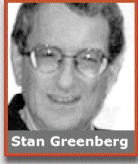


**CO-EDITORS:**



William Galston



Stan Greenberg



Ruy Teixeira

The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

## THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

### WHAT IS "RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM?"

BY JAMES VEGA

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## WHAT IS "RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM?"

By James Vega

The recent much-discussed report on "Rightwing Extremism" by the Department of Homeland Security has raised a very important issue of definition: What precisely is right-wing "political extremism" and how does it differ from other concepts like "the radical right" or "hard-right conservatism"?

For most Americans, the most critical—and in fact the defining—characteristic of "political extremism"—whether left or right—is the approval of violence as a means to achieve political goals. Opinions on issues, no matter how "extreme" or irrational they may be do not by themselves necessarily make a person a dangerous "extremist." Whether opinions are crackpot (e.g. abolish all paper money) or repulsive (e.g. non-whites should be treated as sub-humans), extreme political opinions are not in and of themselves incitements to or justifications for violence.

But there is actually one very clear and unambiguous way to define a genuinely "extremist" political ideology—it is any ideology that justifies or incites violence.

Underlying all extremist political ideologies is one central idea—the vision of "*politics as warfare*". While this phrase is widely used as a metaphor, political extremists mean it in an entirely concrete and operational way. It is a view that is codified in the belief that political opponents are literally "enemies" who must be crushed rather than fellow Americans with different opinions with whom negotiated political compromises must be sought.

In recent decades we have unfortunately become accustomed to political opponents being defined as "enemies" rather than fellow Americans, but the notion was profoundly shocking when Richard Nixon first used the term in his famous "*enemies list*." It marked a tremendous change from generally collegial attitudes of Senators and members of Congress, where a certain basic level of civility was almost always maintained, even among the most bitter political opponents. Unlike many other countries, until the Nixon era American politicians generally saw "politics" as the job of achieving rational compromises among democratically elected representatives and not as the task of crushing, purging or liquidating political enemies, as was often the case in totalitarian countries.

Watergate and the election of Jimmy Carter temporarily derailed the trend toward defining politics as warfare, but the notion got a powerful "second wind" in the 1980's—which came from two main sources.

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The first was the culture and doctrines of counter-insurgency and covert operations that blossomed in the Reagan era. In combating insurgent movements, U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine carefully studied Leninist organizations and frequently imitated their strategy and tactics in order to dismantle them. The basic philosophy was frequently to “fight fire with fire” using any available tactics, including even blatantly undemocratic and morally indefensible ones.

During the Reagan years, there was a massive expansion of extremely secret counter-insurgency programs—primarily in Central America and Afghanistan—that were conducted outside the formal structure of traditional civilian-military control. Among the people involved in these programs, an ethos of loyalty developed to the secret military/intelligence hierarchy that was conducting these operations rather than to the formal elected government.

The hero and symbol of this trend was Oliver North. By showing up in his military uniform at congressional hearings called to investigate his role in the illegal funding of counterinsurgencies in Central America and Afghanistan (although he was actually a political appointee of the Reagan white house at the time and not on active military duty) North dramatically embodied the view that his primary loyalty was to the covert military/intelligence command running the secret operations around the world and not to the majority of Congress that had specifically prohibited the actions he had coordinated. He became a symbol of a perspective that viewed the majority of Congress (that had voted against funding the Nicaraguan “contras”) as an internal “enemy” just as the Nicaraguan Sandinistas were an external enemy.

By the early 1990’s this general point of view had become deeply entrenched among many right-wing conservatives. As conservative talk radio shows grew in popularity, many hosts like Rush Limbaugh repeated and refined this militarized and combative version of conservative ideology.

These views became even more extreme after the fall of the Soviet Union. In the conservative view, Liberals quickly replaced communism as the principal “enemies” of America. Conservative leader Grover Norquist expressed the view quite clearly when talking to a former college classmate. He said: “For 40 years we fought a two-front war against the Soviet Union and statism in the U.S. Now we can turn all our time and energy into crushing you. With the Soviet Union it was just business. With you, it’s personal.”

The titles of a whole series of books by well-known conservatives reflected this same view of liberals as literal “enemies”:

Dinesh D’Souza: “The Enemy at Home”

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Ann Coulter: "Treason: liberal treachery from the cold war to the war on terror"

Michael Savage: "The Enemy Within: saving America from the liberal assault on our schools, faith and military"

From this it followed that there could be no compromise with liberalism. Politics became visualized as a bitter civil war.

"This war [between liberals and conservatives] has to be fought with the scale and duration and savagery that is only true of civil wars." – Newt Gingrich

"We'll defeat them [the democrats] and crush their institutions... a cornered rat fights. The left is playing for its life and will fight harder than anyone on the right sees". – Grover Norquist

"We will not try to reform existing institutions. We only intend to weaken them and eventually destroy them" – The manifesto of the Paul Weyrich—inspired New Traditionalist Movement

Along with the covert counterinsurgency culture, the second major source of the "politics as warfare" view was the growing religious right.

