

Ten Ideas for 2008

By the time a campaign starts, it's too late to put a completely new idea into the heads of a majority of the electorate – especially a broad new theme or a major reframing of an issue voters think they already understand. At that stage, a candidate can do little more than agree or disagree with ideas that the public already knows. President Bush, for example, didn't invent the family-values theme or the strength-makes-you-safe theme or the tax-cuts-create-jobs theme. He just aligned himself with them; that's why his campaign seemed so simple. (Actually, the basic conservative ideas are no less complicated than their liberal competitors. They just seem simple because we've heard them so many times.)

So what ideas will liberal candidates be able to campaign on in 2008? The ones we start developing and promoting now. I have ten suggestions. None of the ideas in my list is original, and in some sense that's the point: These are ideas that are already gestating somewhere in the community, but they need your help if they're going to become part of a majority platform. Some of the ideas are floating freely in the *zeitgeist*, but I've tried to reference the ones that I stole from particular places.

The ten ideas fall into three groups. The first three ideas are defensive: The Right has been making some dubious claims that we need to start challenging. Ideas 4-6 reclaim major ideological assets that that we have let the Right own without a fight – Christianity, globalization, and capitalism. The final four ideas align the Democratic Party with democracy and the common good.

Fighting Back

We fought the 2004 campaign with one hand tied, because we let the Right get away with a few sweeping assumptions that just aren't true. Some of those assumptions are explicit and some are subliminal. We need to make them all explicit and answer them.

1. 9/11 didn't change everything.

A few years ago we kept hearing that the Internet had changed everything. All the rules were different in the New Economy. You didn't have to sell products any more, and you could make money by giving away services for free. We know how that worked out. As big and important as the Internet has turned out to be, it didn't change everything. Nothing changes everything.

For three years now we've been letting the Right get away with ignoring common sense by saying "9/11 changed everything." Kerry was afraid to challenge this assertion in 2004 because he didn't want to appear to be soft on terrorism. We can't let that happen in 2008.

What didn't 9/11 change? Lots of things. The United States still needs allies. The Geneva Convention still makes sense. Imprisoning people without trials is still tyranny. Torture is still wrong. You still need to double-check your intelligence before you start shooting people. Stuff like that. If we take on those issues one-by-one, and let the Right respond with "9/11 changed everything" we're going to lose.

2. Morality is not sex.

Practice this line: "You keep saying 'morality' but really you're just talking about sex." Homosexuality, promiscuity, and obscenity are just sexual issues. Even abortion turns into a sexual issue if your real goal is punishing promiscuity rather than saving fetuses.

Sex barely scratches the surface of morality. If your moral code instructs you to bring honesty, integrity, and compassion into all your human relationships, it's not clear that you need any special rules about sex at all.

When Jesus listed the admission standards for Christians to get into Heaven (Matthew 25), not one of them concerned sex. The key idea was “Who did you help?” not “Who did you sleep with?”

We shouldn't abandon the word *morality* to the neo-Puritans. Letting the working poor get priced out of the health care system is *immoral*. Trumping up bogus charges about WMD and terrorism in order to start a war is *immoral*. The way we treat prisoners at Guantanamo Bay is *immoral*. We can't be shy about using the language of morality. The Left is the true home of moral values, once you understand that morality is more than sex.

Al Sharpton, for one, gets this. On the [November 28 Meet the Press](#) he said:

Many of us have limited this argument to just sex-based arguments: gay marriage, abortion. ... I think that the broad issues of poverty, of disease, of health care -- those are moral issues, too. We're not entering into a values discussion broadly enough.

3. America can't rule the world.

The community of nations needs a leader, not a ruler – and America is the only viable candidate. At this point in history, the world spins its wheels if the US doesn't lead. (Global warming is a prime example.) But we get into trouble when we forget about leadership and try to rule.

After 9/11, when we announced the goal of making the world a less hospitable place for international terrorist organizations, other nations responded with overwhelming support and cooperation. But the world was horrified when we went on to set ourselves up as the ultimate judge of other nations, empowered to decide which governments shall and shall not survive. (Mugabe, pass. Saddam, fail. House of Saud, pass. Kim Jong Il, incomplete.)

