBI files, however, show Kerry to have been a main protagonist in two days of ferocious debate, culminating in his withdrawal from leadership of the group. This was high drama, a turning point in his career—and impossible to forget.

Nor was this the only untruth that Kerry told

about Vietnam. Again and again over 25 years, in news interviews and in one dramatic speech on the Senate floor, he claimed that he had been sent across the Vietnamese border into Cambodia on a secret and illegal mission that was "seared" in his memory. Kerry's Swift Boat mates called this into question, and it emerged that he had simply made up the story out of whole cloth. The *Times* passed lightly over this episode, as if the lies or fantasies of a man who might be President were less newsworthy than the "unsubstantiated" statements of his critics.

Despite the *Times*, the veterans' broadside was probably the turning point of the campaign. It punctured Kerry's image as a hero, and it reinforced questions about his suitability to lead the country in wartime. These questions stemmed not only from his past but also from his recent stance, or rather stances, on the Iraq war.

Kerry's vote against the \$87-billion appropriation was hard to square with his prior vote to authorize the war. His explanations only made things worse—like his famous statement that "I actually did vote for the 87 billion before I voted against it," or his assertion that he had voted to authorize force because he believed it would help avert the use of force. As if this were not confusing enough, Kerry told an interviewer in August that if he had to do it over again, knowing there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, he would have supported the war nonetheless; and then he unleashed the campaign slogan that Iraq was "the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time." To Kerry, Iraq showed that the U.S. should meet a "global test" before using force, but in 1990, after the elder Bush had passed the global test by winning authorization from the UN Security Council, Kerry voted against the use of force anyway—and then in 2004 he said that, despite that vote, he had actually been in *favor* of the use of force.

The *Times*'s election postmortem put the best face on it: "Kerry[s] nuanced statements about Iraq gave the [Republicans] an opening . . . to attack him as a 'flip-flopper.'"

XI

ACTUALLY, KERRY was not so much a flip-flopper as a man desperate to avoid seeming soft. This was no doubt the impulse behind his repeated invocations of Ronald Reagan, whom in life he had called a man of "moral darkness." More important, it underlay his insistence that he would conduct a "more effective war against terror." Some of his backers, like the financier George Soros, had objected to use of

the war metaphor altogether, arguing that terrorism was better treated as crime. Despite his tough rhetoric, Kerry's approach was closer to that of Soros than of Bush.

Thus, asked what his "more effective" war would consist of, Kerry said that, "most importantly" we could do a better job

of restoring America's reputation as a country that listens, is sensitive, brings people to our side, is the seeker of peace, not war, and that uses our high moral ground and high-level values to augment us in the war on terror, not to diminish us.

Then he drew an analogy between terrorism and the gambling and prostitution that he had dealt with as a prosecutor in Massachusetts: "We have to get back to the place we were, where terrorists are not the focus of our lives, but they're a nuisance."

Again trying to sound tough, Kerry also said repeatedly that he would "find and kill" Osama bin Laden. In this connection, he chided the Bush administration for having "outsourced" to our Afghan allies the siege of Tora Bora, the Afghan redoubt where bin Laden may have been hiding. But this criticism was incongruent with his simultaneous complaint that, in Iraq, Americans rather than our allies were doing too much of the fighting. And in any case, bin Laden seemed unimpressed by Kerry's threat.

Quite the contrary. Days before the vote, the al Qaeda terrorist released a videotape that amounted to an endorsement of the Democratic candidate. Kerry was later to say this tape cost him the election, by heightening the issue of terrorism in voters' minds. But his claim flew in the face of the final exit poll, according to which voters who said they were influenced by the tape were *more* likely to have voted for him.

Bin Laden's endorsement was largely missed by the American media, having been lost in translation. In his peroration, bin Laden promised that "any state that does not toy with our security automatically guarantees its own." But the Arabic word for "state" was misunderstood by U.S. news outlets as "country," at least until the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) pointed out that what bin Laden very clearly meant was one of the 50 states of the Union, and that what he intended to convey was that states going for Kerry would be immune from attacks by al Qaeda.

