

## CHAPTER FOUR

Center Forward?  
The Fate of the  
New Democrats*Franklin Foer*

THE 2000 DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION in Los Angeles seems another era ago, and that's because it was. If you were a New Democrat, it was a good time to be alive. Kenneth Baer's *Reinventing Democrats*, a history of the centrists' makeover of the party published on the eve of the convention, proclaimed, "No matter what happens in the year 2000, it is safe to assume that the DLC and the New Democrats will be at the center of any debate, or battle, to chart the future of the Democratic Party for the next century."

Based on all available evidence at the convention, that battle had already been settled. The mantle of the party had been handed from one of the Democratic Leadership Council's founding fathers, Bill Clinton, to another, Al Gore. That handover only begins to describe the reasons for believing that the reformers had triumphed and that the party's centrist wing had mastered and domesticated its coalition partners on the left. For his running mate, Gore tapped Joe Lieberman, a man with impeccable hawkish and culturally moderate credentials. The party's platform was written by a former editor of *Blueprint*, the DLC's journal. In its final version, the document had few of the McGovernite exhortations for reduced military spending

and enforced busing that had crowded a generation of Democratic manifestos.

I spent that convention hanging out with New Democrats—attending their events and trailing after the movement’s leading lights through the Staples Center and high-roller parties. Victory was theirs, and they knew it. Nearly every member of the party was self-identifying as a New Democrat those days. Even Jesse Jackson Jr., whose family had a long history of denouncing the DLC as racist and reactionary, had appeared on television to announce that he, too, was a New Democrat. As I made my way through the convention floor with Simon Rosenberg, the head of a fund-raising group called the New Democrat Network, I watched as he was swamped with candidates for Congress and state legislatures, all wanting to have his group’s imprimatur.

Making our way through the Florida delegation, we encountered the head of the state’s DLC, a gruff lawyer named Bob Grizzard. It should be said that Grizzard hardly possessed DLC president Al From’s sense of Brooks Brothers sartorial style. Defiantly wearing a T-shirt from Clinton’s 1992 campaign over a flannel shirt, Grizzard had announced to his delegation, “We’re the party of diversity and inclusion . . . and if they don’t want to swallow the DLC, we’ll stick it to ’em.” A minute later, he grabbed an African American member of the delegation and brought him over to us. “He’s not quite with us yet,” Grizzard laughed. “But give him time.” Grizzard’s friends seemed embarrassed by the gesture, but they shared his sense of centrist triumphalism. Bob Poe, Florida’s party chair, told me, “The DLC is the wind in our sails.”

From the perspective of the 2004 presidential race, it’s hard not to feel that those early proclamations of triumph were premature. The centrist victory was either ephemeral or illusory. To start with the obvious: the 2004 campaign season witnessed the strange and troubling ascent of Howard Dean, a man who once proudly resided within the DLC but who ran for president by trumpeting distinctly uncen-

trist rhetoric. He promised to forcefully challenge the hegemony of the moderates. In speeches, he explicitly blasted the DLC and promised to represent the “Democratic wing of the Democratic Party”—a phrase that had first been invoked by Paul Wellstone and other Left-liberals who resisted the Clintonization of the party. For the centrists, the fact of Dean’s campaign is this: the party came within a hair’s breadth of handing the nomination to a man who had run one of the most Left campaigns in the party’s history.

But Dean hardly represented the year’s only instance of backsliding. The Edwards campaign gained surprising traction with his populist opposition to free trade agreements and his “Two Americas,” us-versus-them stump speech. And it would be hard for a New Democrat to take too much solace in the ultimate triumph of John Kerry. Although Kerry has made some important feints in the direction of the DLC agenda over the course of his career—delivering speeches where he flirted with supporting vouchers and raising questions about affirmative action—he has never really been a stalwart of the movement. There are serious doubts as to his commitment to any core set of beliefs, let alone a heartfelt sympathy toward the New Democratic agenda.

