

FRAMING THE FUTURE

**How Progressive Values
Can Win Elections
and Influence People**



**BERNIE
HORN**

an excerpt from

***Framing the Future:
How Progressive Values Can Win Elections
And Influence People***

by Bernie Horn

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Preface

Work-booted, buzz-cut farmer Jon Tester seems an unlikely hero for progressive America. But on November 7, 2006, he delivered the United States Senate back into the arms of a Democratic majority by defeating an eighteen-year incumbent to become the junior senator from Montana. Montana, for heaven's sake!

This is a state where conservatives outnumber liberals 40 to 15 percent and where, in 2004, President Bush defeated Senator Kerry by 59 to 39 percent. Yet Tester ran on a platform that harshly criticized the war in Iraq, urged the repeal of the USA Patriot Act, opposed Bush's tax cuts, defended abortion rights, supported stem cell research and a higher minimum wage, and condemned any constitutional amendment that would ban flag burning or same-sex marriage. In other words, Jon was a progressive without apology or obfuscation. In Montana.

There's something about the way he speaks to voters. It's hard to put your finger on it because it's not just the words he uses. There's his confident tone of voice, his open posture—and of course—his retro haircut. But consider this: when attacked for criticizing the USA Patriot Act, Jon replied:

Let me be clear, I don't want to weaken the Patriot Act, I want to repeal it. . . . What it does is it takes away your freedoms. This country was based on freedom. Hundreds of thousands of Americans

have fought and died for our freedoms. Take away our freedoms and the terrorists will have won.

Jon Tester makes himself clear. He demonstrates strong principles and a vision of how things should be. Voters not only know what he stands for today, they feel confident they know what he'll stand for tomorrow. In short, U.S. Senator Jon Tester uses progressive values to frame the future.



Keith Ellison is one of a kind. In 2006, he became the first Muslim in history to be elected to the United States Congress. Although he ran in a reliably Democratic district, his campaign was anything but run of the mill.

Right-wingers attacked Keith's religion and questioned his patriotism. Even after he won the election, the host of a CNN talk show confronted him on national television, saying, "prove to me that you are not working with our enemies."

Shortly thereafter, both a right-wing radio host and a Virginia Congressman excoriated Keith because, they said, he was going to take the oath of office with his hand over the Koran instead of a Christian Bible.

Keith Ellison could have argued the facts—pointing out, for example, that members of Congress take the official oath of office without any book whatsoever. Christian Bibles are often used for reenactment photo ops afterwards, but some representatives have used a Jewish Bible or a Book of Mormon. Instead, he said this:

Maybe it's a beautiful thing that all faiths, all colors, all cultures can come to America and swear to uphold one constitution. Maybe that's a strength, maybe that's something we should celebrate, maybe that's something that doesn't happen elsewhere on the globe.

When challenged, Keith seizes the moral high ground. He confidently lays out his principles, his vision for America. It's hard not to like him, even if you disagree. Congressman Keith Ellison uses progressive values to frame the future.



At least *framing the future* is how we describe it at the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), where I serve as senior director for policy and communications. Both Jon and Keith are Flemming Fellows, our shorthand way of saying that they are alumni of CPA's Arthur Flemming Leadership Institute, which has pioneered *values-based leadership*.

Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona and Congressman Ron Klein of Florida, who in 2006 fought tough battles to win seats previously held by conservative Republicans, are Flemming Fellows. So are Congressman Kendrick Meek of Florida, Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida, and Congresswoman Grace Napolitano of California. Since 1994, more than four hundred state senators and state representatives—Democrats and Republicans from all fifty states—have graduated from the Flemming Institute, learning how to use values to frame progressive public policy. In recent years, we at CPA have also taught these techniques to hundreds of legislators, candidates, and activists outside the Flemming program.

Framing the future works. Every year, Flemming Fellows win a disproportionately large share of the progressive victories in the states. In fact, since the great leap backward of 2001, as one policy disaster after another was spawned in our nation's capital, Flemming Fellows and their allies made significant gains in state capitals all over the nation. These legislators have been the vanguard of the progressive movement, proposing and enacting some of America's most far-reaching, innovative measures—expanding health care coverage, lowering prescription drug prices, raising the minimum wage, banning discrimination against gay, lesbian, and transgender Americans, mandating the use of cleaner energy sources, strengthening unemployment insurance, guaranteeing access to emergency contraception, ending racial profiling, stopping identity theft, and the list goes on.

The purpose of this book is to show you—an activist, advocate, campaigner, candidate, or political observer—how to use this same approach to persuade others.

It's an approach that's both consistent with the advice of Dale Carnegie's classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and informed by the work of Susan Bales at the FrameWorks Institute. FrameWorks applies

conclusions from decades of scholarly research in the social and cognitive sciences to contemporary message development, and unlike some other progressive framers, it uses focus groups and polling to test its recommended language. (The Frameworks website—frameworksinstitute.org—offers message framing reports on early childhood development, health care reform, gender equity, global interdependence, and more.)

