

Toward a Winning Platform for Building a US Progressive Majority

George W. Bush and his administration continue to prove that their view of government, their mode of political manipulation, and their incompetent crony governing is a national disgrace. We who feel that disgrace need to face this question: "What is the alternative?"

The Clintons, Gore, Kerry, and other centrist Democrats have attempted to build a winning coalition out of a wide spectrum of conflicting perspectives. Putting forth another loose coalition of this nature will result in more middle-of-the-road confusions, halfway answers, and weak-sounding proposals.

The challenge for genuine progressives is to agree on a clear, bold, truthful, easily communicated platform that can crystalize a majority of US citizens, a coalition that will be able and willing to govern the United States for the next 16 or 20 years. That platform needs to be simple and timely enough to tie in with the experience of a wide span of people. At the same time it needs to be far-reaching and forward-looking enough to win the full enthusiasm of its adherents, workers, candidates – and finally, the voters. With time and effort, a winning coalition can be built on the basis of plain truths told to confused voters and nonvoters in a convincing manner. What might be the main elements in such a platform?

Platform Item 1: Build a thoroughgoing democracy – one that emphasizes government of the people, by the people, and for the people over against government of the corporations, by the corporations, and for the corporations.

Platform Item 2: Favor a free-enterprise economy in which the economic players play by the rules set by democratic governments – by governing bodies that are willing to set fair, society and ecology affirming laws and referee the economic playing field fairly and firmly in complete independence from the economic players being refereed.

These obvious sounding statements imply huge changes from the current mode of operation by neoconservative Republicans, moderate Republicans, paleoconservatives, and centrist Democrats. These two platform elements are also rejected by many libertarians, left-wing ideologues, and anarchists. Some members of these latter groups want to do away with strong government of any sort.

But progressives will not win anything worth winning if they relinquish or water down these two items. The program of firmly refereeing the economic playing field by democratic governments must not be compromised to win centrist support or support from the far, far left. Commitment to these two platform items means finding a way to build a majority coalition out of populist Democrats, thoroughgoing progressives, some Greens, a few flexible conservatives and centrists, and a lot of nonvoters.

To build this majority we need to present a convincing case for these two platform items. We need to spell out government of the people, by the people, and for the people in a specific, real, and convincing fashion. We need to point out how destructive of democracy it is to pamper the business community. We need to point out in detail how bad it has been to allow the empowerment of an economic elite who assume that they and they alone should govern. We have to point out the scandalous behavior not only of Bush's administration, but also of moderate Republicans and centrist Democrats who sometimes say good things but basically go along with government of the corporations, by the corporations, and for the corporations.

Here are some of the components of a thoroughgoing Democracy: It means making voter fraud a serious crime that is vigorously prosecuted and severely punished. It means establishing public financing of political campaigns. It means putting in place instant-runoff voting in local, state, and national elections. Instant-runoff voting means that it takes more than fifty percent of the voters to choose a winning candidate. A runoff is accomplished by each voter voting for their first and second choices. Such a structure not only empowers third parties but also vastly improves the breadth of the debate.

Thoroughgoing democracy also means outlawing any kind of campaign gifts to politicians from economic institutions. It means outlawing business institutions from hiring government lobbyists. It also means outlawing business institutions from making donations to nonprofit corporations. It means putting corporations and other business institutions out of the public policy-making business altogether. Government policy in a democracy should be made by the people themselves, not by the economic institutions of the investor classes. The task of a corporation and every other business institution is to provide a product or service that people want to buy and to make a return to its investors. A business institution does not need to have or pretend to have some other purpose. Business profits should not be used to influence governments. If all business profits went directly to their investors and were taxed at that point, we would have a better system. Direct taxation of corporations can be phased out as taxes on investors are increased to take their place. Hidden gifts from governments to corporations should be eliminated; land, mineral rights, broadcast bands, and the like should be sold or rented to corporations at a fair market price. Bailouts and subsidies to critically needed corporations should be carefully chosen for reasons of broad social need, never to repay cronies. Also, when government is buying something from a corporation, strict multiple-bid rules should be used. In these and other ways corporations must be taken out of the business of politics and put in the business of doing honest business. The legal status of corporations also needs to be altered from that of a person. If necessary, the US constitution should be amended to make clear that a corporation is not a person. Also, corporations that are clearly and persistently criminal should be routinely relieved of their license of incorporation by the state that licensed them.

