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*The power of persuasion*

## More Muscle, More God, Less Shrum

By DAN GERSTEIN

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As Democrats continue to sort through what went wrong on Election Day and how to remedy it, many have been tempted to blame John Kerry. He was, they say, an unappealing candidate, with an unpersuasive message, surrounded by unthinking strategists (see Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, silence on).

But those who point the finger at the candidate are only prolonging the destructive dance of denial the party has been engaged in since Bill Clinton left office, where we spend most of our post-election energy making excuses and finding scapegoats (see Ralph Nader) instead of confronting the painful reality that too many people are just not buying what we are selling.

We have to remember we nominated Mr. Kerry -- foolishly believing that his war-hero status would miraculously obscure his persistent equivocating on the central issue of the campaign, the war in Iraq. And we have to remember that it was not just Mr. Kerry who failed to unseat a failed president -- this was a wholesale repudiation of national Democrats in much of the country (see Tom Daschle).

If we want to stop this slide into long-term minority status and be competitive in national elections, we must own up to our major electoral weaknesses -- and do something about them.

We should start with a blunt assessment of the election results, which revealed that the majority of voters don't trust us on two critical threshold issues of the moment -- security and values. And by all indications they don't trust us largely because we are deeply out of touch with, and at times even contemptuous of, their views.

While Democrats mocked George Bush's simple-minded belligerence, we grossly "misunderestimated" the public's concerns about terrorism -- too often kowtowing to the antiwar wing of the party and complaining about Republican scare tactics. The same could be said of the power of the gay marriage issue (a proxy test for moral values) -- while Mr. Kerry was ducking the issue, his supporters defined him by self-righteously judging opponents to be bigots, without even trying to understand their reservations.

In essence, we've fallen right back into the elitist, weak-kneed, brain-dead trap from which Bill Clinton liberated the party. To escape that box again, and break the Republican's red-



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state electoral lock, we must adapt to the temperature of the times. That does not mean pandering or selling out our core principles, but rather meeting people where they are and leading them to our side, with resonant arguments and relevant ideas.

That's a long-term discussion. But here are four places we could start:

### **Finding Credibility on Security**

This election revealed that the public fundamentally doubts the ability of Democrats to keep the country safe. That's partially a byproduct of a cynically brilliant attack campaign by the Republicans. But we certainly made their job easy by emphasizing summits and diplomacy and showing unease with the use of force. If we hope to win elections in the post-9/11 era, we must change that equation. It's not enough to say we're strong -- Mr. Kerry's damning miscalculation -- we must show we're strong, by putting the muscle back in the muscular internationalism of Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy. Then we can convince people we'll run a smarter war on terror.

### **Closing the God Gap**

The election also confirmed that culture and character are far more important to connecting with voters than policies and programs. And nowhere do Republicans have a bigger advantage here than on religion. Mr. Bush was able to convince more voters that God was on his side because he was speaking in a vacuum -- Mr. Kerry barely talked about religion until the closing days, which helps explain why the Catholic candidate lost the Catholic vote. And when Democrats do touch the subject, too often they are disdainful of the faithful.

We must realize that many swing voters won't listen to us on the issues -- let alone share their votes -- if they don't think we share their values. That does not mean we should try to out-pray the competition. It simply means that, as Bill Clinton did, we should show respect for the central role religion plays in the lives of the majority of Americans. And that we should follow the example of Martin Luther King Jr. in harnessing the values of faith to advance progressive causes, from civil rights to environmental protection.

### **Developing New Solutions**

Democrats tried at times in this election to tap into the Clinton mojo, but they mostly forgot one of the central lessons 42 taught us -- ideas matter. Mr. Clinton won over the middle class not just with his centrist rhetoric, but his ideologically transcendent and transformational proposals. Mr. Kerry, by contrast, offered no ideas that made mainstream voters sit up and



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take notice (like "ending welfare as we know it"), making it easy to pigeonhole him as just another big-spending liberal.

We will only outperform the Republicans by out-thinking them again. This is not a matter of left vs. right, but of old vs. new. The ultimate answer is not to offer mushy compromises, but to put forward a bold, label-defying vision and identify equally bold solutions to problems that people really care about, like saving our entitlement programs. If we can't do better than playing Medi-scare, we don't deserve to govern.

### **Breaking Old Habits**

To develop the next generation of new ideas, Democrats have to break out of our stale political grooves. That means choosing new leaders who "get" the problem -- and can articulate a clear, consistent and compelling vision throughout a campaign (indeed, throughout a career), something John Kerry clearly did not do. It means declaring our independence from the sclerotic influence of progress-blocking interest groups like the teachers unions -- and being willing, as Bill Clinton was, to challenge outdated party orthodoxies.

And not least of all, it means finally banishing top Kerry guru Bob Shrum and his tone-deaf chardonnay populism, along with the rest of his broken-record peers, from our presidential campaigns for good. Mr. Shrum may be our party's pre-eminent concession speechwriter, but if we can't figure out that a top strategist who goes 0-8 in the Super Bowl is doing something fundamentally wrong, we don't deserve to win.

In the end, Democrats have a clear choice. We can keep complaining about Republican tactics and voter stupidity. Or we can work to convince the broad majority again that government can be an effective agent for economic and social progress, and that Democrats can nurture the American Dream while keeping us safe from harm. I know which one I'm voting for.

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