How voters would have reacted had the tape come out earlier in the campaign, with more time for analysts to parse it, is unknowable. But it might well have helped Bush—and not only because of its partiality to Kerry. In bin Laden's relentless inveighing against

the President, the tape was also an inadvertent confession of fear. This element was well caught by a columnist for the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Abram*:

[T]he tape is one of capitulation and bankruptcy, and not one of threat and warning, since bin Laden appears in regular robes and not in a military uniform with a rifle by his side. . . . In addition, bin Laden does not refer at all to jihad in this tape. . . . The tape tells George Bush: "Leave us alone, and we will leave you alone." It is obvious, from both the language and the body language, that this is a speech of a man who is capitulating, withdrawing, or trying to "change his spots" from a jihad fighter to a politician.

With this from the horse's mouth, it would have been all the harder for voters to credit Kerry's promise to fight a "more effective war on terror" than Bush.

XII

WHATEVER HIS real stance on terrorism, Kerry's forthright opposition to the Iraq war did win him an extraordinarily intense following in at least one place: the chic corners of Manhattan and Hollywood that also hated Bush for his association with the censorious religious Right. As the *Times* reported, "Dozens of celebrities had thrown their weight behind the Democratic candidate. . . . Sean Penn knocked on doors in New Mexico. Leonardo DiCaprio, Jon Bon Jovi, and Bruce Springsteen tirelessly stumped for Mr. Kerry."

This was a mixed blessing, since the performers furnished frequent and ample reminders of what many Americans find objectionable in their wares. But Kerry seemed oblivious to the problem. At a star-studded benefit performance for the Kerry campaign at Radio City Music Hall, Whoopi Goldberg pointed to her crotch and said: "Keep Bush where it belongs and not in the White House." Following this, Kerry came out and declared: "Every performer tonight . . . conveyed to you the heart and soul of our country." A couple of weeks later, the rap "artist" Eminem released the catchy antiwar lyric: "We gonna let him know,/Stomp, push, shove, mush, fuck Bush,/Until they bring our troops home." Commented Kerry: "I heard Eminem on *Saturday Night Live* last night. I heard the song. . . . I like it."

Emblematic of the role of the entertainment industry was the release of Michael Moore's movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Moore had first gained public attention in the mid-1980's when he was fired after only a few months as editor of the leftist glossy, *Mother Jones*. The publishers said he had failed to perform his

duties, but Moore insisted the reason was his refusal to publish a dispatch from Nicaragua containing criticisms of the Sandinista government. Any such criticism, he asserted, would play into the hands of President Reagan and was in any case probably false.

As a film-maker, Moore has eased away from doctrinaire pro-Sandinism to eclectic anti-Americanism. Bin Laden, he suggests, should really be called “USama,” since “we trained him to be a terrorist,” just as we financed the Taliban. The Bush family is in cahoots with the bin Ladens, and invaded Afghanistan in search of profits for American oil companies. Not only is there no terrorist threat, but Iraq before the U.S. invasion was a serene country that “had never attacked or threatened to attack the United States . . . [and] never murdered a single American.” Today, “the Iraqis who have risen up against the occupation are not ‘insurgents’ or ‘terrorists’ or ‘The Enemy.’ They are the REVOLUTION, the Minutemen, and their numbers will grow—and they will win.”

There is, in Moore’s universe, only one real threat to the world:

I agree with the NRA when they say, “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people,” except I would alter that to say, “Guns don’t kill people, Americans kill people.” We’re the only country that does this, and we do it on a personal level in our neighborhoods and within our families and our schools, and we do it on a global level.

It is easy to see from this why Moore should have become the darling of Europeans who hate America—he received a thirteen-minute ovation at the Cannes film festival, and three of his books about “stupid, white” Americans grace Germany’s best-seller list. It is harder to see why the Democratic campaign thought it wise to treat him as a hero. Terry McAuliffe, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, appeared at the Washington, D.C. opening of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, as did the Senate minority leader Tom Daschle and as much as “half of the Democratic Senate,” according to Senator Bob Graham of Florida. Moore was given a VIP seat alongside Jimmy Carter at the Democratic national convention. *Fahrenheit 9/11* was also screened there by a major labor union; by some accounts it was the week’s most popular event. Asked directly about the film, Kerry’s spokesman Matt Miller stopped just shy of a flat endorsement. “The movie certainly has fired up a lot of people and gotten them excited to go out and work,” he said.

