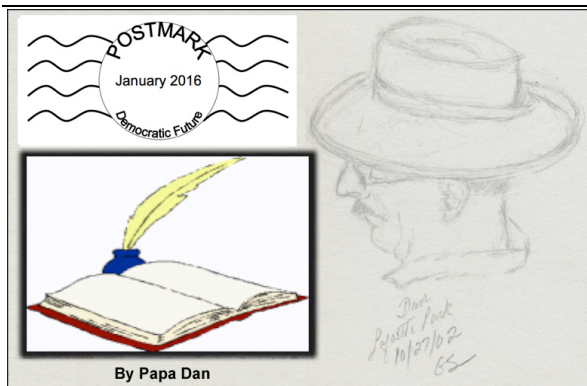


The Democratic Future, 2005 & 2016

By Dan Sapone



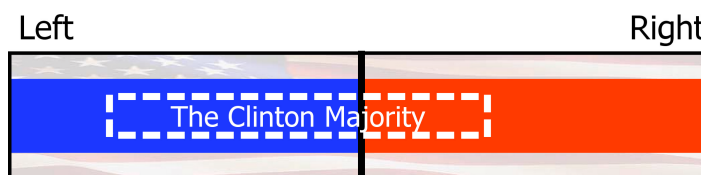
“The choice is fairly simple. It is a choice between leading and following.”

— Dan Sapone
January 1, 2005

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 During the current early-primary political season, as I listen to the analyses of our current crop of pundits and campaign strategists, I have the feeling that I have heard some of it before. One of the key questions on the table, particularly regarding the future of the Democratic Party is this: which part of the political spectrum should the successful candidate “claim” as the basis for a path to victory. In simplistic terms, that spectrum spans a wide swath of territory from the “liberalism” of the far left to the “conservatism” of the far right. Since the middle of the 20th century, conventional political wisdom in America has held that either side of that divide must rely on some portion of the political center to supplement their own political base to win a national election. While our short-term focus here in the early weeks of 2016 is on the race for the nomination, that question applies directly to the general election in November. So, where have I heard this discussion before? Ironically it was in a column I wrote for the “*New Century Muse*” (no longer with us) on January 1, 2005 entitled “Finding Their Place: What Next for the Democratic Party?” [\[Democratic Future 2004.pdf\]](#)

The Democratic Party faced this same choice after the 2004 election. In 2005, I wrote:

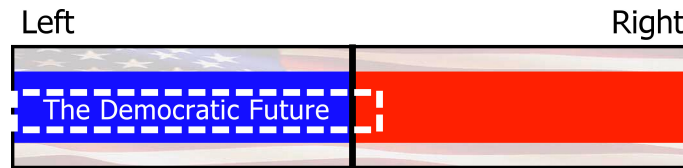
"In 1992, Bill Clinton and his strategists made the judgment that the country had moved to the right during the 12-year Reagan/Bush presidencies. Along with that judgment came the determination that Democrats could not win an election with a majority based on the left end of the political spectrum. So, to win a national campaign, Clinton reasoned that a majority must be found that includes as much of the center of the political spectrum as possible. So, the campaign strategy, and the subsequent election results, looked something like this.



This was an effective strategy in that it successfully isolated Republican candidates

— George H.W. Bush in 1992 and the Bob Dole in 1996 — on the extreme right AND stranded the extreme left with nowhere to turn except Clinton (with the unpalatable third choice of Ross Perot). The good news for Democrats was that this strategy yielded a two-term Democratic presidency. The bad news was that it planted the seeds of the polarization we are experiencing today."