When a corporation is caught disobeying the law, the officers of that corporation who violated the law should be fined (or perhaps jailed), rather than fining the corporation itself. This would help prevent a corporation from counting their fines for illegal behavior as part of their normal business expenses. Similarly, any government official who receives gifts of any sort from a business institution should be investigated and prosecuted on charges of bribery.

All this and more is what full democracy means. We have to explain this to the people who want government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

When such democracy is in place, the economic playing field can be shaped in accord with the people's values and refereed by honest democratic governments. Until that is done, corruption, price gouging, externalizing business costs to taxpayers and the public, and devastating the environment are inevitable results. When the people are in charge of their governments, then all the following values can go into shaping the economic playing field: pure food and drug regulation, affordable health care, clean air, clean water, ecological care, a sensible energy program, a sensible transportation system, disaster relief, police protection, common defense, a sensible sale of weapons and other dangerous products, a livable minimum wage, relief for the impoverished, and much more. What the people want and deserve the people can get, if the people are in charge. But the people are currently deluded into allowing corporation-profit-making-at-all-costs to be the dynamic in charge of the course of human history.

Within the context of a fully operative democracy, the free market can function in an optimal fashion. The free market works best when it is democratically refereed. Corruption is minimized. Companies who obey the rules are not penalized for doing so. And rogue companies cannot hide their destructive actions behind the skirts of governmental protection. Clearly, the present planet-wide anarchy of corporate greed is not a wholesome arrangement. This is a truth that can be convincingly documented.

Platform Item 3: Make the healthy functioning of the entire planetary ecology first priority rather than subservient to the maximization of corporation profits.

Though ecology is listed third in this platform, it is actually first priority in this sense: if the natural planet is not functioning in an optimal fashion, no government or economy can function in an optimal fashion. Ecology is not a topic for wild-eyed extremists; it is the most conservative, basic, utterly necessary topic in this period of history. In earlier times the human footprint was not great enough to threaten the functioning of the entire planet. Now that has changed. The human species in its industrial civilization social mode has become a geological level force that is driving one of the six greatest extinction spasms in planetary history and posing a threat to the human species itself. If we follow platform items 1 and 2 and create a truly democratic government, it will become possible to give ecological issues the priority they deserve.

Here is how an ongoing, popular, democratic, ecological emphasis might be accomplished: in each local geographical region (bioregion) of the continent, have every mayor (or an appointee) of every city or town plus every county commissioner meet together once a year for a five-day period of time and lay out a detailed ecological plan for that region (bioregion) of earth geography. Ecological scientists would be present at these meetings as advisors. These plans would then be published for the public, and they would be consolidated in each state by a permanent commission that makes recommendations to the state legislature for appropriate laws. At the national level there could be a cabinet-level agency on ecology that consolidates all these local and state proposals and laws into appropriate legislation to be enacted by the congress. Though some information input from business institutions will be needed, direct policy influence from business institutions or their surrogate bodies upon any part of this democratic process should be strictly forbidden.

Platform Item 4: Create an energy policy that radically reduces the use of fossil fuels and fosters a mixture of energy sources that phases out petroleum use faster than petroleum supplies diminish.