In addition to the candidates, there are other questions about the health of the movement. For the first time since the late 1980s, the party’s left wing has shown signs of life, and this actually understates the health of the Left. It isn’t just stirring; it is vital, thanks to a proliferation of antiwar blogs, talk radio, and the unintended consequences of campaign finance reform, which have all exaggerated the power of unions, environmentalists, and other interest groups. The most troubling aspect of the Left’s revival is its grim determination to imitate the Right. Where the Rush Limbaugh Right has spent the past decade being uncivil and mean, the Left’s grassroots now demand that their party become more uncivil and mean, to match the wingnuts tit for tat.

Intellectually, the movement is on the defensive for the first time

in many years. The Nobel Prize–winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, once a confident New Democrat, has raised some serious questions about the party’s devotion to fiscal conservatism. “I believe we pushed deficit reduction too far,” he wrote in his recent book *The Roaring Nineties*. “Unless we understand how to think about deficits, economic policies in the future will be distorted.” Free trade has come up for serious discussion within the party, and it’s not just a matter of political demagoguery. Although New Democrats touted the virtues of trade, they failed to seriously wrestle with the fallout from globalization.

What forces brought about the current moment of stagnation? How could this movement go so quickly from triumph to malaise? The answer, I think, is that triumph and malaise are deeply connected. Having succeeded in transforming the party and having implemented many of their most important reforms, they are stuck without a terribly coherent, compelling ideological mission. (Much of the time, the New Democrats seem as if they only exist to consolidate the gains their movement made in the 1980s and 1990s—not exactly inspiring stuff.) This is not to say that they don’t have a crucial role in the party. Their flagship organization, the Democratic Leadership Council, and its think tank, the Progressive Policy Institute, continue to generate the soundest policy proposals in Washington. These two organizations draw on the movement’s greatest virtue: its sensibility—a pragmatic, nonideological view of government that calls on the state to solve social ills only when social science evidence suggests that the state can do substantial good. As tacticians, they still have incredibly important insights. They are a necessary check on the party’s left-wing kamikaze impulse to run full-throated, highly ideological campaigns. However, they don’t have a clear mission or a strategy for revitalizing themselves.

### What Were the New Democrats?

To describe the New Democratic mission, one must first describe the bleak landscape in which the movement sprang to life. The McGovern-Fraser reforms of 1971 were implemented to democratize the party; to take power away from the hands of crusty, old, white, male party apparatchiks; to move the nominating process from the smoky backrooms into the sunlight of the primary system. These reforms, of course, had an unintended consequence. Yes, the new system constituted a more open, more democratic process for selecting a nominee, but these primaries did not make the party a model of civic participation. Because primaries tended to inspire low turnout, their outcomes could be decided by the deployment of committed, organized bands of activists. In other words, in the context of Democratic Party politics, the candidate who could best tap the passions of the Left, the students, and the unions would win the primaries.

The transformation of the party was more thorough than these reforms, too. McGovern may have been pummeled in 1972, but his spirit triumphed two years later in the midterm elections, when a whole new generation of liberals came to Congress. Buoyed by a post-Watergate, throw-the-bums-out zeitgeist, they helped revolutionize the inner workings of Congress, overturning the seniority system that had long kept power in the hands of conservative Southern Democrats. The toothpaste was out of the tube. A whole genre of Democrats was displaced and disempowered by these changes.

It is important to remember that there were two constituent groups that were primed to join the New Democratic movement. First, and most obviously, there were the conservative and moderate Southern Democrats—your Sam Nunn and Chuck Robbs—who had been trampled by the party's social revolution. Second, there was a whole generation of Democratic Party intellectuals and wonks who were simply sick of losing elections and tired of the party's activist Left-liberal id triumphing over its tactical superego. They also believed

that the class of 1974 and the other New Left–inspired rebels had created new orthodoxies within the party, preventing it from engaging in honest thinking about the efficacy and morality of its policies. These intellectuals figured themselves reformers; some of them even explicitly compared themselves to the progressives of the early twentieth century. Indeed, there is something to the analogy. For starters, they both viewed themselves as locked in combat against corrupt machines. Instead of fighting against the vulgar bosses who resided in city hall and party clubs, however, the New Democrats were fighting against a group of corrupt interest groups—the unions and the racial mau-mau artists.