This book is also backed up by a lot of on-the-ground research. CPA executive director Tim McFeeley and I have presented message framing workshops all over the country, allowing me to get feedback from hundreds of battle-hardened lawmakers, candidates, campaign managers, and volunteers. I also conducted an electronic survey to get advice from hundreds of political insiders.

Finally, this book is informed by a groundbreaking, nationwide survey commissioned by the Center for Policy Alternatives and authored by one of America's top pollsters, Celinda Lake, president of Lake Research Partners. This poll had two distinctive features. First, it included a huge oversample of *persuadable* voters, which allowed Lake Research to zero in on their thinking. As Celinda puts it, "These are the voters that determine who wins close elections." Second, it was fielded in the days immediately after the 2006 election. As a result, the respondents are people who *actually* voted, not people who claimed ahead of time—sometimes erroneously—that they were *going* to vote. Most important, these voters are telling us what they thought and felt after absorbing the full force of the campaign ads and news coverage of a major national election. The timing makes this poll special—we have the chance to capture these kinds of voter attitudes only once every two years.

In short, *Framing the Future* is not an academic or theoretical book, even though Chapter 1 suggests a political philosophy. Rather, it is designed and intended to give you proven, practical linguistic tools to win the next election, and to keep on winning.

Here's what to expect. The introduction, "The Emerging Progressive Majority," briefly lays out the opportunity facing progressives in the coming years. The rest of the book is divided into three parts. Part One, "Our

Moment in History,” presents a new way to explain what progressives stand for and why this framework succeeds. Chapter 1, “What We Believe,” describes the overall progressive philosophy—“freedom, opportunity, and security for all”—and what each of those concepts means in a progressive world. Chapter 2, “What’s Holding Us Back?” suggests that progressives have been hampered by an inability to explain what principles they stand for. Chapter 3, “The Winning Message,” presents proof—in the form of polling data—that the proposed philosophy works. In fact, it is the only progressive message that attracts enough persuadable voters to defeat the generic conservative message (lower taxes, smaller government, strong military, and family values).

Part Two, “The Mechanics of Persuasion,” shifts gears from long-term philosophy to the day-to-day job of political persuasion. Chapter 4, “Targeting the Persuadables,” explains why our language must be tailored to appeal to a particular slice of undecided Americans and uses polling data to take you inside the heads of these voters for a look at their political beliefs. Chapter 5, “How Framing Works,” lays out the concepts of message framing in a user-friendly way for grassroots advocates and activists. Chapter 6, “How Values Work,” describes progressive values—each of which is a powerful message frame—and again provides polling results that show which values are the most persuasive.

Part Three, “The Progressive Toolbox,” attaches the philosophy to the mechanics, offering you specific how-to examples for reframing political issues and winning the debate. Chapter 7, “Freedom, Opportunity, Security,” demonstrates how to apply our progressive values to various issues. The final chapters list specific words and phrases to use and to avoid. Chapter 8 discusses terms that describe our philosophy and ourselves, Chapter 9 presents words that help you talk about government and government processes (taxes, regulation, and social services), Chapter 10 makes the case for the principle of “fair markets” when talking about the economy, and Chapter 11 suggests persuasive language on a wide range of hot-button issues. The concluding chapter, “An Action Plan for Activists,” returns us to the Flemming Fellows, reminds us how they win by framing

the future, proposes that the grassroots and netroots can rescue the progressive movement, and shows how that can be done.

You may think of this as a partisan battle. But I know progressive Republicans who are fighting for the soul of their party, and I know right-wing Democrats who are trying to steer their party down the wrong road. Yes, progressive Republicans are nearly extinct at the federal level, but down at the grassroots, you'll find plenty of progressives in both parties. This book is for Americans of all stripes.

You may think that in today's world the only important battles are over federal policy. But there are about half a million elected officials in states, cities, and counties who decide some of our nation's most critical issues. Moreover, change at the national level becomes much more likely after states and localities act as *laboratories of democracy*, proving the practicality and effectiveness of new solutions. This book is for anyone interested in federal, state, or local policies and causes.

You may think this book is just for progressives. In truth, I often use the term *we* to mean *we progressives*—as in “we believe this,” “we say that.” But even if you don't consider yourself a progressive, please read on. By the end of the first chapter, I hope you'll see yourself as one of “us.”

Now, let *us* roll up *our* sleeves and get to work. With a clearer understanding of progressive principles and values—and a whole lot more legwork—we can win in 2008, 2010 and beyond. We can persuade our federal, state, and local governments to represent and defend the interests of all. And the promise of America—our common vision for a nation of peace and justice—may finally be fulfilled.

