

Their Pledge and Ours

By Michael Coblenz

Tag: Republicans co-opt the Pledge of Allegiance by proclaiming this to be "One Nation Under God." Democrats should counter that this nation stands for "Liberty and Justice for All."

The elections are still five months away, but Democrats are feeling pretty good about things. Republicans are down in the polls, and there is a nearly endless list of issues to use against them: Corruption scandals involving Jack Abramoff, Duke Cunningham and Tom Delay; The Bush Administration's mismanagement of the war in Iraq, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and Dick Cheney's shooting incident; The impending trial of "Scooter" Libby for divulging the name of a CIA agent in an act of political retribution; Concerns over the potential sale of American ports to a Dubai company; Concerns over warrantless wiretapping; and numerous problems with Bush's signature prescription drug benefit plan.

It's an embarrassment of riches for the Democrats, but there is a down side. Attacking Republicans on all of these things only feeds into the perception that Democrats are unfocused, and that there is no core set of beliefs upon which the party is based. This problem has dogged the Democrats for years, and was widely reported as part of the reason for John Kerry's loss in 2004. Many Democrats admit that there is a problem, and one of the things the Democratic Party did to fix it was to create a slogan. They came up with "Together, America can do better."

Unfortunately that is so vague as to be almost meaningless: Together with whom? Better than what?

While no one seems able to explain what Democrats believe, most people have no trouble describing what Republicans stand for: lower taxes, less government, traditional values.

Republicans have spent decades convincing Americans of this. But as government has grown under Bush and the fixation on tax cuts has created unprecedented budget deficits – lessening the effectiveness of the mantra of lower taxes and less government – the Republican Party has become increasingly fixated on "values." This goes hand in hand with the rise of Christian Conservatives in the Party.

Not long ago I saw a video clip from a meeting of the Conservative Political Action Committee in which the singer Pat Boone sang a musical rendition of the Pledge of Allegiance. The chorus was "One nation under God." That seems to sum up the current viewpoint of the Republican Party. In the old days, Main Street Republicans might actually have believed in lower taxes and limited government, but under Bush the religious conservatives have taken over and replaced limited government with "one nation under God."

Watching Pat Boone made me think about the Pledge of Allegiance. The phrase "one nation under God" was a recent addition, added during the Cold War when the United States was facing "Godless Communism." But there is much more to the pledge than that. The first part describes the pledge – stating an allegiance to the flag and to the nation for which it stands. The second

part describes certain characteristics of that nation – a republic, "Under God," indivisible. The final part sets out a few central values upon which that nation was founded – "with liberty and justice for all."

Republicans want this to be "One nation under God," but what about a nation that was (in the words of Abraham Lincoln) "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"? What about a nation that was, according to the Constitution, created to "establish justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty"?

If Republicans want to appropriate the phrase "One Nation Under God" as their banner, why don't the Democrats lay claim to "liberty and justice for all"?

The criticism of the Democratic Party is that it wants a thousand different things, but stands for nothing. Democrats want fair labor laws, effective environmental laws, affordable health care, equal access and opportunity regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation, and the list goes on and on. It is a thousand different things. But there seems to be some common themes: a desire for inclusion, a commitment to fairness, a sense of "justice for all."

Much has been made about the Red State / Blue State divide and the perception that Republicans connect with Middle America because they claim to be the champions of traditional values like marriage, patriotism, and religion. These traditions are undeniably important to the fabric of a

nation. Marriage is a vital social institution, but there is nothing uniquely American about it. The same holds true for religion and patriotism. The Constitution never mentions God, and the only references to religion are negative: a prohibition on religious qualifications for office (Art. VI), restriction on the establishment of religion and prohibition on interference with religious practices (Amend. I).

Democrats, in contrast, don't seem to connect in the Red States, not just because they are unfocused, but because the few things that they do focus – like an interest in minority rights – seem alien to Middle America. But Democrats want justice – social justice, economic justice, environmental justice – and what could be more American than that?

Conservative Christians claim that this is a Christian nation, but the point is debatable: while many colonists were religious, the Constitution is clearly a product of the Enlightenment. What is not debatable is that this nation was founded on a certain set of bedrock principles, principles championed in the Declaration of Independence, enumerated in the Constitution, and enshrined in the Pledge of Allegiance. Among those principles are justice, liberty, and equality.

Can justice appeal to Middle America? I think so. A commitment to justice is what makes this nation unique, and most Americans understand that.

I'm not suggesting that a new slogan will cure everything that ails the Democratic Party. But it can't hurt. So why not adopt a slogan that not only encapsulates what the party stands for, but also connects it to one of the nation's most enduring principles?

Republicans proudly proclaim that they represent "one nation under God." Why don't Democrats proudly proclaim that they want a nation that seeks to ensure "justice for all"?

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