

Now What?

Seven Lessons for Building a More Powerful Progressive Politics

by Frances Moore Lappé & Richard R. Rowe

*To retrieve the democracy we thought we had,
we have to take democracy to where it's never been.*

The re-election of George W. Bush is not the continuation of a long historical trend; it extends an *interruption* in a dominant trend.

During most of its history, America has moved in the direction of greater inclusion, fairness, and openness. In an uneven, but clearly detectable direction, we've moved from the abolition of slavery to the rise of the labor movement, from women winning the right to vote to establishing Social Security, from the civil rights movement to passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Exclusion, inequity and injustice have given ground, albeit in fits and starts, to fairness and rule of law. We have enjoyed what Martin Luther King, Jr. meant when he said: "...the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

The most recent interruption of this "bending toward justice" began 30 years ago when a small group among the Radical Right became alarmed that the progressive agenda had moved America too far from individualism and so-called "free market" capitalism. Acting from fear, they quietly began planning and funding a reversal of progressive policies. The result has been increasing concentrations of wealth and unaccountable corporate power, as well as divisive public policies and attitudes that threaten the very basis of our democratic society, future generations and, quite possibly, the future of life on our planet.

Today Progressives are appropriately struggling to understand how and why the Radical Right has been so effective in promoting its regressive agenda. In this examination, a first step is to probe the underlying assumptions we've seen surface among Progressives about the nature of the challenge. Three of these assumptions we believe deserve careful rethinking:

- We're engaged in a struggle between two competing moral systems within a democracy operating by a common set of ground rules.
- We Progressives share a clear and superior moral vision and we will win if, like the Radical Right, we frame our issues within our overarching moral vision.
- Our basic failing is organizational. The Right may have more money than we do, but since the majority of Americans agree with us on most issues, we'll succeed if we more effectively use the money we have and follow the Radical Right's successful organizational strategies.

Here we propose seven priorities that embody a somewhat different take. While we agree that better organization, more discipline and more money are needed, we believe the following priorities are necessary to effect systematic changes in the American body politic. Throughout, we suggest that

they can only be realized through the *expanded and innovative use of open, democratic communications to build broad ownership among the diverse communities of America.*

I. Recognize that the Radical Right is following unethical and anti-democratic rules.

Two teams are not competing on the same democratic turf, and it is dangerous for us to delude ourselves otherwise. The Radical Right is operating by very different rules. Some lie and deceive with impunity, believing such behavior is justified by their goals. Many devalue respectful dialogue, tolerance, and compromise. Many use intimidation, scape-goating, and fear-mongering, and are willing to sacrifice life before exhausting all nonviolent paths for resolving conflict. Their leaders have explicitly said that winning is not their goal; rather it is to destroy their opposition, as in deadly war. These actions and approaches are immoral and anti-democratic.

Implications for action:

- A. We should be extremely cautious about what aspects of the strategy of the Radical Right we adopt.

We must dispel the notion that the reason the Radical Right has been winning is simply that it is strategic and smart. This is unnecessarily disempowering. Perhaps more important is that 1) for decades the Radical Right has systematically applied massive resources to their agenda, resources accumulated through the very primitive capitalism they promote; and 2) they operate from an anti-democratic value system that allows them to violate some of the basic principles of democracy and to manipulate Americans to achieve their goals. They manipulate Americans to vote against their own and their communities' interests by using fear and by diverting people's attention toward "wedge issues" such as abortion or gay marriage, which offer people a sense of meaning while *distracting* them from seeing the larger regressive, self-defeating agenda of the candidates they are supporting; and 3) Progressives have not defined a compelling moral vision and applied it in a consistent, democratic, and long-term manner.

II. Create a new compelling, comprehensive frame.

All human beings sift information through frames of meaning. The challenge for Progressives is to present our agenda within an effective, compelling moral frame, instead of as a bundle of abstract issues. While Progressives do face real organizational challenges, our first task is to develop such a moral framework, along with powerful metaphors and symbols to communicate it. These must be thoughtfully constructed and systematically applied over a long period of time.