INTRODUCTION

The Emerging Progressive Majority

Most Americans are progressive on most issues. By margins of at least two to one, our fellow citizens believe corporations and upper-income people are paying too little in federal taxes; oppose repealing the federal estate tax; favor quality, affordable health care for all “even if it means raising your taxes”; support the idea that the federal Medicare program should negotiate prescription drug prices directly with pharmaceutical companies; want federal action to address global warming; would require auto manufacturers to make cars more energy efficient; say laws covering the sale of handguns should be more strict; think labor unions are necessary to protect workers; believe that gays and lesbians should be able to serve openly in the military; and do not want the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

That’s the good news. Here’s the bad. Most Americans also support traditional conservative principles—limited government, lower taxes, free markets, and personal responsibility. (You’ll see the polling data in Chapter 4.)

In other words, a large group of Americans favor both progressive policy and conservative philosophy. As a result, they may side with either progressives or conservatives, *depending on how a political question is framed*. These Americans are usually called *independents*, *undecideds*, *uncommitteds*, *swing voters*, or *ticket-splitters*. But in this book, they’re called *persuadables*, because that’s the important thing about them—they’re not part of

the progressive/Democratic or conservative/Republican base; they can be persuaded to join either side.

You may well be asking, if they're so darn persuadable, why have they sided with conservatives so often? During the past four decades, we've suffered through twenty-eight years of Republican presidents and "enjoyed" only twelve years with Democratic presidents. From 1994 to 2006, we had a U.S. House of Representatives that was not only controlled by Republicans, but dominated by right-wing extremists. During the same period, the U.S. Senate was only a little less reactionary. Why? Unlike partisans, persuadable voters are usually more interested in a candidate's philosophy than her list of policy positions.

The Solution

This is not a battle that can be won with a single strategy, a silver bullet. But progressives can go a long way toward altering the balance of power if we agree on and espouse an attractive progressive philosophy. Then voters would favor both our policies and our principles.

This book suggests such a philosophy. The short version is "freedom, opportunity, and security for all." Chapter 1 explains each of these three concepts, and Chapter 3 lays out the results of a nationwide poll which found that "freedom, opportunity and security for all" is enormously popular among both persuadables and partisans. Most important, it is the only progressive message that outpolls the generic conservative philosophy.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that progressives change their positions on public policy. I am saying that there are specific words that represent progressive values, that these values fit together into a coherent vision of a progressive America, and that by using these values, we can communicate our principles in a way that persuadable voters will understand and appreciate. In short, we need to use values to describe our vision—that's *framing the future*.

In politics, framing is employed in three ways. An issue can be framed, the way right-wingers have presented the federal estate tax as the "death tax." A political campaign can be framed, the way Clinton strategists presented the 1992 presidential race as a question of "the economy, stupid."

Or a whole political philosophy can be framed, the way conservatism has been presented as the ideology of “small government, lower taxes, strong military, and moral values.”

Freedom, opportunity, and security can be used in all three situations. It can help progressive candidates defeat their conservative counterparts, help progressive advocates enact legislation, and help rank-and-file progressives win day-to-day arguments.

It’s an Emergency!

There’s no doubt that George W. Bush’s administration has been a catastrophe, and that historians will one day rank him as one of our nation’s very worst presidents. That’s why the next few elections are so critical—the very soul of America hangs in the balance. We’ve got to take back America, and soon, before solutions to national and global problems slip beyond our reach.

But winning elections in the coming years won’t be easy. Despite progressive victories in 2006, the next few elections will be razor close. You can tell by looking at the last few.

In 2000, Vice President Al Gore held all the trump cards. He could claim responsibility for eight years of peace and prosperity. He was smart and flush with accomplishments. His opponent was the tongue-tied son of an unpopular former president. And yet Al Gore won only a bare majority of votes and ultimately lost the election. But if the ballots of just 538 Florida voters who intended to vote for Gore had been counted—Al Gore would have been elected.

In 2004, Senator John Kerry was a terrible standard-bearer. He was as cold as a dead log in the snow. His campaign was as limp as a wet paper napkin. George Bush had all the powers of incumbency, all the money of America’s super-rich, all the party discipline of an authoritarian-style regime—in wartime! And yet, Kerry almost won. If just 59,301 Ohioans had been persuaded to vote for Kerry instead of Bush—less than 0.05 percent of the Americans who voted that day—John Kerry would have been elected.

In 2006, Democrats won control of the United States Senate based on a squeaker in Montana. If a mere 1,782 Montana voters had supported

Conrad Burns instead of Jon Tester, the Senate would have remained in GOP hands. The House contest wasn't quite as close. Still, Republicans would have maintained control if they had won just sixteen more seats. Looking at the closest races, if fewer than 50,000 well-placed voters had switched their support from the Democratic to the Republican candidates, Dennis Hastert would still be Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

And think about what it took for voters to finally embrace the Democrats in 2006: a wildly unpopular president prosecuting a wildly unpopular war; monumental deficits and debt; attempts to destroy bedrock programs like Social Security; corruption on a grand scale (House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, Rep. Duke Cunningham, Rep. Bob Ney, and the scandal ignited by lobbyist Jack Abramoff involving Congress, the White House, and Christian conservative Ralph Reed). And even with all that, would Democrats have won if not for the sexual appetites of Congressman Mark Foley?

