

TOWARD A PROGRESSIVE FUTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

An Essay Prepared by the Sudbury Democratic Town Committee of Sudbury
Massachusetts

Preamble

These are extraordinary times in the United States. The return of the Democratic Party to Power in Congress may herald the beginning of a new era in Progressive politics that will turn the country from perpetual war and misguided programs under Republican administrations to a future of peace, social cooperation, and justice. The administrations of Reagan and the elder and younger Bush have damaged the body politic of this country in many and profound ways. We now live with a new Cold War and the notion of preemptive war, unconstitutional exercise of power by executive decree, an increasingly repressive security state, unprecedented suppression of civil liberties, belated recognition of global climate change, increasing inequities in income, willful abandonment of critical federal regulatory functions, loss of job security under questionable foreign trade agreements, a chaotic and increasingly unaffordable health care system, chaotic immigration laws, a preposterously large military budget that severely limits consideration of domestic programs and infrastructure, a non-progressive tax code with great loopholes for the wealthy and big business, etc., etc. We live now in a kind of political train wreck that will take years to recover from. What is to be done and what guiding principles can we use in creating a new political climate in the United States? We of the Sudbury Democratic Town Committee believe that this nation needs to return to the roots of the Democratic Party, roots that espouse the ideas of cooperation, justice, and social security and that serve the commonweal.

In the essay that follows, we consider some issues by way of example to illustrate the path that a resurgent Democratic Party might take to lead the country from its present state of neglect and dismay into a more just and hopeful future. The essay is intended principally for legislators and state and local Democratic Committees, but might be of interest more broadly. We hope that the views represented herein will afford food for thought and, in some cases, a different reality.

Last November, voters across America voted resoundingly for change. The election was a stunning repudiation of the destructive Bush agenda. Voters placed their hopes for the future in the hands of the Democratic Party. It is crucial that Democrats deliver. If Democrats can formulate and pass programs that improve the lives of the people of the nation and the world, we could be at the start of a new progressive era, one lasting half a century or more. Our elected leaders cannot be timid. You were elected to change the course of our nation; this requires bold action on your part.

We recognize, of course, that there are limits to what you can accomplish until a Democrat is elected President. But you can hold hearings; you can advocate; you can

raise the issues that Democrats will stand for in the 2008 election. You must promote positions because they are right, not because they are immediately politic.

There are many such issues, of course. We, the members of the Sudbury Democratic Town Committee, would like you to consider the following as a first priority:

Foreign Policy. Bush's 'war on terrorism' framework forces Americans to think about foreign affairs in strictly military terms. Instead, a progressive Democratic view of foreign policy must begin by understanding that any military action should be considered only as a *last resort*.

We must recognize that being the world's only super-power means that we have a responsibility to serve as a positive model to the world, to respect and work with our allies and with the United Nations to jointly develop solutions to the world's problems.

Our policies and programs should aim to:

- encourage democracy everywhere, but not at the point of a gun.
- assist poor countries to develop, primarily through proactive technical assistance focused on education, health, and family planning, not through military aid, which has been all too often our kind of assistance. We should support, not undermine, democratically elected leaders, something that we do not have a proud history of doing, and
- encourage fair international trade, but only with countries and companies whose labor and environmental standards are at least as good as ours.

This type of foreign policy will considerably reduce the support for terrorists that our current policies promote, and will result in greater involvement of other countries and peoples in opposing terrorism. Although terrorist acts are likely to continue for the foreseeable future - and we will need to devote adequate resources to combat them - *fear of terrorism* should not dictate the basic thrusts of our foreign concerns. With a consistent and enlightened diplomacy-based approach to international affairs, we can relegate terrorism to a policing responsibility, not the central focus of our foreign policy.

Finally, we must categorically and publicly reject preemptive war. This primitive notion is one of George Bush's most terrible policies. Diplomacy is the only way to achieve peace and stability for the people of nations that are already too heavily armed. Perhaps it would be good to reflect on Europe in 1914. World War I was begun by nations who thought it would be a "cakewalk". Soldiers were sent off with flowers, songs and hopes that they would return victorious in a few weeks. Instead, a whole generation of European youth was wiped out, and nobody won anything. The saddest thing is that once the carnage was under way, nobody had the vision or political courage to stop it. George Bush began the Iraq war with similar promises, although many people, to their great credit, did not believe him. But the Iraq war is having the same effect as the early skirmishes of World War I. It is destabilizing the world. We need the Democrats right now to step in and stop the madness before we too lose a generation of young men and women for nothing. Now is the time. No escalation, no more destabilization of an already troubled world, no more being tricked by phony incidents used as excuses for expanding the war to Iran.