In the 1980's and 1990's the religious right began to reach large audiences through the growing network of evangelical TV shows, particularly those of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and by the "Left Behind" novels of Tim LaHaye. The religious right also absorbed a tremendous emotional intensity and "by any means necessary" sense of urgency from the increasingly militant and violent anti-abortion movement.

It is worth offering a wide range of quotes to show how remarkably widespread the "politics as warfare" view became among the religious right in the last 25 years.

"There is a cultural war going on for the soul of this country... the issue is making this God's country again" Ralph Reed

"Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty; we are called by God to conquer this country." Randall Terry

Will you join me in a Declaration of War?" "There is no middle ground... the church is marshalling its forces." – Fund Raising letter from Jerry Falwell

" We are involved in a "cultural war" for the very soul of America... [We are] recruiting "soldiers in the army of Christ... [There are] "five key fronts in the modern-day culture war"— Rev. D. James Kennedy, Coral Ridge Ministries

"It is dominion we are after, not just a voice. It is dominion we are after, not just influence. It is dominion we are after, not just equal time. World

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conquest. That is what Christ has commissioned us to accomplish.” – George Grant, former executive director of D. James Kennedy’s Coral Ridge Ministries.

“Man your battle stations. Ready your weapons. They say this rhetoric is so inciting. I came to incite a riot....Man your battle stations. Ready your weapons. Lock and Load.” – Rev. Rod Parsley

“We’re on the beaches of Normandy and we can see the pillbox entrenchments of academic and media liberalism. We’ll take back our country for Christ.” – Rev. Russell Johnson, head of the Ohio Restoration Project.

Michelle Goldberg<sup>1</sup> described one nationwide series of rock concerts for fundamentalist youth as follows:

Battle Cry, a Christian fundamentalist youth movement that has attracted as many as 25,000 people to Christian rock concerts in San Francisco, Philadelphia and Detroit uses elaborate light shows, Hummers, Ranks of Navy SEALs and the image and rhetoric of battle to pound home its message. The Rock band “Delirious”, which played in the Philadelphia gathering, pounded out a song with the words “we’re an army of god and we’re ready to die... Let’s paint this big ol’ town red ...we see nothing but the blood of Jesus. The lyrics were projected on large screens so some 17,000 participants could sing along. The crowd in the Wachovia sports stadium shouted in unison, “we are warriors.”

This vision of politics as warfare was profoundly reinforced and extended by the Left Behind series. As Chris Hedges<sup>2</sup> described the plot:

...200 million ghostly, demonic warriors would sweep across the planet, exterminating one-third of the world’s population. Those who join forces with the Antichrist in the Left Behind series, true to LaHaye’s conspiracy theories, include.....the media, liberals, freethinkers, and international bankers.

The Antichrist, who heads the United Nations, eventually moves his headquarters to Babylon. These demonic forces battle the remaining Christian believers—those who converted after the rapture took place, remnants of extremist American militia groups, who in the novels are “Warriors for Christ....”

This apocalyptic vision introduced a profound change in many conservative Christians’ view of liberals. They were no longer simply “immoral” or “sinners”—who might yet be saved or forgiven. They were literally demon soldiers in a satanic army.

In both the military and theological versions of the “politics is warfare and liberals are the enemies” perspective, the difference between violent extremists and others

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becomes quite subtle—it is simply whether one takes the notion of “enemies” as literal or figurative.

- From a military point of view, if the notion of “enemy” is taken literally, then liberals or Democrats become defined as “enemy combatants” in the military rules of engagement that all soldiers are taught and become legitimate targets for lethal action. Once defined this way, it is not wrong to kill these “enemies”; on the contrary, it is a soldier’s solemn duty.
- Equally, from a religious point of view, if the “enemies” of Christianity are understood not simply as immoral and sinful human beings, who should be evangelized and hopefully saved, but rather as literally the demonic soldiers of a satanic army, then the Bible offers many passages that justify their violent annihilation—justifications for “Holy War” which were repeatedly invoked during the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the European wars between Catholic and Protestant.

The ultimate results of taking the “*politics as warfare*” and “*liberals as enemies*” notions literally can be dramatically seen in the cases of the two most famous right-wing American terrorists—Tim McVeigh (the Oklahoma City bombing) and Eric Rudolph (the 1996 Olympics and abortion clinic bombings). Both men saw themselves as genuinely heroic American patriots and righteous Christian warriors who were first soldiers and then “prisoners of war” in the battle against America’s most evil enemies. The difference between them and other right-wing conservatives—and what made them profoundly dangerous political “extremists”—was simply that they took the two concepts above literally rather than figuratively and followed them to their logical conclusion.

According to government statistics, violent right-wing extremism declined during the Bush years because of a combination of improved law enforcement efforts after Oklahoma City and also because of a widespread sense that Bush was following a deeply militaristic and crypto-theocratic agenda. But the underlying “politics as war” philosophy remained and, in fact, was powerfully reinforced by the Bush administration.