Here's some advice for progressives: don't count on another sex scandal. We get that lucky only once. We're going to have to win the next election the old-fashioned way—by persuading American voters that progressives have better ideas. Now—what ideas?

PART ONE

Our Moment in History

CHAPTER I

What We Believe

*Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.*

In this poem, Langston Hughes famously evokes the spirit of the American dream. It is our soaring common vision—a portrait of an America without tyranny, without injustice.

*Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.*

The American dream is not about a society where government secures the greatest good for the greatest number. Our dream is personal. It's about a poor child delivering newspapers and one day ending up as the publisher. It's about an unskilled worker attending night school and becoming a successful manager. It's about individuals and families practicing their religion without interference, getting ahead through hard work, and being able to retire in security and comfort.

The American dream is a prayer, a vision, a fervent hope that every individual in our nation may be given a fair chance to build a successful life. This deeply held, deeply felt common vision for our nation is both about money—individuals and their families getting ahead, and about self-determination—individuals and their families deciding what to think and how to live. Our dream celebrates the individual.

“Our culture is very, very individualistic,” explains pollster Celinda Lake. “Even when people think collectively, they are thinking of a collection of individuals.” When faced with a proposed government policy, “People look for themselves in the proposal. People want to know what the proposal will do for me and to me.”

American individualism goes way back. If you took political science in college, you may recall that Alexis de Tocqueville, observing the America of 1831, was impressed (but not favorably) by our individualism. Even earlier, Benjamin Franklin—the quintessential self-made man—reflected the thinking of his era, “The U.S. Constitution doesn’t guarantee happiness, only the pursuit of it. You have to catch up with it yourself.” Thomas Jefferson initially made individualism an explicit part of the Declaration of Independence. His first draft stated that “all men are created equal and independent.” The founding fathers’ dedication to individualism led them to make the Bill of Rights a centerpiece of American government. And throughout the history of our nation, despite great hardships, immigrants traveled here (those who came voluntarily), settlers moved across the plains, and farmers migrated to cities, all to find a better life for themselves and their families. America has been shaped by this common quest of individual Americans.

Pollster Daniel Yankelovich has been tracking American individualism for decades. He finds that “the 1960s ushered in a radical extension of individualism, broadening it from the political domain to personal life styles. By the 1980s the ethos of expressive individualism had grown into a national preoccupation.” In short, over the past forty years individualism has become an even stronger force.

Individualism is our nation’s greatest strength and its greatest weakness. It drives innovation and progress, but it also consigns millions of

Americans to lives spent in poverty. In fact, “Let America Be America Again” is primarily about workers in the fields, the mines, and the factories whose American dreams were crushed. The system doesn’t work for every individual because of our national culture of competition.

Competition is the very bedrock of our governmental, economic, and social systems. Elections and court cases are competitions. School and college are competitions. Our economy is a complex and gigantic competition. Even our ideas of style—attractive clothes, jewelry, furniture, houses—are based on how they compare with others. Obviously, where there is competition there are both winners and losers.

My point is, we can’t force a communalistic philosophy on an individualistic nation. Let me be clear. The progressive-liberal-Democratic base of voters would gladly accept and espouse a communitarian philosophy. I, too, wish that American culture were more oriented toward altruism and community. But it isn’t. A realistic progressive philosophy is one that accepts our national culture of individualism and competition and—nevertheless—seeks to make the American dream accessible to all. How can we envision such a philosophy?

Balance Is Justice

Imagine a balance scale—the old-fashioned kind with two pans, one suspended from each end of a bar. It’s the kind of scale that symbolizes equal justice under law. In a progressive world, the role of government is to help balance the scale when powerful individuals or organizations compete against weaker ones. Government should function as a counterweight on the scale of justice. The greater the disparity of power between competing interests, the greater weight the government must provide to the weaker side.

It is not government’s job to ensure that everyone wins every competition—that would be a logical impossibility. Instead, government must ensure that, whenever possible, competition is both fair and humane. In other words, justice is the purpose of government, and in an individualistic society, balance is the means of achieving justice.

A system in balance rewards hard work, efficiency, and innovation—which benefit all of society, and discourages crime, corruption, and

schemes to game the system—which rob all of society. As a practical matter, despite all efforts, our system will never be perfectly in balance. Justice is a journey not a destination. But we can switch this mighty country onto the right track and open up the throttle to increase its speed.

Isn't balance an awfully broad principle? How do we apply it?