When Richard Hofstadter described these early twentieth-century reformers, he portrayed them as denizens of a status-anxious middle class displaced in the new economy of the industrial age. The same could be said of the DLC, which represented a coalition of meritocrats and moderates dispossessed by the rise of the interest groups. And just like their progressive antecedents, the New Democrats represented the bourgeois counterattack. The New Democrats pushed for the party to embrace a middle-class ethic—“opportunity” and “responsibility” were omnipresent words in their slogans. In place of Keynesian profligacy, they proposed a program of fiscal restraint and fretted over deficits. On the cultural front, they wanted to beat back the libertinism of the 1960s, or the “adversarial culture,” by more openly declaring their own religious faith and patriotism and embracing that of fellow citizens. They worried over teen pregnancy and modulated the party’s rhetoric on abortion—“safe, legal, and rare” was their effective slogan.

More important than the movement’s more conservative attitude toward the sexual revolution was its attitude toward work. Clinton and his fellow New Democrats recited lyrical paeons to old-fashioned industry. As a memo from Bruce Reed and Al Fromm put it, “Democrats need to show the middle class that we will honor their values, defend their country, and think twice before spending the tax dollars

they worked so hard to earn.” Thus, welfare reform became one of the single most important rallying cries of the movement.

There was a great strength to the New Democratic critique: they could devise a coherent ideology because their opponents on the left wing of the party had gone so far in the other direction. There was a lot to define them against: the New Left’s takeover of the party had pushed it in such a leftward direction that Republicans didn’t have to work hard to caricature Democratic candidates as “out-of-touch liberals,” even if they were relatively moderate technocrats like Michael Dukakis.

Notwithstanding the appeal of the New Democrat approach, it is worth posing the obvious counterfactual question: Would the New Democrats have succeeded without Bill Clinton? There was an implacable logic to the reforms that the DLC proposed. The Democratic Party was going to become a hopeless, helpless minority if it didn’t implement some major rhetorical and policy reforms. But the DLC was an unabashedly fratricidal organization. It rubbed the party’s establishment the wrong way and precipitated a backlash. In 1985, the California congressional delegation more or less demanded that House Majority Whip Tony Coelho quit the organization. Jesse Jackson denounced the DLC as racist and corrupt, and plenty of others followed the good reverend in deriding the group as “Democrats for the Leisure Class.” Barney Frank said, “The notion of being rescued by the right of the DLC is like being on the *Lusitania* and being told that the *Titantic* has been sent to rescue you.” (On the flip side, William Galston and Elaine Kamarck charged the mainstream of the party with practicing “the politics of evasion” and “liberal fundamentalism.”)<sup>1</sup>

Bill Clinton was the perfect vehicle for selling the New Democratic case to the party. With his rhetorical gifts, he somehow man-

1. William Galston and Elaine Ciulla Kamarck, “The Politics of Evasion: Democrats and the Presidency.” Washington DC, Progressive Policy Institute, September 1989.

aged to sand down the edges of the DLC agenda. He added just the right modicum of populist rhetoric to his centrism—enough to convince Left-liberals that he might actually be one of them. To be sure, even Clinton couldn't really negotiate a rapprochement between the party's factions, as some of the bloody debates from his White House years illustrate. But if Clinton hadn't emerged in 1992, it seems clear that the party was set on an explosive course. There was no mechanism for arbitrating the increasingly vicious conflict between the two wings of the party. Perhaps another nominee—Paul Tsongas? Bob Kerrey?—would have been able to keep the party peace and prevent the Democrats from fracturing, but it seems unlikely.