Linguist George Lakoff and his team at the Rockridge Institute are usefully awakening many Progressives to the importance of frames. Lakoff presumes people inevitably project their image of the nuclear family onto society, and that today's politics can be understood as a battle of two such frames. Since the early '70s, the Radical Right has successfully projected its moral vision through a "strict father" frame. This metaphor emphasizes concentration of power at the top in a paternalistic manner. To move our culture in a more life-enhancing direction, Lakoff suggests we must learn more effectively to communicate within a "nurturant parent" frame he ascribes to Progressives.

We feel uneasy about using the “nurturant parent” frame. We believe that, especially in today’s culture of fear, a strict father frame will inevitably triumph over a nurturant parent frame. “Nurture” means “to feed or nourish; to support and bring up to maturity; to rear.” It suggests “taking care of or being cared for.” It brings to mind dependents who can’t be fully responsible for themselves, who need “rearing” by benevolent nurturers. What could be worse for progressives? We are already criticized and stereotyped as “coddlers” of the lazy poor.

Fortunately, we sense that emerging among many Progressives is a more compelling vision. It is essentially ecological -- a view of societies as interdependent, interactive, iterative (i.e. ever-evolving) networks. These are networks of communities that enable life. From this vision of what is life-enhancing, we believe a certain framing follows: We like to think of it as “strong communities.” It is in inclusive, engaged, healthy and diverse communities that work for all that human beings find sustainable safety and meaning.

Implications for action:

- A. We should begin immediately to develop an effective conceptual framing and the specific language needed to communicate it.
- B. This process, to be effective, needs to be highly participatory and thus generate wide “ownership” at the grassroots level. It cannot be handed down from a think tank. The process should include: wide input from Americans in all walks of life through face-to-face meetings, internet dialogue and internet polls. It needs to engage the expertise of linguists, neuroscientists, and communications professionals in addition to our political leaders. This campaign to evolve a clear progressive framing should engage a broad web network, blogs, polls, chat rooms, house meetings, and printed discussion materials.
- C. The results of this process of framing a progressive moral vision for America should include:
 1. A comprehensive, integrative, encompassing, powerful metaphor (frame).
 2. New and effective metaphors and language for communicating specific social issues.
 3. Selection of roughly three targeted, leverage-able issues. These should be concerns most people care about and that are easy launching points to perceiving the broader progressive vision. (A candidate, for example, might be: children’s health – which touches on air quality, pesticides, access to health care, and food quality.)
 4. A lexicon/glossary of terms through which Progressives can consistently communicate. (Effective examples from the Radical Right include Death Tax, Tax Relief, Pro-Life)

III. Democratize the electoral system and governance.

Even if our ideal candidates were to be elected in 2006 and beyond, we would still need to address two underlying problems:

Our electoral system falls far short of minimal fair-election standards established by the Carter Center: for example, equal and free media access for all candidates.

Increasingly, we are governed not by a government of, by, and for the people but by unelected, unaccountable corporate entities. The power of concentrated wealth within our political system has gone so far that most Americans would probably see the title of Greg Palast's book, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, as more accurate than clever. In the last few years alone, key health care, gun control, pollution prevention, and homeland security legislation have been blocked by industries whose campaign contributions give them power over White House proposals, agency regulations and Congressional votes.

Implications for actions:

- A. Focus on education to awaken Americans to how out-of-step and counter-productive our electoral system is compared with electoral practices in other democracies.
- B. Support campaign finance reform laws, such as those that are already making a difference in Arizona, Maine and Vermont. Learn from their experience and work to take lessons to national reform.
- C. Change laws in order to allow such innovations as fusion voting. (New progressive parties, such as New York's Working Families Party, take advantage of "fusion" -- cross-endorsement -- voting, now legal in seven states. Fusion voting allows a third party to have a voting line on the ballot and choose to support a candidate of another party or run its own candidate. Fusion is a pathway to build progressive parties without the risk of a third party taking votes away from a Democrat in close elections.)
- D. Promote instant run-off voting reforms.
- E. Focus on creating a uniform, national voting mechanism that is publicly owned and assures verifiable voting records.
- F. Because corporations hold more power than most government bodies, work to democratize and make more accountable the corporate structure and operations.
 - 1. Support efforts to alter state corporate charters so that corporations consider shareholder interests but not at the expense of the environment, communities, and workers.
 - 2. Support efforts challenging many of the "personhood" rights of corporations that allow them to trump citizens' rights.
 - 3. Support efforts requiring corporations to be responsible for the life cycle of products.
- G. Support efforts to make more transparent both government and corporate decision-making.