Iraq. There is reason to believe that President Bush had decided to invade Iraq long before March 2003, and that he applied undue pressure on the CIA and others to provide doctored evidence to justify an invasion. The administration has never allowed this question to be investigated carefully. You should do so now.

Our presence in Iraq is fueling an insurgency, a civil war, and an expansion of terrorism, both in Iraq and worldwide. To reduce the chaos in this devastated land, American troops must depart as soon as possible. We should encourage the UN and Iraq's neighbors to play a role in to reduce the level of conflict and re-establish a functioning country. Perhaps diplomacy will succeed where guns have miserably failed. But since we are in large part the immediate cause of this mess, *all* Americans need to leave Iraq within six months in order for this approach to succeed.

Afghanistan. The invasion to overthrow the Taliban met with widespread national and international support in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11 and the fact that the Taliban were harboring Osama bin Laden. It was clear from the beginning, however, that the invasion had little to do with bin Laden and everything to do with building up Bush's domestic political image as a "war president". The actual military operation was badly botched, there was no plan for political rebuilding, Osama bin Laden remains at large, and the Taliban are again increasing in strength. Currently, we are engaged in an occupation coming under increasing resistance and for which neither military nor political solutions are obvious. We are stuck in Afghanistan with a failed mission.

Health Care. *The system.* We have a severely unbalanced health care system that denies adequate coverage to many of our citizens. Despite spending about twice as much per capita than other developed countries, we rank very low on key indicators such as infant mortality, life expectancy, and the number of health care providers per population. This is because, in the absence of a single payer health care system, insurance companies and paperwork consume between 30% and 40% of our health care dollars. This system also hurts our economy: the products that we produce are less competitive because their cost includes employers' contributions to their employees' health care. For example, an average car costs an extra \$1500.

There is a solution that would cover everybody and cost *less* than is currently spent by individuals, employers, and the government on health care - *a universal single payer health care system*, covering everyone, with no involvement of either insurance companies or employers. It could be something akin to Medicare for everyone. Democrats need to have the spine to tell insurance companies "no!" – to be willing to fight for a system that will improve the health care that *all* Americans receive. Only a plan that cuts the insurance companies out of the health care dollars will be able to cover all Americans at an affordable price.

An anecdote illustrates the change in attitude that needs to happen. An American tourist was in Britain when his child became ill. When he asked the pharmacist how much he owed for the medicine, the pharmacist looked at him incredulously. "The medicine is for a sick child?" he asked. "We would never charge you for that."

Pharmaceuticals. Under any system, current or improved, it makes no sense at all to prevent negotiations for best prices. This Republican gift to the drug industry must be removed.

In addition, two other major reforms are needed:

- Drug companies should be required to demonstrate that any new drug is at least as effective as an existing drug before it is approved. Under existing regulations, a drug only has to be better than a placebo treatment. As a result, drug companies often introduce new drugs that are either less effective than existing drugs, or that have more serious side effects. These new drugs are then given to patients because they are still on patent while the older, more effective drugs are not.
- There should be much more focus on the development of preventive measures, such as vaccines and immunizations; it is government's responsibility to put forward the key message that 'prevention is better than cure'. Intellectual property rights cannot be allowed to trump the health and well being of hundreds of millions of people.

Finally, poor health outcomes are strongly associated with income inequalities, even among wealthy people. This can explain the results of a study that looked at the health of white people aged 55-65 in the United States and Britain. Although in both countries the richest third of the people were healthier than the poorest third, the *richest* third of the people in the United States had the same health as the *poorest* third in Britain. Anything you can do to reduce the glaring, and increasing, income inequalities in the United States will have the good unintended side effect of lowering health care costs.

Workers. Democrats must protect the economic security of working people and the middle class. Increasing the minimum wage is a reasonable start, but it is not enough to achieve a living wage for all. Pegging it permanently to a fair level would help the individuals and families at the bottom of our economy and remove this contentious item from the realm of partisan politics. There are several possible fair levels - twice the poverty level for a family of four, the real value of the minimum wage in 1968 when it was its highest (\$9.19 in 2006 dollars), or one of the values proposed by the staff of the Economic Policy Institute in Washington DC, the Political Economy Research Institute at UMass Amherst or the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU.

