

Remarks by NDN President Simon Rosenberg
New Democrat Network Annual Meeting
May 20, 2004
Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C.
(As prepared for delivery)

I stand before you today a proud, card-carrying New Democrat.

My remarks today will focus on what I believe a New Democrat is, and what it means for the New Democrat Network this year and in the years ahead.

The New Democrat movement was born in the 1980s out of two broad concerns: that on ideological grounds the Democratic Party had become loosened from its historic moorings and was no longer the effective champion of the middle class, and that we were in a long, slow decline as a Party. New Democrats saw the problems we faced in the 1980s as both ideological and institutional.

By naming its think tank the Progressive Policy institute in 1989, the Democratic Leadership Council signaled that it's true intent was not to take the party to the right, or the middle, but forward. Designed to revitalize and modernize progressive politics, to adapt our core values to new and changing circumstances.

In almost 20 years the New Democrats have made an extraordinary contribution to the life of the nation. Essentially, and you can see it now in the Kerry campaign, the old pre-Clinton operating system of the Democratic Party has been replaced by a New Democrat one – focused on middle class tax cuts, fiscal responsibility, strong and responsible assertion of American leadership around the world, and a commitment to service and community. All derived from the New Democrat trinity of opportunity, responsibility and community.

And Senator Kerry continues to adapt these powerful values to today's challenges, making his message even more fresh and compelling every day.

In the 90's, the New Democrats were the innovators, the modernizers, the architects, and the writers of a new operating system for progressive politics. And Clinton's eight years of remarkably successful government showed that this effort to adapt our principles to new times could work, and produce one of the most progressive and effective governments in our history.

All of us should be grateful for the work that Al From, Will Marshall, Bruce Reed, Elaine Kamarck, Bill Galston, Rob Shapiro, Ed Kilgore and many others did those many years ago.

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They successfully set our Party on a new and better course, and helped begin a vibrant transformation of progressive politics necessary for us to compete in the 21st century.

And the New Democrat Network has done its part. We've helped bring 50 new people to the Senate and House. We've supported hundreds of elected officials at all levels of government. We've been powerful champions of a new and better agenda for the country. And now, we are becoming one of the most effective users of modern television and other media to fight for our values and our agenda.

But what's next for the New Democrats? For us, the modernizers, the innovators, the architects, the visionaries, the builders? Should we be happy with what we've built, and where we are?

I don't think so. I can think we can, and must, do better, much better.

Our standing as a Party today is objectively much weaker than the beginning of this reinvention 20 years ago. The Republicans have more political control today than any time since the 1920s. They control the Presidency, the Senate, the House, more governorships, more state legislative chambers and more legislative seats. There are few people alive today in America who have lived with such a powerful Republican Party.

And our standing with the American people has continued a several generation-long decline. When President Kennedy was elected in 1960 close to half of America considered themselves to be Democrats. In the last year in one poll more Americans identified themselves as Republicans - 33 to 32 percent. This means that since 1960 we've lost one out of every six Americans from the Party.

And the investments the conservative movement have made in building a new, information-age political machine to promote their values, has matured to the point where it simply dwarfs our capacity to take our values and our agenda to the American people.

Remember folks that from the intellectual founding of the conservative movement in the mid 50's it took 25 years for their movement to seize the White House, and another 14 years to win Congress. Creating the infrastructure to promote this new belief system took time, money and leadership to build.

But as Rob Stein will show in a little while, this new Tammany Hall, this information age conservative propaganda machine has been built, and it is huge, powerful, mature and effective. They have redefined the concept of a political machine, and built one very attuned to the media age that we live in today. For it has three distinct parts – a 501 (c)(3) intellectual community, an enormous political and advocacy community, and increasingly a for-profit media distribution community. And they have used this machine to seize power and wield it with great effectiveness.

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Matching the conservatives would not be so urgent if the modern conservative movement has not taken such a malevolent, reckless and win-at-any cost turn. Their policies are making the world less safe and less prosperous while leaving us with historic structural deficits. Their aggressiveness has an anti-democratic feel, as they wage war, actual war against their foreign enemies, class war against the middle class and political war against the Democrats.