Let's break down public policy into three situations, where: (1) government has no proper role; (2) government acts as a referee; and (3) government acts as a protector.

Freedom

Where government has no proper role, because public action would violate individual rights, progressive policy should be based on freedom. By *freedom*, I mean the absence of legal interference with our fundamental rights—freedom of speech, religion, and association; the right to privacy; the rights of the accused; and the right of all citizens to vote. Compared to an individual, government wields tremendous power, so a progressive policy adds great weight—in the form of strong legal rights—to the individual's side of the scale. For example, freedom of speech is absolutely sacrosanct unless it immediately and directly puts others in danger—"falsely shouting fire in a theater" as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes put it.

Freedom should be fairly easy to understand—it's a defense of our basic constitutional rights and civil liberties. I include the right to vote because it should be as sacred as any constitutional right. The very definition of *democracy*—rule by the people—requires the unrestricted right to vote. So laws that keep American citizens from casting ballots should be eliminated on the grounds that they violate our most fundamental democratic freedom.

I very intentionally adopt a limited definition of freedom, often called "negative freedom." Why? Because a limited definition keeps the word from becoming meaningless.

Freedom is the cornerstone of America's value system. For two centuries, America has been defined by its commitment to freedom. One poll found that Americans believe—by a margin of 73 to 15 percent—that *freedom* is more important than *equality*. But because it's so popular, *freedom*

is the most misused of all political terms. The abuse of the word *freedom* is nothing new. Here's the chorus of the pro-Union Civil War song, "Battle Cry of Freedom":

*The Union forever! Hurrah, boys, hurrah!
Down with the traitors, up with the stars;
While we rally 'round the flag, boys, rally once again,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom!*

The song was so popular, Confederates created their own "Battle Cry of Freedom," which goes:

*Our Dixie forever! She's never at a loss!
Down with the eagle and up with the cross!
We'll rally 'round the bonny flag, we'll rally once again,
Shout, shout the battle cry of freedom!*

Think about that. Almost four score and seven years before George Orwell described Newspeak, the Confederacy was using the word *freedom* to defend slavery. Unfortunately, things aren't much better today.

Neoconservatives have incessantly proclaimed to Americans that both the war in Iraq and the "war on terror" are in defense of our freedom. Don't believe it. Our freedom is not in jeopardy—neither the Iraqis nor al-Qaeda are attempting to invade America and control our government. U.S. military and police actions might be said to protect our security, but not our freedom. So don't use the word *freedom* when discussing terrorism or Iraq—it just provides a false justification for war.

Similarly, conservatives equate freedom with capitalism. Don't believe it. Our nation's market economy is not free from government control—actually, it is dominated by government. Markets are based on a dense web of laws enforced by multiple layers of federal, state, and local agencies. Businesses are not free to sell diseased meat, make insider stock trades, pollute our air and water, or discriminate on the basis of race, gender, or ethnicity. So don't be fooled by the terms *free market*, *free enterprise*, or *free trade*, because they all support right-wing policies.

Most astonishing, I think, is the way religious extremists use the word *freedom* to mean the very opposite. They argue that freedom gives them the right to use the power of government to impose their religious views on the rest of us. When they pressure school boards to mandate the teaching of intelligent design in schools, when they erect monuments to the Ten Commandments in courthouses, when they work to ban all abortions, when they seek to promote prayer in public schools, right-wingers assert it's an exercise in religious freedom. Please, don't believe it. Freedom is the absence of government intervention.

When defined too broadly, freedom becomes an empty platitude that can be wielded as a bludgeon to pummel any side of any political argument. My freedom to operate a monopoly tramples on your freedom to buy cheaper products. My freedom to drive an unsafe vehicle tramples on your freedom to travel the same roads in safety. My freedom to smoke in a bar tramples on your freedom to breathe clean air. "Freedom to . . ." and "freedom from . . ." gets us nowhere.

Besides, progressives have had plenty of opportunities in the past few years to rally for freedom solely in defense of individual rights. To name just a few:

- When the National Security Agency conducts warrantless eavesdropping on the phone calls and e-mails of innocent Americans, it's a violation of our freedom.
- When the FBI's TALON database shows that the government has been spying on peaceful domestic groups, including Quakers, the Campus Antiwar Network, and Veterans for Peace, it's a violation of our freedom.
- When the Pentagon and the CIA, although barred by law from domestic spying, nevertheless use national security letters to pry into the lives of Americans, it's a violation of our freedom.
- When the federal government arrests an American citizen, Jose Padilla, on American soil and holds him for years without the most basic rights afforded the accused, keeping him in almost complete isolation and preventing him even from talking to a

lawyer during his first twenty-one months in a military prison, it's a violation of our freedom.

- When, just forty-five days after the September 11 attacks, with almost no debate, Congress approves the USA Patriot Act, broadly increasing government power to search medical, tax, and even library records without probable cause, and to break into homes to conduct secret searches, it's a violation of our freedom.