IV. Create a national party that is progressive.

It is still an open question whether the Democratic Party can be reformed into a truly progressive party that will be supported by the vast majority of Americans. It is possible that Kerry would have gotten far more support had he put forth a strong progressive vision. Because Progressives have been, understandably, focused on the catastrophic impact of the Bush administration, we've not sufficiently considered the deficiencies in the structure and approach of the Democratic Party that blocked Kerry from being able to articulate such a progressive agenda.

Implications for action:

- A. We must now take the time to engage in a critical examination of the Democratic Party with a view toward making the changes necessary for it to carry forward a progressive agenda effectively.

V. Strengthen strict and open accountability systems.

Many accountability systems are already built into the American system: governments and their regulatory agencies have auditors, ombudsmen, protections for whistle-blowers and many others. The media is also responsible for holding government accountable for its actions. Each of these, especially the media, needs to be strengthened, and each needs to be held more accountable for fulfilling its accountability functions in a strict, thoroughgoing and fair manner.

In addition, new information technologies offer the possibility of more open and independent accountability mechanisms driven *by the public themselves*. The Internet makes such public accountability systems feasible and highly cost-effective. Progressives should eagerly develop and expand such systems.

Implications for action:

- A. Make the anti-democratic, unethical behaviors of the Radical Right much more visible to the American people and hold the Radical Right accountable for lies, intimidation, and scape-goating. Progressives need to build a systematic, energetic, quick-response media-alert system. Such a system would have alerted the public when Democrats were barred from conference committee rooms debating key legislation, when Dick Cheney lied repeatedly about a connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, and when the Republican Party labeled democratic opponents "Pro-Taliban" in their ads. This response system could have rallied support for Senator Specter when he said a nominee to the Supreme Court who wants to overturn *Roe v. Wade* was unlikely to be approved by the Senate.
- B. Monitor and report regularly on the impact of the Bush administration on the quality of life of Americans.
- C. Create a one-stop website – linked to a broad-based network of expertise tracking the administration's impact on a full range of issues (health care, education, air quality etc.). It should be multilayered. Most visible are condensed, usable, brief fact sheets and easily accessible sources. There should also be many deeper layers for those wanting more detail

and nuance. The point is to present hard data, trends, and zingers in graphic, moving images and words. (Creating Udecide.org in the run-up to the '04 election, we learned that people are hungry for, and will use *brief, digestible, distributable formats*. See www.udecide.org).

- D. Link this resource to a strong media outreach effort, linking news outlets to experts able to offer quick responses.
- E. Support grassroots, independent, community-based Progressive media, especially independent news services.

VI. Promote and make visible effective democratic solutions.

The Progressives' moral vision is in fact coming to life at the community level across the country, but it is largely invisible. Even Progressive web sites offer little but critique. Thus, Progressives are hindered in making their case for viable alternatives to market fundamentalism.

Implications for action:

- A. Create and support attractive, useable websites for spreading news of effective, empowering practices: what is working at local and regional levels. Create living catalogues of effective practices to encourage cross fertilization, emulation, and interchange.
- B. Support the full range of Progressive media that includes emergent solutions.

VII. Engage Americans in the process of democracy-building through expanded, innovative uses of the open, interactive public communication networks.

The Radical Right uses secrecy and deception both to develop its agenda and as part of its strategy. Progressives, by contrast, must embody the lessons and values of transparency, inclusion, respect, honesty, civility and participation to build a successful politics.

Implications for action:

- A. Expand the use of the independent media, including web news services, community radio and TV, satellite radio, Internet TV, "wikis" (multiple users, non-mediated websites), listservs, internet polling, collaborative web tools, etc.
- B. Expand and develop networks of house parties, conversation cafes, study circles, cross-issue gatherings, and more.

In Conclusion

We hope these seven lessons, or guidelines, will stimulate discussion and debate to help clarify the next steps progressives can take to build a sustainable and democratic future for this nation, and the world.

Please send your comments and suggestions to nowwhat@udecide.org.