As *de facto* world leader, America has a responsibility promote a vision of global progress. If we do our job well, if our vision really does benefit the world (and not just ourselves), then other nations will line up behind us and good things will happen. But if we try to rule, if we put forward a self-serving vision and strong-arm other countries into supporting it, then ultimately the world will unite against us just as it united against Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.

Reclaiming the Winners

The Republicans have become the party of Christianity, globalization, and capitalism – three victorious historical forces. If we can't reclaim those forces for the Left, we lose. The question is how. The move-to-the-right faction says that we should adopt some or all of the Republican positions, as Clinton adopted welfare reform. In other words, liberalism *by its nature* is anti-Christian, anti-globalization, and anti-capitalist, so we need to abandon it if we want to start winning elections again. Others take the John-Kerry's-hunting-trip approach: keep our liberal values, but change our imagery and rhetoric so that we look and sound more like Republicans. A southern good-old-boy, they claim, could have won in 2004 without changing any of Kerry's positions on abortion, gay rights, health care, environmental protection, and outsourcing.

Both of these approaches are short-term fixes to a long-term problem. We don't need to move either the Democratic Party or its rhetoric to the right. We need to move Christianity, globalization, and capitalism to the left. None of the three is conservative by its nature. We need to understand each of them deeply, so that we can present the public with authentically *liberal* Christianity, *liberal* capitalism, and *liberal* globalization.

Sound impossible? A century ago, the idea that conservatives could own Christianity sounded impossible. At the turn of the 20th century, the political face of Christianity was the Social Gospel: help the poor, heal the sick, lift up the working man. Conservatives were greedy Wall Street types, the kind of people that Jesus said

would get into Heaven at about the same time that a camel walked through the eye of a needle. How did the conservatives turn that around? Well, they didn't move to the left, and they didn't fiddle with their image and rhetoric. They moved Christianity.

4. The Religious Right are Pharisees. Christianity belongs to us.

During the 20th century, the Right took Christianity away from us. They recast the religion of Jesus to stand for aggressive militarism, closed-minded prejudice, and doing everything within your power to make the rich richer. (When did Jesus say, "Blessed are the war-makers" or "Screw Caesar; it's your money"?) By the time Pat Robertson ran for president in 1988, the conquest was complete. He could style himself as "the Christian candidate" without any significant objection.

It was the Pharisees' revenge. For those liberals who don't read the Bible – that's part of the problem, by the way – I'll explain. All through the gospels, Jesus is being heckled by the Pharisees, a faction that promoted a strict interpretation of Mosaic Law. Again and again, Jesus sides with the spirit of the law against the Pharisees' loyalty to the letter of the law. (For what it's worth, the Pharisees look much more reasonable in Jewish versions of history, where they are not foils for someone else.) The law, Jesus argues, needs to be tempered by compassion and common sense. In the Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), for example, the priest and the Levite who cross to the other side of the road (rather than help the injured man) aren't just being jerks. They're obeying the letter of the law. They're maintaining their ritual purity by not coming into contact with blood or possibly a corpse. But the Good Samaritan ignores all that in favor of a higher law: Love your neighbor as yourself.

See where I'm headed? When Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and their ilk get going, you don't hear much about compassion and common sense; but you hear a lot about the letter of the law. As the bumper sticker puts it: "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." That's the Pharisee position; it's not Christian. Jesus would have had no part of it. We need to point that out, again and again. Christianity belongs to us; we shouldn't surrender it to the Pharisees of the Right.

This will be easier than it sounds, because Christianity has never been as uniformly conservative as the media portrays it. A Soujourners [community statement of faith](#), for example, contains numerous liberal statements like this one:

We believe in binding up the divisions that the world often creates, especially those based on race, class, gender, or culture. We are called to combat racism in all its forms and to build a more just and pluralistic society where diversity is respected, freedom is secured, and power is shared. We refuse to accept structures and assumptions that normalize poverty and segregate the world by class. We are committed to resisting sexism in all its forms and affirming the integrity and equality of women and men both in the church and in the world.