Restoring economic security to the middle class should include:

- preserving Social Security. We are not convinced that it was ever really in trouble, but increasing – or eliminating – the cap on the payroll tax would provide sufficient funds to ensure its continuity and to increase benefits;
- encouraging more people to join unions to ensure fairer salaries, better working conditions, and job security. This can be done by legislating card check neutrality and ensuring job protection for workers involved in organizing drives. Protection for workers involved in organizing drives already exists in the Wagner Act. However, it is not being enforced by the NLRB. It is therefore critical to appoint worker-friendly people to the NLRB who will seriously enforce the already existing labor laws, as well as worker friendly judges to the courts. This last priority is clearly a long term goal, but we should do what we can immediately to ensure that the guardians of labor rights are friendly to labor.
- preserving pensions; and

- providing more and better job retraining possibilities for laid-off workers.

Over the past few decades, increases in worker productivity have resulted in massive increases in top executive compensation, but not in comparable increases below that level. To address this issue, we suggest that:

- Federal regulations should require that corporate charters be amended to make their behavior responsible to their employees and the environment, rather than only to their stockholders. In addition, corporate Boards of Directors should be mandated to include representatives from labor and the community; and
- Corporations no longer be afforded the many legal rights of "personhood" that they currently enjoy. Corporations have used this fiction of their personhood to undermine a shocking number of progressive policies. These rights permit them to run lavishly funded campaigns to defeat grassroots referendums such as those for a progressive state income tax, insurance regulation, workers compensation, campaign finance laws and regulation of environmental toxins. Corporations also have the right not to speak; this was used to overturn a Vermont law requiring the labeling of products containing bovine growth hormone. They have a fourth amendment right against search and seizure that was used to protect Enron from having to open up its books, and is used to require OSHA and EPA inspectors to obtain warrants before inspecting for safety and environmental violations, thus conveniently giving the corporation time to clean up before the inspection. Their first amendment (free speech) rights allow them to force workers to sit through lengthy meetings to hear anti-union threats and propaganda, while union organizers are not allowed to talk to workers at the workplace because the first amendment doesn't provide protections against PRIVATE restrictions on speech! Removing the fiction of corporate personhood would make organizing for progressive ends infinitely easier.

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The Functions and Functioning of Government. *A Democratic perspective on government.* We believe that collective effort through government and other civil institutions is an integral part of civilization and of the American way. The Republican Party's ideological approach – denigrating government, weakening all forms of regulation, reducing funds available for collective action, and promoting the private sector as the solution for every problem – has been extremely harmful to our society.

The Democratic Party should adopt a pragmatic approach to these issues, but with a bias towards government action led by concerned, competent officials. A comparison of Social Security and Medicare with private pensions and private health insurance programs clearly demonstrates that Republican ideology is wrong: privatization is not the answer. In these major programs, the public sector has far outshone the private sector in delivering products to people efficiently and as promised. We can re-establish confidence in FEMA and other federal agencies by firing Bush's cronies and replacing them with good leaders. It is important for the American people to understand that the many failures of government under George Bush are not due to an inherent problem with government action, but rather to the deliberate actions of the Republicans who undermined effective action in so many places, New Orleans being the worst and most

obvious, by appointing incompetent people to run important branches of government. Government is not the problem; it is a crucial part of the answer.

Ethics. We need to return ethics to government – make it more open, reduce secrecy, provide more opportunities for the press and others to question our leaders in depth, insist upon honesty and openness, forbid highly questionable legislative practices such as earmarks, reduce lobbyists' influence, and severely reduce the influence of money. As long as it is possible to buy legislation or other action by politicians, cynicism and inaction will prevail.

Civil liberties. Taxpayer money must be spent responsibly for the people. We need to dismantle the police state that George Bush has been trying to create, to repeal much of the Patriot Act, to stop eavesdropping and other spying practices, to close the detention centers, to destroy the databases on law-abiding citizens. We need to restore the right of habeas corpus for everybody, and to ensure protection for whistle-blowers. We need to declassify documents and open the records of government so that it operates in the open, not in secrecy. Just as the politics of fear must not be allowed to drive our foreign policy, it must not be used as a pretext for gutting our Constitution.

Reestablish our commitment to the separation of Church and State. The separation of Church and State is a fundamental part of our Constitution. The current Republican administration has been consciously blurring this line by cutting government programs for the poor and giving money to religious institutions to provide these same services. For example, food programs for the elderly have been cut in Bush's recent budget. This forces needy people to become dependent on religious institutions they may not agree with, and unconstitutionally bolsters the Republican party.