### What Are the New Democrats?

For all the virtues—both political and intellectual—that the New Democratic agenda has provided as a governing strategy, it hasn't fared nearly so well in opposition. Although Clinton endowed the party with a playbook, the party has been unable to score many points with it. Still clinging to the Clintonian middle ground, the Democrats were clobbered in the 2002 midterm election. Facing a disingenuous negotiating partner in George W. Bush, they have been made to look like fools in their legislative battles with the administration, where their good will toward the White House has never been reciprocated. The Left has attributed these problems to the weaknesses inherent in New Democratic thinking.

While the Left attacked them, the New Democrats faced their own internal identity crisis, which was evident in the 2004 campaign. Longtime stalwarts of the movement, like Elaine Kamarck, formerly of the Progressive Policy Institute, and Simon Rosenberg, head of the New Democrat Network, hitched themselves to the Dean campaign, even though Dean was explicitly campaigning against the DLC. The president of the DLC, Bruce Reed, became a primary adviser to the



Edwards campaign, even though Edwards spent most of the winter harping on the evils of free trade.

Over the past year, profound questions have arisen about what it means to be a New Democrat. What distinguishes the News Dems from the rest of the party? Are there clear issue cleavages, or just a tactical disagreement, or not even that? It's worth reexamining the original tenets of the movement to see how well they hold up, to measure how far the New Democratic agenda has progressed, and to find out how many—or few—fundamentals now separate the movement from the rest of the party.

### *Fiscal Conservatism*

Even in the heyday of Rubinomics, when fiscal conservatism yielded undeniably handsome returns, there were Democratic dissidents, like Robert Kutner and Robert Reich, calling on the party to return to its Keynesian roots. But now, there are almost no Democrats in Washington who take this position—or at least no one who loudly takes this position. Congressional Democrats, even the most Left ones, have argued against the Bush tax cuts by charging it with fiscal irresponsibility. The old bastions of the Left, like the *Nation*, list the exploding budget deficit in their litany of Bush administration sins. Throughout the party, Rubinomics reigns supreme.

This new economic policy may be the greatest accomplishment of the New Democrats. It represents a fundamental reshaping of the party's attitude toward government. By placing limits on government spending, Rubinomics created de facto limits on the government programs that the party could support. But this success has come at a cost for the health of the movement because it has lost one of the primary rallying cries that distinguished it from the rest of the party.

### *Foreign Policy*

During the 1980s, foreign policy clearly set the New Democrats apart. Sam Nunn, David Boren, and others cast an infinitely more skeptical

eye toward arms control than the party's Left. They pushed for Congress to spend more on Reagan Doctrine proxies, like the Contras and the Afghan mujahadeen. In the 1990s, as the cold war melted away, foreign policy faded from the New Democratic agenda, too. Although New Democrats tended to favor the Gulf War and interventions in the Balkans, these issues weren't nearly as central as welfare reform and other domestic concerns.

Now that foreign policy has returned to its cold war importance, the New Democrats should return to their hawkish roots. Iraq has already led to a revival of the Left's old, latent antimilitarism. As the conflict continues, there will be a new generation of candidates who feel comfortable screaming, "Bring our troops home." It will fall to the New Democrats to prevent the Left's dovishness from reviving all the old worst stereotypes of the party's weakness. (It is incredible how the old stereotypes die so hard. Despite Clinton lobbing missiles into the Sudan and Afghanistan, and despite the Democratic Party's near unanimous support for interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, the Democratic Party continues to pay a price for turning its back on its anticommunist traditions in the 1980s. To be sure, the old stereotypes persist because some old-style Democrats continue to make old-style arguments.)

Unfortunately, it's not an easy position to stake out. The New Democrats must split the difference between the revived McGovernite anti-imperialism of the Left and the robust unilateralism of the Bush administration. In between, of course, there's plenty of room for a reasonable position: a greater sensitivity to multilateralism than the Bush administration has shown, a greater proclivity toward American power than felt by the Left. Unfortunately, it's not a position that lends itself to easily sellable slogans, let alone easily articulated principles. And what's worse, the New Democratic movement is largely devoid of foreign policy thinkers who might be able to tease out those slogans and principles. For a generation, the Democratic Party has

bestowed power and prestige to domestic wonks, not foreign policy ones.