That column from eleven years ago explained the details of how that happened. The most notable detail is that Clinton was beating Republicans on some of their own issues, attracting voters from that "Center." What's relevant today is that the "Center" that propelled Bill Clinton to two presidential terms in the 90s, does not exist today. Polls and recent experience tell us that there are not significant numbers of voters of either party who will cross the divide and vote for candidates of the other. So, in today's polarized electorate, the winning strategy for any Democratic candidate for president in 2016 must look like the one predicted back in January of 2005. It will have to look like this:



To win both the Democratic nomination and the general election in 2016, any Democratic candidate must follow that old 2005 advice:

The choice is fairly simple. It is a choice between leading and following. Their task is to persuade a significant portion of the American people to follow Democratic leadership back to the left. In spite of the Clinton success of the 90s, a dispassionate analysis of that strategy was that it was a strategy to follow the perceived trend in the American electorate to the right. It was not a strategy to lead anyone. If Democrats are going to regain a position of influence in the U.S. government, they must stand up for their traditional core values and persuade Americans that those values are important. They must lead.

So, howya-gonna-do-that? Once again, let's take a look back to 2005:

"Educating America"

The central task is one of basic education. It does not take a terribly long memory to recall that, in the 1960s and 70s, the phrase "Christian moral values" meant basically one thing — in popular culture as well as in churches and synagogues: it meant taking care of the poor. Remember that Lyndon Johnson, before he got us mired in the Vietnam War, was a hugely popular and powerful Senator and President because he succeeded in painting the image of Republicans as uncaring toward poor and minority Americans. His Civil Rights Act and his "Great Society" legislation passed a reluctant Congress in part because it was portrayed from pulpits across American as the Christian and moral thing to do.

So, what changed? The neo-conservative movement in America embarked on a brilliantly orchestrated and hugely successful "educational" campaign to redefine morality in America. The new definition of "Christian moral values" focuses on

whether you support abortion rights and with whom you have sex. That definition, and the rhetoric that accompanies it, specifically excludes the question of taking care of the poor.

This re-definition was not difficult to do — and liberals helped. During America's "neo-conservative re-education," those who supported abortion rights failed to articulate their "Pro Choice" position as supporting poor, largely minority, pregnant teenagers who had no choices but back-alley illegal abortions and poverty. Anti-abortionists successfully labeled liberals who supported abortions as "baby killers."

Campaign rhetoric and marketing surrounding gay and lesbian rights followed a similar path. Liberals failed to promote the idea that the right to marry is a basic building block of mainstream society. They could have argued that same-sex marriage would bring homosexuals into the mainstream of American life with all of the stabilizing forces and behaviors that strengthen communities. Instead, they allowed Republicans to associate their cause with particular sexual behaviors.

On economic issues, both religious and Democratic leaders simply failed to reinforce the connection between economic disparity and moral values, between the Bible and the Federal budget, and between tax policies and the widening gap between rich and poor. Republicans were free to define morality narrowly focused on marriage and abortion and ignore the morality of their economic policies."

That's what happened to get us where we are today. So, just as it was true in 2005, it is true today that the Democratic Party has work to do. If they are going to elect a president, whether it be a Bernie or a Hillary, and carry enough Democrats into the House and the Senate to actually implement progressive policies, they must lead. They will have to follow advice they were given eleven years ago:

"[It] must stand up for the distinctly American moral values that Americans have supported throughout their history and they must lead in the direction of basic human rights and economic justice. People will follow, Democrats and "Greens" alike, if Democrats do the hard educational work of reminding Americans who they are and what moral values have always meant to them."

The bad news is that it may take awhile. The worse news is that here isn't time. There is much at stake in 2016 – from the fate of the shrinking middle class to the long-fought-for human rights that the Supreme Court will certainly be called on to defend during the coming presidential term — and there is little doubt that the next president will shape the nature of that court for a generation. I hope that the candidates will exhibit the wisdom to promote these distinctly American values and resist the temptation to attack each other on the specifics. They must not lose sight of the reality that *one of them* must be elected president. The future depends on it.



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Epilogue: Just as I finished writing this column about the future of the Democratic Party, I decided to write a parallel column outlining my view of the future of the Republican Party. Unfortunately, that same day, David Brooks (*New York Times* Op-Ed columnist and author) beat me to it. His column is found at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/opinion/time-for-a-republican-conspiracy.html>.

I couldn't have written it better myself. -- DRS