Energy supply and energy use is an ecological and an economic problem of the greatest urgency. The existing energy policy focuses on keeping oil prices low by producing more oil. This policy is producing horrific consequences. The increasing carbon dioxide levels caused by fossil fuel burning results in a "global warming" that destabilizes climatic conditions, melts glaciers and permafrost, raises the ocean levels, intensifies the hurricanes that travel over hotter oceans, creates deserts, destroys coral reefs, and many other consequences, some of which are not yet known. The current policy of oil use refuses to respond adequately to this set of issues. The current policy also prevents making a timely transition from fossil fuels to solar, wind, and other sustainable sources. The longer we wait, the harder this will be. Furthermore, a seemingly endless supply of cheap oil discourages energy conservation. We have already burned one trillion barrels of the roughly two trillion barrels of oil believed to exist. The second half will be harder to extract and refine and more humans will be clamoring to use it. This means oil will become ever more expensive unless humans choose to use less of it. And most grievous of all, the current policy forces this nation into an economic war with China, India, Europe, and other

big oil users over control of the West Asian oil economies, where intense sectarian conflicts will surely continue for decades to come. The horror of the oil wars has only begun.

There is only one energy policy that makes sense in view of all these factors: *use less fossil fuels, especially oil and gas*. The most important ways of doing this are: (1) establish the overall laws and regulative agencies to encourage a rapid and massive free-market expansion for wind and solar energy supplies and (2) launch an equally massive tax-incentive and educational campaign for energy conservation. The high price of oil is due to a lack of alternatives, an economy that wastes energy, and a runaway demand for oil that is exceeding the rate of supply. The core problem is not price gouging by oil companies, though that may also be happening. The core problem is the attempt by governments and oil companies to keep oil prices inappropriately low and thus to defeat alternative energies. Rather than subsidizing oil companies, requesting faster production from West Asian nations, and dumping oil reserves on the market, governments should tax oil and gasoline at a higher rate. This would discourage the use of oil and thus promote conservation and the transition to sustainable energy sources.

Increasing oil taxes is a hard action for governments to take because lower-income citizens, already struggling to make ends meet, find that rising oil prices increases their cost of living. Rising gasoline and fuel oil prices hit struggling families in ways they cannot escape, plus everything that is transported by oil or made of oil rises in price. Here is a way to handle these consequences: provide an oil transition tax credit or stipend to the least wealthy citizens. (Wealthy citizens can afford the higher prices.) Such a stipend is already supplied in some states for high heating oil expenses. The income tax system could be used to provide this tax credit or a stipend for those who pay little or no income taxes. Martin Luther King Jr. in his last book *Where Do We Go From Here?* suggested a reverse income-tax stipend to end poverty. He claimed this would be a cheaper program than our current expensive system of building more jails, more housing projects, and other costs of poverty to the general society. Furthermore, a direct placement of money in the hands of the impoverished makes them customers, stimulates the economy, and creates wealth for everyone.

However strange this may seem to US citizens, governments should be working to raise the price of oil, not lower it. In London customers already pay \$5.79 a gallon for gasoline – in Amsterdam it is more than \$6.40. These higher prices are due to higher taxes. Only in the United States and a few other unenlightened countries is low energy prices considered good policy. US tax policies have coddled gasoline customers for decades with a cheap gasoline supply. This has encouraged US citizens to buy bigger gas-guzzling cars. Low gas and heating oil prices have encouraged the building of energy-wasteful homes and public buildings. Higher oil and gas prices will reverse these trends as well as release the rapid expansion of wind and solar energy production.

The key to a successful oil taxation policy is raising the price of oil gradually enough that the needed changes in energy use and production have time to gear in. The way people can get hurt the most is keeping oil prices low until those prices have to increase suddenly and rapidly. If we do nothing, gasoline prices will one day soar to \$10 a gallon. Paying \$5 dollars a gallon in the near term can mean not paying \$10 a gallon later. When wind, solar, and conservation kick in, the demand for oil and thus the price of oil can be held in check.