In fact, even with a Republican in the White House, violent rhetoric in America actually increased. In his book, *The Eliminationists*<sup>3</sup>, David Neiwert traces the infiltration of violent “kill them” rhetoric into the political mainstream. Although he does not arrange his information into a formal hierarchy of threat levels, it is easy to do so. The following are drawn from Neiwert along with other sources:

### **Levels of Violent Threats**

#### **1. Disturbing “Jokes” About Killing Liberals**

Rush Limbaugh: “I tell people don’t kill all the liberals. Leave enough so we

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can have two on every campus—living fossils—so we we'll never forget what these people stood for."

Ann Coulter: "My only regret with Tim McVeigh is that he did not go to the *New York Times* building"

## 2. Implied Threats:

Bill O'Reilly: "Americans who work against our military once the [Iraq] war is underway will be considered Enemies of the State by me. Just fair warning to you, Barbara Streisand, and others who see the world as you do. I don't want to demonize anyone, but anyone who hurts this country in a time like this, well, let's just say you will be spotlighted."

## 3. Overt Threats of Violence against Liberals:

Glen Beck: "Hang on, let me just tell you what I'm thinking. I'm thinking about killing Michael Moore, and I'm wondering if I could kill him myself, or if I would need to hire somebody to do it. No, I think I could."

Eric Erickson (Redstate.com): "At what point do [people] get off the couch, march down to their state legislator's house, pull him outside and beat him to a bloody pulp for being an idiot?"

Michael Savage: "I say round liberals up and hang em' high. When I hear someone's in the civil rights business, I oil up my AR-25."

## 4. Specific Incitements to Violence against Law Enforcement Officers

Dick Morris: "Those crazies in Montana who say 'we're going to kill ATF agents because the UN's going to take over.' Well, they're beginning to have a case."

G. Gordon Liddy (broadcasting advice on how to kill law enforcement officers): "...head-shots, they are wearing body armor, head shots... or shoot for the groin."

Seen in combination, it is clear that all these notions represent a profoundly ugly and slippery slope that leads toward actual violence. The various excuses usually offered—"I was just joking", "I didn't make any specific threat", "everyone understood that I didn't actually mean it", and, most pathetically, "It's no big deal because everyone talks that way these days"—are really utterly inadequate responses to the profoundly sinister trend they attempt to justify.

It is precisely a major increase in the violent rhetoric in extremist meetings and on extremist websites that has set off alarms within the law enforcement community and which was probably among the motivations for the release of the HRS report. Virtually

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every governmental and non-governmental agency that monitors extremist activity has noted that a similar trend in extremist rhetoric directly preceded the increase in violent terrorist activity in the 1990's.

Many conservative groups object to being lumped together with violent extremists, and argue that even their most intense and radical opposition to Obama does not make them violent political extremists.

In fact, they are entirely correct. What distinguishes "political extremism" from other concepts like "the radical right" or "hard-right conservatism" is the following:

1. The two ideological pillars on which genuine political extremism rests are the notions of "politics as warfare" and of political opponents as "enemies". Groups which reject these notions are not political extremists,
2. Political extremism becomes dangerous and violent whenever and wherever these two notions are taken literally.

What should Democrats do? Basically, there needs to be clear and resolute pushback against these two notions. When politicians or others use the notions of "politics as war," and "liberals and Democrats as enemies", Democrats have to clearly and forcefully object. They have to stop the discussion dead in its tracks and say:

"No, you are profoundly wrong. Politics is not warfare and Americans with whom we disagree are not "enemies". We totally reject these ideas. In fact, that's one of the most fundamental differences between you and us and we think it is a major reason why most Americans now support Obama. You actually believe that you are literally at war with every single American who does not agree with you. We don't think that way, and most Americans don't either."

In fact, particularly now, in the age of Obama, most Americans do not see the world this way. But they have become accustomed to hearing hateful rhetoric and no longer immediately object.

As a result, the best defense against the political extremism and violence that now presents itself as a potential threat is precisely to object and to revive the traditional American sense of shock and outrage at extremist thinking—a sentiment that was once a proud hallmark of America's profoundly democratic political culture.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/Kingdom-Coming-Rise-Christian-Nationalism/dp/0393329763/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241049391&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Kingdom-Coming-Rise-Christian-Nationalism/dp/0393329763/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241049391&sr=1-1)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/American-Fascists-Christian-Right-America/dp/B001O9CBAI/ref=sr\\_1\\_6?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241056770&sr=1-6](http://www.amazon.com/American-Fascists-Christian-Right-America/dp/B001O9CBAI/ref=sr_1_6?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241056770&sr=1-6)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/Eliminationists-Hate-Radicalized-American-Right/dp/0981576982/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241049550&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Eliminationists-Hate-Radicalized-American-Right/dp/0981576982/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241049550&sr=1-1)