After years of warrantless wiretapping, illegal imprisonments, and torture, we should all be saying the F-word with regularity. No, no, I mean *freedom*. Why do progressives seem allergic to this word? Why aren't we *shouting the battle cry of freedom*?

Maybe we're afraid. In a democracy, the causes for which freedom is most necessary are almost by definition unpopular. It's unpopular to defend the rights of criminals. It seems politically risky to challenge something named the Patriot Act. Whenever free speech needs to be protected, it is almost certainly unpopular speech—because popular speech isn't attacked. It's the idea of freedom itself that is popular. That's why we need to talk about freedom! If Jon Tester can rail against the Patriot Act in Montana, we can do it in the other forty-nine states.

Or maybe we look askance at the word because we feel it's been co-opted by the right wing—like wearing little American flag pins. In a meeting of big-shot progressive leaders held at a big-league progressive think tank in Washington, D.C., I talked about the importance of saying the word *freedom*. The room collectively gagged. One person said it can't be done; another cracked a joke; a third said freedom is something we worked for in the 1960s. Geez Louise!

Dear friends, we have a solemn responsibility to fiercely guard our constitutional and human rights to freedom. We must use freedom as our bully pulpit when arguing that government is out of control. We must point out that freedom is one of our most cherished values. We must remind Americans that Clarence Darrow was right when he said, "You can protect your liberties in this world only by protecting the other man's freedom. You can be free only if I am free."

Opportunity

Where government acts as a referee between private, unequal interests, progressive policy should be based on opportunity. By *opportunity*, I mean a level playing field in social and economic affairs—fair dealings between the powerful and the less powerful, the elimination of discrimination, and a quality education for all. Competing interests usually hold unequal power, so progressive policy adds weight—guarantees of specific protections—to the weaker interest. For example, unskilled low-wage workers have no leverage to bargain for higher pay. That’s why it is up to the government to impose a reasonable minimum wage. Quite simply, when social and market forces do not naturally promote equal opportunity, government must step in.

Opportunity means, more than anything, a fair marketplace. Although progressives tend to stress the rights of consumers and employees against businesses, opportunity also means fairness between businesses—especially helping small enterprises against large ones—and fairness for stockholders against corporate officers. Individual ambition, innovation, and effort—harnessed by the market system—are supposed to benefit society as a whole. But that can happen only when the competition is fair.

Opportunity also means fair economic transactions with the government. Government should use the scale of justice when determining taxes—obviously a sliding scale where those who have the least pay the least. And when it is the government that is making payments—for contracts, subsidies, public education, and the like—the principle of opportunity dictates that all individuals and companies should have equal access, unless the balance of justice demands a measure of affirmative action.

The concept of opportunity is an easy sell to progressives. Hubert Humphrey said, “The struggle for equal opportunity in America is the struggle for America’s soul.” Amen to that.

And yet, since the Reagan years, we’ve been losing that struggle:

- **Wage inequality has grown.** From 1979 to 2003, income for those in the bottom tenth of wage earners increased less than 1 percent, and millions actually earn less today than they did

then, adjusting for inflation. During that same period, salaries for Americans in the top tenth increased 27 percent.

- **The richest have gained the most.** Between 1996 and 2001, the richest 1 percent of Americans received 21.6 percent of all the gains in national income. CEO pay, especially, has skyrocketed. Today, the richest 10 percent of Americans own 71 percent of all the wealth—the top 1 percent own 33 percent of all assets.
- **Poverty has increased.** Although the number of Americans living in poverty steadily declined from 1993 to 2000, at least five million have fallen below the poverty line since George W. Bush took office.
- **Tax inequality has widened.** Over the course of ten years, 36 percent of the Bush tax cuts enacted in 2001 will benefit the richest 1 percent of Americans. Only 9 percent of the Bush tax cuts benefit the least affluent 40 percent of Americans.
- **Educational inequality has worsened.** Economic (and often racial) segregation of schools has increased, with schools in poorer areas having less money per student and paying less per teacher while dealing with larger class sizes, crumbling facilities, and inadequate equipment. Students who need more resources are given less.

Equal opportunity has taken it on the chin. The gauzy mist of the American dream is being blown away by a gust of savage reality. That's because the right wing opposes opportunity.

Conservatives have fought against ending discrimination, even though equal treatment is a precondition for equal opportunity. They don't even pretend to support equal opportunity in commerce; instead, conservatives lobby for government favors, no-bid contracts, and economic development giveaways. And right-wingers seek to destroy anything that allows individuals to stand up to larger economic forces, with labor unions, consumer protections, and antimonopoly policies under constant attack.