The US government currently spends an enormous amount of money on sustaining its cheap oil supply. A few years ago Sierra magazine published a report on the true price of gasoline including environmental, public health, national security, and other hidden (externalized) costs. The figure reported by Sierra was over \$14 a gallon. This report was made before the invasion of Iraq. Though often denied, a core reason for the invasion of

Iraq has been to protect US oil availability. Therefore, part of those billions we are spending in Iraq should be added to what we are actually paying for our gasoline. If we also count government spending for hurricane damage to oil facilities, we may be spending as much as \$20 a gallon for our gasoline. This is a lot of money that could be used to encourage conservation, wind, and solar as well as finance energy transition assistance for our least wealthy citizens. Even if all these figures are off by 50%, the truth of these statements still holds.

The overall energy policy of the US government also needs to shape the role of other sustainable energy sources. There are prospects for producing energy from bio-diesel fuels, small dams, and ocean tides. Research into still other energy sources needs to continue. Some will suggest that expanding the number of nuclear fission plants should be included in the energy mix, but most progressives support a strong stance against massive expansion of the nuclear sector – in fact, support the phasing out the nuclear energy plants we already have. Safety issues, waste storage issues, and terrorism vulnerabilities make nuclear energy plants a far more costly and dangerous presence than their benefit to the energy picture provides. If governments refuse to pay for their unique safety challenges and their waste storage, nuclear energy corporations would not be economically viable in competition with wind and solar.

In summary, solar and wind energy production and conservation are the key elements in a post-fossil-fuel economy. The current economy is so needlessly wasteful that conservation measures have enormous potential. And the rapid expansion of wind and solar energy sources is already technologically possible. The prospects for these alternative sources and for conservation need to be thoroughly spelled out in a massive educational campaign directed toward every citizen, investor, and government official.

Platform Item 5: Renounce a foreign policy that emphasizes being the world's only remaining superpower, militarily speaking, and create a foreign policy that builds consensus among a wide range of nations.

This policy includes reducing the overall US military outlay and ending wasteful and pugnacious programs such as the militarization of outer space. Nuclear disarmament and the management of nuclear materials remains a high priority. This policy also includes using our military power judiciously and in cooperation with a wide scope of international support. It means acting quickly to interrupt every genocide. It means being a servant of justice, rather than a protector of corporation greed and ecological devastation. It means fully supporting a more effective United Nations, an international court, disarmament and ecological treaties, and a progressive set of international monetary institutions.

This platform item includes using our economic power and military teams as a means of quickly handling natural catastrophes, population displacements, health pandemics, developmental bottlenecks, ecological emergencies, and so forth.

The unilateral actions of the Bush administration on matters of warfare, regime change, and the national reconstruction in Iraq have put this nation in deep deficit – not only a deep monetary deficit to China, Japan, and other nations, but also in a deep deficit of world influence, respect, and trust within the society of nations. We have paraded ourselves as an arrogant, independent, greedy, and bigoted nation – indeed, a “loose cannon.” Our performance in Iraq has also been a series of incompetent boondoggles that were worse than the boondoggles after hurricane Katrina. These incompetencies have further weakened the confidence of the billions of people with whom the people of the United States share this planet. Such injuries will take time and much skillful work to heal, but they do provide us with a clear directive for what *not* to do. Reading over the history of the

Bush administration can help us to clarify the many decades of foolishness by both Democratic and Republican administrations and to forge a policy of genuine compassion and wisdom toward building the types of international unity that can resolve the overwhelming problems that beset this planet.

Platform Item 6: Put in place laws and taxation programs that encourage economic, minority, and gender equity.

We must not perpetuate the extreme wealth differences currently permitted and even encouraged by our governmental system. Poverty can be and should be virtually eliminated. There will always be differences in wealth, but every citizen should be assured the means of providing themselves with food, shelter, health care, an excellent public education, time for the pursuit of happiness, and time for informed democratic participation. Minority oppression hurts everyone, not just the minority. Poverty is costly to every citizen, not just to the impoverished. As Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out, it would be cheaper to end poverty than to pay for its consequences.

