

## **"Start Fresh, But Don't Start Over"**

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The current fevered interest in Bill Clinton's last-minute pardons is endangering the real debate the Democratic Party needs to have: How do we go forward?

The peril comes only partly from the sheer amount of attention focused on Clinton's exit from the White House. Media fascination has prompted an avalanche of Clinton psychological profiles and has tempted too many prominent Democrats to form circular firing squads. Ultimately, the pardons are done and irrevocable. After the investigations and interrogations, we must still confront our future. The pardons are the past.

The greater danger posed by pardon fever is that it is distorting Democratic political instincts. Too many strategists are now preoccupied with restoring "the morality of the party," proving that Clinton was somehow responsible for Al Gore's defeat or arguing that Gore didn't really lose. They are missing the point. None of these issues will motivate voters to pull Democratic levers in the next election. The party's real challenge is to review and revise our policies to meet America's dramatically new economic, social and technological circumstances.

First, party members must acknowledge the most damning fact of Democratic life today: At the national level, we haven't been so completely out of power since 1956. The point was driven home by the televised tableau from the House of Representatives on Tuesday night: The speaker of the House is a Republican. The Senate majority leader is a Republican. The president is a Republican. To begin any analysis of the party's future without reminding ourselves of this reality is to begin in denial.

Democrats are already engaged in a spirited discussion about where the party needs to go next. But we should agree on one point: The party does not need a debate over its principles. Every Democrat I know believes in the party's goals of helping the disadvantaged, protecting the environment and preserving a woman's right to choose. In fact, there is a remarkable unanimity compared with Republicans -- who must avoid the issue of choice if they are to maintain coherence.

What Democrats are missing is that we cannot win -- and we cannot create a Democratic majority -- without accepting once and for all that the electorate has changed. The largest bloc of voters is neither Democratic nor Republican. Self-described independents outnumber each party's faithful; to win a majority, we must capture these voters while holding together the Democratic base.

President Bush and the Republicans are already appealing to this bloc. Bush's speech to Congress was, in many instances, aimed right at the hearts and pocketbooks of the independent-minded voter. His promise to "leave no child behind" on education, his

repeated calls for bipartisanship and his stated desire to "bridge old divides" for the common good were intended to present the GOP as a centrist party, even as the president attempts to satisfy the right wing with Cabinet appointments and executive orders.

To win the battle for these moderate voters, Democrats have to quickly learn three lessons of the new political world:

\* The party must lead on issues of technological and social change. Economists may not be able to agree on whether there is a "New Economy" -- especially these days, with dot coms disappearing as fast as deleted e-mail -- but there is definitely a new American experience. Voters expect institutions to move faster, do more, and respond to lives that are increasingly chaotic. The idea of "Internet time" is a cliché with truth behind it. One report recently noted that a decade ago, it took six years to move a new automobile model from concept to production. Now, it takes only two years. Doing things faster and being more innovative have become the norm for workers in the private sector.

Voters' antipathy toward big, slow government programs makes Democrats more vulnerable to negative stereotyping than ever before. We must become the party that ends government's resistance to innovation. The examples are endless and limited only by our creativity: using sophisticated computerized mapping programs to track crime patterns and catch criminals, promoting energy conservation techniques, expanding privacy protections, making government user- and Internet-friendly.

The other side of the New Economy coin is that we need to reorient our policies to deal with the side effects of modern technology. One example: While I was at the White House, I worked with the Council of Economic Advisers on a study analyzing the number of hours parents spend with their children. The conclusion? In the past 30 years, on average, the amount of time that at least one parent is around their children has dropped by 22 hours a week. Even though that's a logical result of the two-income family, it is still a remarkable change in a short time. If time-challenged parents are to be the vehicle for transmitting our values to the next generation, they will need help. As a party, we must figure out what kind of help.

Modern employees and employers need support as well in this fast-changing world. Some companies need incentives to move their plants or businesses into impoverished areas; some workers will need more training; and employees who lose out will need legislation that ensures continued benefits -- including the pension plans that they depend on -- as they move to different companies.

\* The party must recognize that "economic growth" needs to be a central Democratic credo. It shouldn't be hard. After all, it was a Democratic president who presided over the record growth of the last eight years (a record that was underemployed by the Gore

campaign as it sought to distance itself from Clinton).

In the New Economy, more voters are affluent, suburban and better educated. The average voter owns stock and comes from a family with an income greater than \$ 50,000. These voters are not particularly angry at institutions, nor do they think anyone is denying them the good life (which is one reason Gore's populist rhetoric didn't pay more dividends). They want government to keep working to continue the prosperity, to expand their opportunities while protecting them from health, economic and other emergencies.

Making economic growth a central part of the Democratic message has real consequences. It means applying the tests of sound policy, not interest-group politics, when weighing national economic strategy. If we know that global economics are the key to expanding opportunity for all, both here and abroad, that means we have to turn away from protectionism. Being the party of economic growth also dictates that we reject Bush's proposed tax cut -- because it fails the test of fiscal responsibility. We must say so, and say it clearly. But rather than rejecting tax cuts altogether, we must prove a commitment to middle-class cuts that expand opportunity for those who need it most.

\* The party must acknowledge existing programs that aren't working and reform them - or get rid of them. The most important place for this hard-line review is in the area of education. In poll after poll, the public has repeatedly voiced its belief that the current educational system doesn't work. The Democratic Party is in danger of lagging behind this consensus. Soon, we will be seen as simply defending the status quo.

The situation in education is like the one faced in the welfare arena a decade ago. The American public is ready for dramatic steps. Increased resources alone will not prove enough. We must raise standards, demand accountability, offer more flexibility, guarantee a quality education. It is no surprise that Bush used many of those same words in his speech to Congress. The issue is becoming the political equivalent of a jump ball, and Democrats must present a compelling new case. If Democrats don't lead the way with real solutions, false but powerful ones will gain currency.

If we want to be known as the party of innovation, we must be at the forefront of leaner, innovative government efforts. After Clinton signed the welfare reform bill in 1996, he asked five CEOs to found a group to encourage businesses to hire people on public assistance. So far, 20,000 companies have joined that effort, which I helped organize. They have hired more than 1 million such workers. We should be developing other ways to use the power of the private sector to advance Democratic values, rather than simply being oppositional toward business.

Someday soon, the obsession with Clinton's pardons will fade. And my guess is that Clinton's legacy of record economic growth, unprecedented declines in the crime rate

and a 60 percent drop in the welfare rolls will hold up just fine over time. Further, we will have a host of issues on which we rightfully will be able to oppose Bush administration initiatives -- from drilling in Alaskan preserves to inadequate steps to control HMOs.

But if we fail to advance a powerful new Democratic vision, we will be relegated to the sidelines as nothing more than critics and rear-guard loyalists to a New Deal era gone by. We will do ourselves no favors if we do not create a more effective message for the coming elections. The world has changed, and we must change with it. Otherwise, our hopes to lead will vanish.