When conservatives say they want to address the problem of unequal opportunity, don't believe them. For example, health savings accounts (HSAs) are a cut-and-run approach to the health care crisis. Low- and middle-income Americans who are uninsured would receive almost no benefit from HSAs, and wider availability of HSAs would likely increase the overall number of uninsured by encouraging employers to drop insurance benefits. School vouchers represent the same cut-and-run approach. Vouchers are explicitly designed to "benefit" only a few children, although there is no credible evidence that those students wind up any better off than their peers. If officeholders wanted to promote opportunity for all, not a few, they would be directing the money to public, not private, schools. Conservative solutions are every-man-for-himself schemes—they're the opposite of opportunity for all.

Our mission is clear. It is to guarantee that all Americans are able to realize their goals through education, hard work, and fair pay. We must provide every person, not just the privileged few, with an equal opportunity to pursue a better life—equal access to the American dream.

Security

Where government acts to protect those who cannot reasonably protect themselves, including future generations, progressive policy should be based on security. By *security*, I mean protecting Americans from domestic criminals and foreign terrorists, of course, but also insuring the sick and the vulnerable, safeguarding the food we eat and products we use, and preserving our environment.

There is always a threat that larger or unexpected forces will attack any one of us, so progressive policy adds weight, in the form of government institutions and programs, that helps protect us from harm. For example, society has a responsibility to protect the elderly, the disabled, widows, and orphans and that's why an aptly named federal program has functioned in that role for more than a half-century—Social Security.

Security can be divided into three categories. First, government should secure our personal safety and health. That includes military and police protection, firefighting, health insurance, medical research, and protection

from impurities, pollutants, and hazardous waste. Second, government should perform its fiduciary duty to protect individuals who cannot reasonably protect themselves. That includes people who are poor, elderly, children, disabled, mentally ill—as well as future generations. Of course, the weaker the individual, the greater the protection required. Third, government should protect our common future as a nation. That includes building and maintaining infrastructure, using zoning powers to enhance quality of life, and safeguarding the environment.

Progressives support the concept of security, of course. But as I've traveled around the country giving workshops to progressives, I notice that we usually detour around the word when talking about law enforcement or national security. Like *freedom*, the word *security* seems to stick in the throats of progressives, primarily because we're worried we'll sound like conservatives.

Progressives want to jump immediately to collaboration and cooperation, rehabilitation and reeducation. That line of thinking is both destructive and unrealistic. Crime and terrorism are issues of security. Yes, we believe that our policies are the best means to ensure security, but we need to talk about the ends as well. The proper role of government in these matters, and the top priority of officeholders, is to provide security for our communities. To ignore security is to lose the argument.

And this is an argument we want to have. To quote the president, "Bring it on." Since 2001, conservatives have devastated national and individual security:

- The Bush Administration's doctrine of preemptive war, its utter contempt for our traditional allies, its violations of the Geneva Conventions, and its refusal to comply with important treaties have sacrificed America's moral standing in international affairs. As a result, our nation is now far less able to protect Americans and American interests worldwide.
- The right-wing attack on Social Security is just one small facet of a coordinated, cold-blooded plan to dismantle New Deal and Great Society programs that protect our health, our safety, and our environment.

- The profligate spending and massive tax breaks for the wealthy enacted by a conservative-controlled Congress greatly restrict our nation's ability to deal with threats to our security—from emergency preparedness to protection of the vulnerable in our communities.

In every important way, the right wing has made our country less secure. So let's keep the upper hand in this debate. Whether we're talking about Iraq or drug-related crime, progressives are for commonsense policies that will make Americans safer.

Now, allow me to back up for a minute. I said that government has a fiduciary duty to protect those who cannot reasonably protect themselves and that the weaker the individual, the greater the protection required. One way to define this duty is to recognize a distinction between the *deserving* and the *undeserving*. In the play *Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw revels in this distinction, with Alfred Doolittle (Eliza's father) insisting that he's "one of the undeserving poor. . . . I'm playing straight with you. I ain't pretending to be deserving. I'm undeserving; and I mean to go on being undeserving. I like it; and that's the truth."

By *undeserving*, Shaw means an able-bodied adult who refuses work. Conversely, children, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled *deserve* security. That's why government programs target them (although not always serving them effectively); they're deserving. Here's my point—the government owes security to the deserving, but it owes only opportunity to the able-bodied. Yes, I agree that the unemployed, the unfortunate, and others are deserving of help from their government. But come on, you agree that your cousin Mort should get his act together and find a job, don't you? There is always a line where government responsibility ends.

Finally, now that we've discussed both freedom and security, let me knock down a pernicious truism. My son was taught in high school civics that freedom and security are opposites—to get more of one we've got to give up some of the other. Baloney!

Sometimes the government takes action in the name of security, like the Iraq war—that has the effect of diminishing both freedom and security.