If our role as New Democrats is to be the modernizers of progressive politics, then friends we must take the lead in constructing the response to this great conservative challenge. If phase one of the New Democrat movement was to imagine a new script for progressive politics I think we've done that, and done it well. Now we must accept our responsibility of leading the next phase - to build our modern progressive infrastructure that can match the enormity of what the conservatives have built. Building on the new foundation, in the years ahead, we need to imagine, innovate, plan and build a new vibrant progressive politics, together.

But we must understand that to do that, we have to invest in ideas, politics, advocacy and media. We need a new generation of progressive leadership - entrepreneurs, investors, intellectuals and political leaders- to work together, cooperatively imagine and construct over the next 15-20 years a progressive infrastructure suited to the information age.

So what you are going to see today at this Annual Meeting is the very best of this powerful and strategic New Democrat tradition. We are hearing from innovative policy makers, strong emerging leaders, political entrepreneurs, and a path breaking media campaign, all of which are doing their part in building a better tomorrow.

And what does all this mean for the New Democrat Network? Our role is evolving from one that nurtured new policies and new candidates, to one that is like a venture fund helping to imagine and build a new whole new industry.

Guided by you, the New Democrat Network is transforming itself from a Washington-based political action committee into a powerful, networked community of leaders providing the nurturing, money and support to a whole new generation of ideas, initiatives and leaders. All with the goals of modernizing progressive politics, building a new and durable Democratic majority and ultimately fashioning a new and better future for our children.

Some of these initiatives like the Hispanic Project, or our compelling agenda, a Commitment to Hope and Progress, we will do in-house, under the New Democrat Network banner. Others like Rob Stein's research, David Brock's organization, key bloggers, Hillary's ideas on health care, or our great candidates we will support and promote to the public and our network.

Let me single our Hispanic project for a moment.

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This year one out of eleven voters will be Hispanic. In my lifetime it will be one out of five.

Today, half of all registered Hispanic voters are Spanish-language dominant immigrants. Each year for the next twenty years, 750,000 Hispanics will turn 18. 750,000 each year.

In a 49-49 nation, it is no exaggeration to say that what happens to this new and dynamic and growing Hispanic electorate will determine which party becomes the majority more any other single variable.

In other words, educating Hispanics about the agenda and values of the Democratic Party is perhaps the single greatest strategic imperative of progressive politics today.

That's why we are leading the effort on the progressive side with our Hispanic Project. It is all part of our time-worn commitment to rebuilding a durable majority for Democrats. Adapting the very best of our politics to a new and different age.

The scale of what needs to be done in the years ahead is extraordinary. But if we want to see our values triumph in the great struggle with a rising conservative movement we have no choice my friends. We must hunker down for a long struggle. We have to measure our success not just in election results but in capacities built. We have to be patient, and to have patient capital. We have to applaud innovation and success - like Howard Dean's historic campaign - even if we don't agree with the ideological impetus.

And that's why I am excited about what's happening in the progressive movement today. Innovation and entrepreneurship are breaking out all over the place. We have new intellectual capacities with the Center for American Progress and Media Matters. We have new political organizations like MoveOn, America Votes, ACT and new capacities like the New Democrat Network's Hispanic project. We have new for-profit media outlets like AirAmerica, the blogosphere and the new Gore channel.

And importantly, through the New Democrat Network and other friends, we are increasingly seeing a new generation of investors stepping forward to work with these political entrepreneurs to build these much needed new capacities. People like George Soros, Peter Lewis, and Andy Rappaport who are stepping up and providing the type of enlightened citizenship the country so desperately needs.

So my friends, we have much to celebrate today. We have a candidate who is continuing to embrace and build on the New Democrat approach, and is ahead in the polls. We have a widening circle of people who understand and are acting upon this big idea that we have a new progressive infrastructure to build, and we are seeing a record number of citizens funding and participating in our politics today.

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The great era of progressive denial is ending. A new era, a great era of innovation, entrepreneurship, and excitement has arrived. We may not be winning every battle now, but we are slowly, critically, putting together the resources, the team and the vision to win the war.

Thank you for being part of this visionary, transformative network. Let us leave today excited about what we have done, but even more excited about what we are going to do together in the years ahead.

It is falling to us, our network, to meet this extraordinary conservative challenge.

But I know we are up for it. For the world, the nation and our children are counting on us.

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