### *Race*

More than any issue, race defined the rise of the New Democrats in the 1980s. This issue clearly represented the party's Achilles heel. For its support of affirmative actions and busing, the Democratic Party suffered twenty years of white working-class backlash. If Democrats couldn't find a way to blunt the Republicans' tapping of racial anxieties, they would continue to reel from Willie Horton-like attacks. To reverse these trends, the New Democrats proposed a series of maneuvers, both subtle and blunt. In addition to expressing their displeasure with affirmative action, they picked fights with Jesse Jackson, trying to lower his stock within the party. A 1991 DLC conference famously snubbed Jackson while inviting others from the Left.

But race is another example of how Clinton managed to both score a decisive victory for the New Democrats and blur their identity. By enacting welfare reform and staking out his mend-it-don't-end-it position on affirmative action, he managed to artfully diffuse the white backlash against the Democratic Party. States like Georgia and Ohio suddenly became winnable for the party.

With this new consensus on race, New Democrats don't have any tactical grounds for urging their heartfelt opposition to affirmative action. In addition, with this new consensus on race, the environment doesn't lend itself to talking openly and honestly about the New Democrats' positions on the issue.

### *Populism*

In the postmortems of the 2000 election, the New Democrats were able to easily posit a theory for Al Gore's defeat. Gore had lost by reverting to class warfare rhetoric of old-fashioned Democratic populism, thus alienating the white men in the middle who swung the election. The debates over the Gore debacle were a continuation of a

decades-long blood feud that had pitted the DLC against the labor movement and its intellectual defenders. That's why it is such a shock to now see the DLC beginning to embrace the very populist rhetoric that it had attacked for so long. What's the evidence of this reconciliation with populism? It was visible in the John Edwards campaign, where the DLC's president Bruce Reed and other major movement figures helped formulate a message that complained about "two Americas" and that railed against corporations, free trade agreements, and an economy that rewarded "wealth over work." DLC memos actually treated populism as an acceptable fact of Democratic Party politics.

What can explain this turn around? For one thing, I think the DLC has shifted a few steps to the Left since the 2000 campaign. Reed, one of the great wonks of his generation, has less taste for the internecine fighting that characterized the old debates over populism. Also, the Bush administration has, in part, changed the reality of the American economy. He really has tilted the system in favor of corporations and the wealthy. His policies really do cry out for populist critique.

The DLC's willingness to embrace populism represents the new spirit of rapprochement that permeates the movement and the party in the wake of the presidential primaries. Examples abound of this growing Democratic unity. New Democrats have been invited into meetings with the liberal interest groups, where the 527 organizations coordinate and plot strategy. Centrists who were blackballed from the *American Prospect* have since been hired as columnists.

### *Tactics*

Without substantial policy differences separating the New Democrats from the Old, the movement's most defining characteristic is its tactical approach—the strategy that the Clinton campaigns deployed in the 1990s. Whereas Old Democrats urge the party to increase its electoral tally by investing in efforts to turn out blacks, unions, and other Left-liberal voters, New Democrats have tried to push the party

to appeal to uncommitted voters in the middle. Of course, there's an ideological subtext to this division: the Old Democrats believe that turnout can be boosted by running a campaign that strokes all the Left's erogenous zones. Even if such raw liberalism will turn off some swing voters, the argument goes, that loss will be more than compensated for with the invigorated Left-liberals who will swarm the polls. Conversely, the significance of the DLC's focus on swing voters is that the only way to reach the voters in the center is to downplay the party's left-liberalism and recraft its image to make it more palatable to middle America.