Sometimes the government says it is making us more secure but simply botches the job—for example, a poorly designed levee. Sometimes government lets a privileged minority—powerful economic interests—run roughshod over the majority. In that case, the powerful might be freer (using that word in its broadest sense), but the rest of us become less free.

Benjamin Franklin said, “They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” I say, those who believe that we need to sacrifice freedom for security don’t understand the realities of government. Indeed, defining freedom as the opposite of security renders both concepts utterly useless. Teachers and professors, please pull your heads out of the sand.

The All-American Philosophy

Now that you think about it, don’t the principles of freedom, opportunity, and security sound kind of familiar?

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

This famous line from the Declaration of Independence is more than a set of high-sounding platitudes—it is an assertion of American political philosophy. And it’s a *progressive* philosophy.

By “Life,” Thomas Jefferson and the signers of the Declaration did not mean simply the right to survival, which would suggest that being beaten *almost* to death is OK. They meant a right to personal *security*. By “Liberty,” Jefferson was referring to the kinds of *freedoms* that were ultimately written into all federal and state Bills of Rights, blocking the government from infringing upon speech, religion, the press, and trial by jury, as well as protecting individuals from wrongful criminal prosecutions.

And how do we translate Jefferson’s “pursuit of Happiness”? It cannot mean that everyone has the God-given right to do whatever makes them happy. Read “happiness” together with the earlier part of the same

sentence, “all men are created equal.” Jefferson is not saying that people have an unbridled right to pursue happiness; he is saying they have an *equal right* to pursue happiness. In today’s language, we’d call that *equal opportunity*.

Here’s how these truths might read in updated language: “No one is better than any other—all people have equal rights to freedom, opportunity, and security.” No one is above the law, everyone is equal under the law. No one is born above anyone else, we’re all equal as Americans.

These are the principles that served as the foundation for American independence and self-government. They are ideals that we learned in school and relearn throughout life. They capture the All-American political philosophy.

The whole project of America revolves around eliminating barriers to individual success. In revolutionary times, the monarchy and aristocracy controlled what people could do economically, socially, and religiously. All those barriers needed to be toppled so that people could live successful and happy lives. Two hundred years ago, eliminating barriers was simpler—just get rid of unjust restrictions. But today, eliminating the barriers to freedom, opportunity, and security is more complicated because modern life is more complicated. No one lives self-sufficiently on a farm anymore—everyone relies on everyone else. So today, protecting our rights as Americans requires a more proactive government. But progressives are still pursuing the spirit of the American Revolution.

Put another way, government must employ the historic American concept of checks and balances. When social and market forces do not naturally promote freedom, opportunity, and security, we must achieve them through checks and balances supplied by our government. As James Madison wrote in *The Federalist*: “It is of great importance in a republic not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part.”

Because we will never live in a perfect world, our job is to move American reality closer to American ideals. Thomas Jefferson wouldn’t have expected us to achieve equal access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all Americans. He would have expected us to try. In fact, we

owe that effort to all the founding fathers and all the other brave men and women who risked their lives and sacrificed to make a better country for their fellow citizens.

We progressives haven't forgotten the principles that inspired America. But we have misplaced them. And worse, we've allowed right-wing extremists to hijack our ideals and wave them like a flag, rallying Americans to their distinctly un-American cause. It is time to right that wrong.

Progressives Believe in Freedom, Opportunity, and Security for All

Let's raise the banner of a new progressive philosophy: freedom, opportunity, and security for all.

That means we believe society should step into an unfair competition, balancing the scales of justice to help the weaker interest get a fair deal. It means that where government has no proper role, we demand freedom; where government acts as a referee between economic interests, we champion opportunity; and where government should protect those who cannot protect themselves, we call for security.

Every issue of public policy is encompassed by at least one of our three ideals. Abortion, racial profiling, and voting rights are about freedom. Equal pay, mortgage assistance, and improving public schools are about opportunity. Terrorism, sentencing reform, and universal health care are about security.

Many issues can be framed by more than one of these ideals. Stem cell research is about freedom (don't let religion dictate to science) and about security (allow research that will save lives). Unemployment insurance is about opportunity (pay displaced workers fair compensation) and about security (protect the unfortunate). Gay rights is about freedom (don't let religion dictate which marriages are legally recognized), about opportunity (prevent discrimination in employment and housing), and about security (protect family health benefits and the children of same-sex couples).

More about message framing later. The point is that each of our policies promotes greater equality in freedom, opportunity, or security. If a policy pushes Americans toward greater inequality, it's not progressive.

That's the distinction between progressive and conservative. We seek to extend freedom, opportunity, and security to all Americans. They work to limit freedom, opportunity, and security—to redistribute wealth toward the wealthy, power toward the powerful, and privilege toward the privileged.

Our values are the principles that fueled the flame of the American Revolution. The same torch of American ideals was passed from Jefferson to Lincoln, and from TR to FDR to JFK. So why are we hiding our glorious light under a bushel?

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