Invest in Our Future. Global warming is the most critical issue the world faces today. Experts suggest that we have between ten and fifty years before it becomes irreversible. Any responsible government must have a plan for reducing CO₂ and other greenhouse gases. Such a plan should include:

- encouragement of renewable sources of energy, such as solar and wind, by incentives and federal funds for research and development. Be very skeptical of things like nuclear energy or corn to ethanol which may look carbon free but are not. The purpose of renewable energy is to permit us to have a healthy and sustainable economy, not to make quick profits for particular industries.
- discouragement of major polluters by requiring much better gas mileage for all vehicles and stricter limits on power plant emissions, as well as
- encouraging individuals and businesses to take environmentally sound action.
- Since airlines are a major producer of carbon dioxide, we should look into establishing a high speed rail system throughout the country so that trips of 500 miles or less would be practical on the train. This could be particularly important if the trains could partly run on electricity from renewable resources such as wind or solar.

We need to rejoin the world on this issue, by at least signing and following the Kyoto protocol.

Locally, we thank Governor Deval Patrick for having Massachusetts rejoin the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. During his campaign, he promised to make Massachusetts a leader in investing in the development of renewable energy technologies. We urge him to follow through on this important promise.

Our future also must include restoring and properly supporting the basic institutions of civilization - schools, hospitals, libraries, old age homes, as well as the infrastructure of our country - roads, bridges, etc. All of these need to be well funded to make up for decades of bipartisan neglect. This is money well spent to ensure a prosperous future.

Taxation. We should *restore a truly progressive income tax*. Tax rates on wealthy individuals were formerly much higher than they are at present – over 90%, compared with today’s top rate of 35%. The rich should pay their fair share: the tax rate on people who earn over a million dollars a year should be *at least double* the current rate. In addition, the Estate Tax should be revived and strengthened in order to emphasize that we are a country where people advance through merit, not through the accident of birth.

Major cuts in the military budget (a factor of two or three) would fund many of the programs we are suggesting. Reining in military spending to reasonable levels would make it possible to have the substantive new social programs that we so badly need.

One of the largest government expenditures is for the education of our children. Most funds to support our schools come from a highly regressive local property tax. It would be much fairer if most education funds derived instead from *progressive* state and federal income taxes. The federal government could start by fully funding the Special Education mandates that they have required of local school systems. These unfunded mandates now account for approximately 30% of many local school budgets, and are increasing very rapidly. The costs are beyond what cities and towns can afford to pay, and the rest of the school budgets are being slashed as a result. This is a serious threat to the viability of public schools, the foundation of our democracy.

Corporate tax rates are at historically low levels. Higher rates are warranted and are very unlikely to harm the economy.

Election Reform. *Campaigns.* The core objective of *comprehensive* election campaign reform should be *the education of voters to help them make a more informed choice*. Currently, candidates are virtually required to spend enormous sums of money on TV advertisements – brief sound bites, created by an ad agency rather than by the candidate. But advertising is not education: such a process does not provide voters with a thorough understanding of each candidate’s policies and capabilities. To correct this, we should mandate:

- *free TV time* for an extensive series of debates, town meetings, and other opportunities for the public to assess candidates’ capabilities. These events should be planned long in advance – before the candidates are known; their staff should not be allowed to influence debate procedures in any way; the basic intent should be to encourage substantial impromptu interaction between the candidates and questioners and between the candidates themselves;
- *a ban on political TV advertising* in the 2-3 months preceding an election; and

- *required public funding* of all candidates. Otherwise known as "clean elections", this has been highly successful in empowering ordinary citizens not beholden to corporations to run for office. It has the additional advantage of freeing elected officials from the onerous task of fundraising that occupies far too much of their time and energy.

Voting. We need to have national standards to ensure that anyone who wishes to vote can do so, and that his or her vote will actually count. For this purpose, the simplest technology may be the best technology – paper ballots that can be checked and double-checked.

A national election commission. Campaigns and elections ought to be conducted under the auspices of a *strong non-partisan election commission*. This body – rather than partisan state officials – should be responsible for assessing the kinds of questionable practices that have plagued the past few elections. (If the winner of an election really were the person for whom most people voted, we would now be nearing the end of President Gore's second term.) Such a commission could be responsible for campaign and election processes as diverse as supervising elections, planning and conducting candidate debates, determining appropriate voting technology, overseeing financing issues, and redistricting, with an obligation to eliminate gerrymandering and reduce incumbent advantages.