Before the late 1990s, it was very difficult to muster an argument against the DLC's strategy. The numbers clearly showed that elections couldn't be won just by turning out the base. But that began to change. With the Gingrich revolution, the impeachment of Bill Clinton, and the contested result of the 2000 election, the nation became increasingly polarized along partisan lines. The slice of voters in the middle has become much thinner. Clearly, this is the way that Karl Rove and the Bush administration view the electorate. Starting in 2001, Rove began touting an essay by Michael Barone on the 50–50 nation—an electorate split evenly in its allegiances. Consequently, Rove has argued that the election will be determined by the administration's ability to turn out its conservative vote. To achieve this goal, he told an American Enterprise Institute seminar in 2001 that he wanted to boost Bush's harvest of evangelical votes by four million. A similar strain of logic has propelled the administration to focus on steel tariffs to appease steelworkers in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. The administration views the election as so inevitably tight that it must be won on the margins, not by broadcasting a message aimed at broad swaths of voters.

This view of the electorate—closely divided, with margins of victory decided by the turnout of the base—has also found a new widespread following within the Democratic Party. This was the theory of Howard Dean and his guru, Joe Trippi. During the campaign,

they frequently cited the work of the Berkeley linguist George Lakoff and his book, *Moral Politics*, on the potential for progressive mobilization. “What you do is crank the heck out of your base, get them really excited and crank up the base turnout and you’ll win the middle-of-the-roaders,” Dean told *U.S. News’s* Roger Simon.

Even if the DLC has exhausted its policy ideas—and I’m not saying it has—it would be worth having the DLC around simply to block the Democrats from embracing this tight view of the electorate. For starters, just because Rove talks about turning out evangelical voters does not mean he will ignore the middle. The whole initial stage of the Bush 2004 campaign has been about creating an image of John Kerry in swing voters’ minds, scaring them into believing that he is weak on national security and an entirely untrustworthy flip-flopper. Second, the data just don’t support the Left’s view of the electorate. About one-third of all voters are hard-core Democrats, and about 10 percent more usually vote Democratic. So even if every one of them voted, you would still need an additional 7 to 10 percent of the electorate to win, and this may overcount the partisans. A 2004 study by the Pew Research Center classified 29 percent of the voters as swing voters.

This isn’t to say that the DLC has always gotten things right. They have tended to embrace hokey concepts to precisely pinpoint the identity of the swing voters whom they insist the party must target. Remember the “Wired Dads,” the worker bees who populated suburban office parks, the group the DLC’s pollster Mark Penn trumpeted in the 2000 election? Still, they do have the right general idea.

### What Will Be a New Democrat?

In defining the New Democrats throughout this essay, I’ve used the term “movement.” It’s a term I use because that’s the way the New Democrats describe themselves. But in a sense, this word doesn’t fit all that comfortably. The New Democrats never really had local mem-

bers or any of the other characteristics that constitute true social movements. On the contrary, the DLC is an insiders' group that focuses its efforts mostly on politicians in Washington—not on the people who put them there. This is a big problem. Like the neoconservatives and libertarians, indeed like all but a few ideological movements in modern American politics, the New Democrats have failed to develop a mass constituency for their ideas.

Even though they might not be a mass movement, however, the New Democrats are undeniably an intellectual movement. Even if they are confined to a few offices on Capitol Hill, they continue to serve an important function. Despite the emergence of the Center for American Progress, the Progressive Policy Institute continues to be one of the few deeply wonky generators of Democratic ideas. On trade and education, most notably, and in other areas, too, the PPI actually produces original, detailed proposals for new initiatives. When they don't produce new initiatives, they often produce clever rhetorical strategies for selling old ones—or solid, highly sellable arguments for challenging Republican proposals.

Could the New Democrats ever transform themselves into a mass movement? Obviously, people don't usually take to the streets calling for sensible incrementalist changes in government—Education Reform! Reinventing Government! The People United! Still, there seems to be far more potential for cultivating the segment of the electorate that is alienated by both Left and Right. So far in this essay, I've provided one big reason why the DLC hasn't been able to further expand its political base to provide a home for these people. To paraphrase Richard Hofstadter's description of third parties, the New Democrats stung and then they faded. They achieved their biggest goals and then lost much of their vitality.