In contrast to Kerry, Bill Clinton had sought out symbolic ways to portray himself as a cultural conservative. In 1992, while still governor of Arkansas,

he had flown home to assure the execution of a mentally disabled cop-killer, thus showing voters that his support for capital punishment was not mere rhetoric. He had confronted a rap performer, Sister Souljah, over her appeals to blacks to murder white people. Kerry might have helped his case had he rebuked Moore or Whoopi or Eminem. Instead, his association with them reinforced his image as an unreconstructed liberal.

XIII

ASKED IN a *Newsweek* poll whether Kerry was too liberal, 48 percent said yes while 45 percent said no. The same poll asked if Bush was too conservative. Thirty-seven percent said yes, 58 percent said no. A Gallup poll, with a question worded somewhat differently, showed a smaller discrepancy but pointed in the same direction.

This difference was crucial. Thirty-four percent of voters described themselves as conservative, and they went for Bush overwhelmingly. Twenty-one percent called themselves liberals, and they overwhelmingly preferred Kerry. As always, moderates were the largest bloc (45 percent), and they tilted modestly toward the Democrat (54 to 45); but that was not enough to overcome the 3-to-2 ratio of conservatives to liberals. Unsurprisingly, four-fifths of the voters who said their family’s financial situation was better now than four years ago favored Bush, and the same proportion of those who said they were worse off favored Kerry. But even this most personal and self-interested of indicators was a less powerful vote-determinant than ideology.

The exit poll yielded many interesting and suggestive correlations. Men preferred Bush by 11 percentage points, while women preferred Kerry by 3, adding up to a “gender gap” of 14 points. This was dwarfed, however, by a 33-point “marriage gap,” with married voters favoring Bush by 15 points while the unmarried favored Kerry by 18. There was also a large church-going gap. Those who said they attended religious services one or more times per week went for Bush 61 to 39; those who attended only occasionally preferred Kerry 53 to 47; and those who never attended gave Kerry a margin of 62 to 36. A majority of Hispanics voted for the Democrat, but a much smaller one than four years earlier. Other minority groups—Asians, blacks, Jews—also backed Kerry, but again gave Bush a little more support than last time.

It was in light of these numbers that Democrats after the election began to ask themselves what to do, and where to look, next. A few voices urged their

party rightward. The *Times's* Nicholas Kristof cited the model of Tony Blair's revivification of the British Labor party, adding: "I wish that winning were just a matter of presentation, but it's not. It involves compromising on principles." A group of Senators from states that voted for Bush announced the formation of a new organization, Third Way, aimed at pushing the party away from the Left. This was reminiscent of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), created in 1972 following George McGovern's disastrous loss to Richard Nixon, and of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), established in 1984 following Mondale's loss to Reagan.

But neither of those earlier groups succeeded in overcoming the weight of opinion among party activists and thinkers. CDM was soundly defeated by party liberals, while the DLC was largely coopted by liberal Democratic politicians who flocked to its "moderate" banner without much changing their stands on issues.

Other voices urged the party leftward. The *Times's* Bob Herbert warned that "Some Democrats are casting covetous eyes on voters whose values, in many cases, are frankly repellent." His colleague Paul Krugman argued in a similar vein that "rather than catering to voters who will never support them, the Democrats . . . need to become equally effective at mobilizing their own base." And Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's campaign manager, argued that what has done in the Democrats has been "ignoring their base" by "running to the middle."

This group is likely to be reinforced by the considerable muscle of organized labor within the party. Once, under the leadership of George Meany and Lane Kirkland, the labor movement provided ballast for Democratic centrists against the party's Left. But a decade ago the Left triumphed within the labor movement itself, ousting Kirkland from the presidency of the AFL-CIO in favor of John Sweeney, a member of Democratic Socialists of America. Sweeney failed in his pledge to make the movement grow, and today he is being pressed by insurgents who stand even further to the Left.

Still other Democrats called on their party to adopt the language of values and religion, as if these were foreign tongues that could be mastered through effort. E.J. Dionne urged "religious moderates and progressives to insist that social justice and inclusion are 'moral values' and that war and peace are 'life issues.'" The liberal columnist Harold Meyerson said the party should put forward candidates "who can wrap the values of tolerance in the language of faith." A consortium of liberal church groups released a poll purporting to show that what the largest number of

Americans think of as moral issues are the war in Iraq, "greed and materialism," and "poverty and economic justice."

