

03-01-1999 The Democrats Worst Enemy

"Over pastries and coffee in the Oval Office, Clinton met some of those who tried to throw him from office, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi, House Speaker Dennis Hastert of Illinois, and House Majority Leader Dick Armey of Texas. ... In a sign that some hard feelings remain among the Republicans, Lott and Hastert refused to say after the meeting whether they felt they could trust the president...." -- Reuters, 2/23/99

Perhaps we are not meant to really understand. Why would the Republicans be worried about trusting the president, while apparently the president is not worried about trusting the Republicans?

The Democrats do have to seek some level of cooperation from the Republicans so that they might get something, anything, done in Congress this year. However, in spite of the Republican majority it would seem the Democrats have the upper hand. People everywhere are sick unto death of the Republicans behavior and are ready to abandon them en masse in the 2000 elections. In poll after poll, people report disliking the Republicans in Congress, and approving of the president. Who has the power in this relationship? So, why is anyone concerned about whether or not the Republicans think they can trust the president?

Although, the issue may be more complicated than simply trust. The Democrats may have to work with the Republicans, but they know where they stand -- they can trust the Republicans to be petty, vindictive and to look for any opportunity to hurt them. "We have an adversary and it is not us. It is them -- the Democratic party," Jim Nicholson, GOP National Chair, said at a news conference in Des Moines, IA (Reuters, 2/25/99). Clearly they can't be trusted, but most people seem to trust the Democrats and the president in particular, so why would the Republicans not trust him?

One theory about why the Republicans are so difficult, if not down right vindictive, is that the president, and his Democratic Leadership Council, have stolen all of the Republican's ideas. For example, the president has taken up the charade of "saving" Social Security as a pretext for turning it over to Wall Street. That was the Republican's idea, so if the Democrats are stealing their ideas how are Republicans to distinguish themselves from the Democrats when elections roll around? From the Republican's point of view the Democrats have become very slippery.

It is quite sad really. With the mood of the country being what it is the Democrats could go on the offensive and really kick some Republican butt. They could mobilize millions of fed up, even angry, voters to support radical new initiatives to save the family farmer, protect the environment, improve old age pensions, institute a single payer health care system, extend labor rights and much, much more. But they won't. Instead, the president continues to push the pro-business, neo-liberal economic model.

The Democrats have no reason to go on the offensive because they have no agenda aside from the Republicans'. They could push a pro-people agenda, but that is not what they are about. Now a days the Democrats are just as much about military spending, bombing Third World countries, "Free" trade, and privatizing national treasures like Social Security. The president's

international policy is almost identical to the Republicans, and his domestic policy differs only by its rhetoric and few fine points.

Which is not to say that some of those fine points aren't important, and that he doesn't have a great rap. "When the tides of capital first flood emerging markets and then abruptly recede, ... when millions who have worked their way into the middle class are plunged suddenly into poverty, the need for reform of the international financial system is clear," the president told a San Francisco audience (Reuters, 2/26/99). But he doesn't mean progressive reforms -- he means freeing capital to more efficiently exploit workers. Or as he said in a speech the next day, Americans, "must embrace the inexorable logic of globalization" (AP, 2/26/99).

The Democrats are less thoroughly viscous than the Republicans are. But their lack of a unique ideology leaves them drifting and vulnerable to almost any Republican attack. The Republicans' heroes are real criminals like Nixon and Reagan, yet it was Clinton who got impeached! How pathetic is that?

The thing that is most frightening is that in spite of all of the public animosity towards the Republicans it is still very possible that they could win the presidency in 2000. The Republicans have on their side an ideology -- evil and disturbing though it may be -- and as such they can actually strategize to achieve goals.

Their campaign for the presidency has two things going for it. First, the Republicans behavior in public alienates people, who then stop voting. Over time, this means most of the people still voting are Republicans. The Democrats, who often seem to share the Republicans contempt for ordinary people, never seem to actually inspire anyone and as such are unable to reverse this trend -- which is a long-standing Republican tactic for winning elections.

Second, by choosing someone like Elizabeth Dole as their candidate the Republicans could posture themselves as being less backwards and reactionary. The Democrats, lacking any ideology of their own, have no position from which to criticize Dole's reactionary politics. This could leave many women and other Democratic supporters wondering if they shouldn't vote for the female candidate just for a change, never mind that Dole would put back the progress women have made in this country two decades or more. Patricia Schroeder (formerly a liberal Democratic Congressperson) has already started giving Dole advice, rather than heaping condemnation on her campaign (NY Times, Op/Ed, 2/22/99).

So in spite of the public support for the Democrats it is the Republicans who continue to have the upper hand in public debates. The Democrats continue to be their own worst enemy, and they aren't helping the rest of us much either.