There are several additional reasons why they haven't revived themselves as an important force within the party. First, they suffer from a rather debilitating case of Clinton nostalgia. Of course, nearly everyone in the party suffers from a debilitating case of Clinton nos-

talgia, but this syndrome seems to afflict New Democrats more than anyone else. Instead of formulating their next set of issues and ideas, they often find themselves occupied with defending the Clinton legacy against attacks from the Left and the Right. When they aren't defending the Clinton record, they are touting it as a model of how their centrist strategy can enable Democrats to successfully run government and the party. All this time spent fighting and defending the last war means they have been less than effective in preparing for the next one.

Second, they have managed to squander the rhetoric and politics of reform. In a sense, the origins of the New Democrats trace back to Gary Hart, Tim Wirth, their fellow neoliberals, and the heyday of the *Washington Monthly*. These proto-New Democrats had one major clarion call: to reform the bureaucracies that inefficiently implemented social policy. This mantle of reform had been prominently displayed in the Clinton campaigns and his administrations: "reinventing government" was an omnipresent idea, as were welfare and education reform. Like all the best New Democratic ideas, these three were simultaneously good politics and good policy. They helped dispel the deeply held beliefs that the Democratic Party existed for the sole purpose of growing the bureaucracy.

However, those old reformist hobbyhorses no longer exist. Welfare reform has been accomplished. Campaign finance was overhauled. Bush adopted and then bungled the New Democrats' education agenda. And though reinventing government might still be good policy, it has lost its political novelty. The New Democrats need to propose a new set of policies that could help revivify the concept of reform. John Kerry has a few decent reformist ideas, such as his suggestions for the tax system, but there's not enough out there to justify a whole new reformist rhetoric that could be politically and intellectually powerful. Without this broader rhetorical and intellectual framework, the DLC will have a hard time being more than a centrist



think tank and the New Democrats will have a hard time being a social movement.

Third, the New Democrats need to start doing more foreign policy thinking. Their silence on the issue is deafening. If they felt as passionately about international issues as they do about domestic ones, they would be doing more to press Kerry. They would be deriding him for retreating from his commitment to Iraqi democracy; they would be pushing him to level more sweeping critiques of the Bush administration's failure to follow through on its rhetorical paeons to democracy in the Middle East. The administration's continued closeness to Saudi Arabia, as always, should be a prime concern. It's hard to imagine the New Democrats will ever regain their importance if they can't speak forcefully about the greatest issue of our times.

### **One Last Rhetorical Question, Posed and Answered**

You might ask: If the New Democrats have triumphed in so many areas and if they can't easily articulate a coherent agenda, then why should they bother trying to do more than produce ideas and policies? The answer lies on the left. Bush has inspired a new wave of radicalism on the party's liberal flank. There's no better evidence of this than the elevated stature of Michael Moore.

For a Democratic politician, there should be no obvious upside in identifying with Michael Moore. During the last election, he dumped all over the party, lending his full-throated endorsement to Ralph Nader's candidacy. After September 11, he cast his lot with the radicals again, opposing the American war in Afghanistan. And now, he has put together a movie that confirms all the cheapest anti-American slurs, as well as spinning irresponsible conspiracies. You would think that these positions would make Moore political poison.

But Moore hasn't been political poison—or at least he hasn't been treated like political poison. Starting in the primaries, the Democrats rushed to embrace him. General Wesley Clark campaigned with him

in the New Hampshire primary. The party's leadership turned out to the red carpet premiere of his film *Fahrenheit 9/11* at Washington's Uptown Theater. Here's Tom Daschle; there's Terry McAuliffe extending his arm to the burly documentarian.

Right now, it's hard to consider the Left too grave a threat to the future of the party. For the time being, they seem to be in an incredibly pragmatic mood, driven by an overwhelming, earnest determination to oust Bush. But what happens if Kerry loses? I'm guessing that the proponents of the old left-liberal style of campaigning will announce that events have vindicated their view of the world. They will pin blame for the defeat on Kerry's "cautious" style and his "centrist" view. And if the Left claims to champion bare-knuckled politics now, just watch how bloody the election postmortems will be. It is at that moment that we'll need the New Democrats to defend their policy legacy, their political playbook, and all that is sensible in the party. We'll need them more than ever.