

CHAPTER ONE



2004 — What Were They Thinking?

I sat on the hotel room bed staring at the TV in disbelief. Like many others who had worked so hard to bring out the progressive vote in 2004, I was devastated that America would have to endure four more years of George W. Bush. To make matters worse, the Republicans had actually increased their majorities in both the House and the Senate.

All afternoon, exit polls had buoyed our spirits. Our political consulting firm – the Strategic Consulting Group (SGC) had worked hard to put thousands of Election Day Get-Out-the-Vote volunteers on the streets in Florida, Michigan and Arizona. Those volunteers had joined hundreds of thousands of others across the country who had poured megawatts of energy into an attempt to end the greatest resurgence of conservatism in America since the Gilded Age.

We had lost—and things in America looked bleak.

His victory would give George Bush, and the conservative movement, unprecedented control of the levers of governmental power. It would allow him to shape the Supreme Court and judiciary for a generation, and to embed conservatives at every level of government.

The odds were high that he could reshape the basic structures of American political economy. Once made those changes would be very hard to undo. The conservatives planned to use their “mandate” to privatize Social Security and Medicare, to remake the tax code and to create what they called the “ownership society.” (Illinois Senator Dick Durbin says that really means: “We’re all in this alone.”)

They planned to gut environmental laws, and viewed the election results as a vote of confidence in their disastrous foreign policy. The religious right saw the ensuing four years as an opportunity to impose its understanding of “moral values” on everyone.

In the afternoon of Election Day, dismal exit polls had settled like a pall on the Bush headquarters. But by early in the morning on November 3rd, as I stared blankly at the TV screen, they were once again riding high.

To many Progressives it just didn’t add up. The tax breaks for the rich that lay at the center of the Bush economic policy had done nothing for middle-class incomes. While Paris Hilton jetted around the world

spending her tax cuts, most families were having a harder and harder time. By Election Day, it was clear to everyone that Bush had stampeded the country into the Iraqi quagmire with arguments about Weapons of Mass Destruction that were patently untrue. More soldiers were being killed by the day and there was no end in sight. Voters across America felt that the country was on the wrong track. How in the world could they elect him to a second term? *What were they thinking?*

Of course there are many serious investigators—including Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.—who believe that Bush didn't really win at all. They make a compelling case that the Ohio Secretary of State and local election authorities disenfranchised over 300,000 predominantly Democratic voters, costing Kerry Ohio's decisive electoral votes.¹ No one contests, however, that Bush did in fact win the popular vote in 2004. And besides, given Bush's record, it shouldn't have even been close. What went wrong?

In the weeks that followed, pundits turned out a blizzard of paper analyzing the Kerry defeat. But in all the analysis, one key symbolic mystery stood out: Why did the poorest counties in Ohio vote Republican? In the economically depressed counties of Meigs or Adams or Vinton, very few people received part of the hundreds of billions of dollars in tax breaks that had flowed to the wealthiest people in America. The economic prospects of small towns like Pomeroy and West Union had seriously declined during the Bush presidency. Why would these people seemingly vote against their own self-interest?

And why, just two years later, did many of these same people cast their votes against the Republicans in the Midterm Elections—and turn their backs on George Bush in the opinion polls? Meigs County had gone 58% to 41% for Bush in 2004, yet it gave Democrat Sherrod Brown almost 52% in 2006. Vinton, the poorest county in Ohio, had supported Bush 55% to 45%, but when the votes were counted in 2006 it gave Brown 55%.

Unraveling that mystery is the key to long-term progressive success.

Some might answer that these voters were simply uninformed or under-educated, or duped by the Republican propaganda in 2004, and finally “woke up” in 2006.

But voters like those in Vinton County did not vote contrary to their *perception* of their own self-interest in 2004, nor did they simply wake up one day and recognize their “real” self-interest in 2006. In fact, voters have an understanding of their self-interests that involves a much more complex spectrum of needs than simply their economic well-being.

This book will make the case that to effectively contest for these and other swing voters—to effectively contest for the future of our society—Progressives need to understand that entire, complex matrix of self-interests. And we have to address the full range of those self-interests head-on.

To win elections and create a long-term progressive realignment of American politics, Progressives have to understand and address the patterns of needs and desires that define how people think about their *core identities*. *We need to address their need for meaning and purpose.* The size of a person's paycheck has to be understood in the context of how he views his *overall relationship to the world*.

There are "moderate" or "pragmatic" Democrats who argue that in order to win, Democrats should adopt many conservative assumptions. They believe that attracting swing voters involves "splitting the difference" between Progressives and conservatives.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In order to consistently win—in order to successfully contest for the power to chart the course for the future of our world—Progressives must offer a clear progressive vision for that future.

We need to offer a world view—a coherent set of values that provides Americans a sense of meaning and purpose.

In the past, congressional Democrats have often been criticized for their failure to provide "positive" alternatives to right-wing policy. But it's not the proposals and policies that were lacking—there have been hundreds of proposals. What has often been lacking is the progressive vision that gives broader meaning to those proposals. We have failed to frame the American political debate in terms of progressive values.

In 2004 Democrats didn't lose the presidential election because we lacked policies and programs. The Kerry Campaign trotted out new policies and proposals every other day. We lost because our campaign talked about policies and programs while Bush talked about right and wrong—about values. He talked about his vision of the future.

As he created a master plan for the city of Chicago, after the Great Chicago Fire, architect Daniel Burnham said: "Make no small plans; they have no power to stir men's blood." Neither do "10-point" programs.

By the 2006 Midterm Elections, it had become clear to many Americans that the Bush vision was a mirage. Now it is up to us to provide America with a clear progressive alternative—a vision that confronts the challenges presented by the future, and describes how we can realize its possibilities.

To beat the right—to fundamentally realign politics in America for many generations—Progressives need to consistently, proudly, self-confidently articulate that progressive vision.

People want and need meaning in their lives. They want something to be committed to. Tepid, moderate, incremental policies and programs do nothing to address that need. An inspiring progressive vision for the future does.

The right characterizes progressive values as “soft,” “utopian” and “naïve.” But the hard fact is that progressive values *must* prevail if human beings are to survive and prosper in the world of the future. Far from being “pie in the sky,” “utopian” or “softheaded,” progressive values are the most precious, adaptive possessions of humanity—and they have provided the moral foundation for the unfolding story of American democracy.

The future of our society and our planet depends on our ability to create a world that reflects those values. And the growing power of our technology—our new ability to destroy human civilization, and alter our climate—means that we don’t have forever to get ourselves on the right track.

In this book we will discuss the many ingredients that are necessary to assemble winning electoral and issue campaigns—and a winning Progressive Movement. But the one ingredient necessary to bring all of the others together—the one ingredient without which long-term victory is impossible—is the clear elaboration of our values and our vision.

If we do it proudly and self confidently—and if we plan and execute well-run electoral and issue campaigns—we can win.

Progressives have what it takes to win the battle for our future, if only we will listen to our mothers and *stand up straight*.