All of this seemed to rest on the premise that religious voters or those emphasizing values do not really know their own minds, and it rightly earned a reprimand from Democratic Congressman Rahm Emanuel: "People aren't going to hear what we say until they know that we don't approach them as Margaret Mead would an anthropological experiment." If the Democrats' problem was only about the wrapping, it would have been solved by having—as they did—no fewer than twelve clergymen addressing their national convention (to a mere six for the Republicans).

XIV

THE MOST trenchant if also the most revealing postmortem was offered by Andrei Cherny, who had worked for Kerry as a speechwriter in 2003. "What we don't have and what we sorely need," Cherny said, is "a worldview that makes a thematic argument about where America is headed and where we want to take it."

This sounds exactly right, but Cherny was unable to suggest what that worldview might be. In this sense, the Democrats were lucky in 2004 that the news from Iraq seemed so bad. Despite Kerry's incoherence on the subject, voters unhappy about the situation understandably held it against Bush, thus diminishing the Republican advantage on national-security issues. But that advantage held nevertheless; it goes back to the Democrats' dovish turn during Vietnam, and is not likely to disappear soon.

Neither is the Democrats' deficit on "moral values." The label may have been a new invention of the pollsters, but (as I have already indicated) the same constellation of issues has been around for a long time. It was called "family values" in the 1990's, "social issues" in the 1980's, and "the three A's" (amnesty, abortion, and acid) in the 1970's. Whatever the name, these issues, too, have consistently worked to the advantage of the Republicans. A large share of voters always calls itself "conservative," and it is their feelings on these matters in particular that make them so.

The Democrats' answer to all this has taken the form of an appeal to economic issues and a defense of the social safety net. There is reason to believe that this is an asset of diminishing worth. It was observed long ago that man does not live by bread alone; as the country has grown steadily wealthier, with fewer individuals facing insecurity over basic necessities, it

should not be surprising that economic factors come to figure lower in voters' priorities. As the *Washington Post* noted, 26 of the 28 states with the lowest average income voted for Bush.

Were these people voting "against their own interests"? It is unlikely they saw it that way. If they placed some other issue ahead of economics, they were asserting their priorities. As the liberal columnist Richard Cohen pointed out, Jewish voters, who as a group are wealthy, vote against their own economic interests when they back liberal candidates, and "Christian conservatives can make the same hard choices."

It is true that voters tend to see the Republicans as the party of the rich. Asked whether Bush paid more attention to the interests of large corporations or of ordinary Americans, 54 percent said the former, 41 percent the latter. Voters who cited the economy as their most important issue went for Kerry five to one, and voters who said that what mattered most to them was a candidate who "cares about people like me" opted for Kerry over Bush three to one. In view of Bush's regular-guy persona and Kerry's patrician remoteness, the reason for this must have been simply that Kerry was the Democrat.

Yet when it came to *policy*, the answers tilted in a different direction. Asked whether government should "do more to solve problems" or "is doing too

many things better left to businesses and individuals," voters opted for the latter by 49 to 46. Asked whether Bush's tax cuts had been good or bad for the nation's economy, 41 percent said good and 32 percent bad. Asked whom they would trust to handle the economy, they gave the edge to Bush by 3 percentage points.

Taken together, these numbers suggest that the problem for the Democrats goes beyond voters who choose to put other issues ahead of economic ones. The problem is whether the party can win even on economic issues. While Bush suffered from the mediocre performance of the economy during his first term (Presidents always get more blame or credit for this than they deserve), and while the Democrats retain the cachet of being the party of the common man, support for their economic policies has been leaching away.

This erosion is something that the Democrats, who already trail Republicans on issues of national security and values, cannot afford. If it continues, and unless the party can fulfill Cherny's goal of developing some new vision, they will win the presidency or Congress only when scandal or recession or defeat in war lays the Republicans low. The rest of the time, the GOP will reign. If this is the abyss into which the pundits peered, little wonder that they became so deranged. Hard, brutish times indeed.