Subtle attempts to keep women in their “place” also need to be completely eliminated. This includes opposing governmental control over anything growing inside a woman’s body. A fetus does not belong to its sire or to the state. It belongs to the woman in whose body it grows. She needs to be the sovereign power over her health, fetus health, fetus delivery, or fetus non-delivery. Laws about murder should not apply until a baby is a breathing member of the state. What a woman, her family, and her religious community believe about this complex set of ethical choices is no business whatsoever of the state. Here is one of the places where less government makes sense.

Platform Item 7: Fully support the US heritage of the separation of church and state.

A secular state is the only sort of state that can fairly protect all religious and therapeutic institutions. A secular state does not mean a state that is opposed to religion; it means a state that does not force (directly or indirectly) one set of religious views on the entire citizenry. A secular state makes laws by consensus of all the people, not in obedience to the principles of right and wrong found in any one tradition. This rule must not be compromised. Prayers should not be said at football games, in public classrooms, or even in the halls of government. Religious artifacts can be part of our general cultural museum, but must not be influential decor in our halls of government. Those who want to replace our secular government with some notion of “Christian nation” are in violation of one of the most sacred traditions of this nation. Indeed, the very idea of a Christian nation is unpatriotic and unChristian. The same could be said for a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation or a Hindu nation. The United States needs to lead the other nations of the world in secular governing.

To conclude, this is the type of focus needed by a majority-building progressive movement in the United States at this time in history:

- 1. Build a thoroughgoing democracy – one that emphasizes government of the people, by the people, and for the people instead of government of the corporations, by the corporations, and for the corporations.**
- 2. Favor a free-enterprise economy in which the economic players play by the rules set by democratic governments – by governing bodies that are willing to set fair, society and ecology affirming laws and referee the economic playing field fairly and firmly in complete independence from the economic players being refereed.**
- 3. Make the healthy functioning of the entire planetary ecology first priority rather than subservient to the maximization of corporation profits.**

4. Create an energy policy that radically reduces the use of fossil fuels and fosters a mixture of energy sources that phases out petroleum use faster than petroleum supplies diminish.
5. Renounce a foreign policy that emphasizes being the world's only remaining superpower, militarily speaking, and create a foreign policy that builds consensus among a wide range of nations.
6. Put in place laws and taxation programs that encourage economic, minority, and gender equity.
7. Fully support the US heritage of the separation of church and state.

These seven platform items can be augmented with a few other concerns and each can be further elaborated, but this list indicates the appropriate general direction. Can such a platform become the consensus of a winning majority of US citizens? The power of this platform is that it is straightforward and true to the actual challenges we face. In the end the truth wins. **If we water down this platform in order to find support among those who we think can't handle the unvarnished truth, we will lose in the final outcome.**

In the contemporary US political scene, if we support candidates who are enthusiastic, confident, and committed to this simple, straightforward platform, a voting majority can be built around them. Anyone who can't agree with at least six out of seven of these platform items is a drag on building a progressive constituency. If we are going to support bringing to completion these essential items, we cannot water them down to include a wider constituency. If it takes a decade to build a progressive constituency, that is what we need to do. This is a long-range transition. The urgency of the transition does not recommend entangling compromises with confusing and demotivating alliances. The era of corporation tyranny can only be shortened if we persistently call for support of a platform that is bold enough to build enthusiasm and commitment for a political direction that can actually complete the called-for transitions.

At the same time, if we find ourselves going into voting booths having to choose between a neocon who must not win, a centrist who might win, and a progressive who can't win, let us hold our noses and vote for the centrist. Until instant-runoff voting is established, we are going to have to live in this ruthlessly two-party arrangement and choose the lesser of two bad choices. This may seem tragic to our perfectionism, but it needs to be part of our long-range strategy to take steps in a progressive direction.

assembled by Gene Marshall
with help from many friends
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