Even the Pope is a flaming liberal when he talks about something other than sex. In [Laborem exercens](#) he writes:

Christian tradition has never upheld this right [to own property] as absolute and untouchable. On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation: *the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use*, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone. [italics original]

Does reclaiming Christianity mean that the Left needs to throw out all the Jews and atheists? Of course not. It also doesn't mean that non-Christian liberals should give lip service to a religion they don't believe. But we need to recognize that Jesus is a cultural icon in this country, and he is on our side. When the Right claims that Jesus is on their side, we need to be able to argue convincingly that they are wrong. That means getting educated about the Bible and learning how to speak its language comfortably – as Kerry could not. (Check

out Forrester Church's *God and Other Famous Liberals*, John Shelby Spong's *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, or John Buehrens' *Understanding the Bible*.) You don't have to be black to quote Martin Luther King, you don't have to be Hindu to quote Mahatma Gandhi, and you don't have to be Christian to quote Jesus.

5. Globalization belongs to us.

Most liberals already know the destructive side of globalization. It has allowed multinational corporations to play governments off against each other, rewarding nations with the lowest wages, weakest environmental protections, and flimsiest standards of workers' rights. But despite its poetic, nostalgic appeal, Wendell Barry style localism is not going to win any national elections for us. We need to have our own vision of globalization.

In the 2004 primaries, several Democrats already did. The idea was called *fair trade*. Howard Dean put it this way in an [interview with the Concord Monitor](#)

Globalization is here to stay whether we like it or not, but the rules for globalization are not. Both NAFTA and the WTO help large multinational corporations but ignore the needs for the people who work for them. In order to make globalization work we also have to globalize worker protection, labor rights, environmental rights and human rights. Free trade won't work under the present circumstances.

The model for liberal globalization is the European Union. As it expands, the EU brings greater freedom and a higher quality of life to the poorer countries it absorbs. The EU pulls up the standards of countries like Poland and Hungary, rather than pulling down the standards of Germany and France. The World Trade Organization (or some new organization) could work the same way: It could be a club of civilized nations. In order to join the club and get favored access to its rich markets, you need to live up to civilized standards – protect the environment, guarantee workers' rights, allow certain basic political freedoms, and so on.

Republicans have worked for decades to frame the alternative to globalization as “protectionism” (in which the government rewards inefficient but well-connected special interests by banning competing imports). Protectionism is corrupt by its very nature: political hacks and rich lobbyists (union and corporate alike) work hand-in-hand to keep you from buying cheaper, better products made overseas. Both the American consumer and deserving, hard-working foreign laborers are victimized. This framing has been so well established that Kerry did not dare to challenge it head-on. Though I dimly remember hearing the phrase “fair trade” once or twice, Kerry highlighted specific problems with conservative globalization (like outsourcing) without presenting a sweeping liberal alternative.

But we have an alternative. If Indonesians can make cheaper sneakers because their workers are happy with wages that Americans would refuse, then that's just capitalism and we have to live with it. But if Indonesian sneakers are cheaper because their factories are allowed to pollute, their workers can't organize, and their courts value workers' lives cheaply – that's different. We need to make the public appreciate this difference, so that fair trade doesn't vanish in 2008 the way it did in 2004.

6. Capitalism belongs to us.

This is a long-term project that probably won't be ready for 2008, but we need to keep working on it. The Right has become the party of capitalism, which by inference makes the Left the party of what? Communism? Socialism? Big government? Who wants to run on that?

But capitalism is just a technique for organizing production and consumption. It isn't inherently Left or Right any more than assembly lines or double-entry bookkeeping or shopping malls are. Today, capitalism concentrates wealth in the hands of the few and distances both corporations and consumers from the

destructive consequences of their decisions. But is that *capitalism*, or is it just *right-wing* capitalism? Could there be a *left-wing* capitalism that harnesses the efficiency of market forces to the values of liberal society?

William Greider says yes. He doesn't have it all worked out yet either, but in *The Soul of Capitalism* he points a finger in the right direction. Without killing the goose that lays the golden eggs, we could encourage employee ownership, change the nature of corporate charters to make corporations more responsive to the public good, require (as Europe does) that manufacturers handle the disposal of their used-up products, create community investment funds that make capital available to good corporate citizens, and inject humanist values into the market system in many other ways. Greider still lacks an over-arching theory that pulls all this together, but his book is a welcome reminder that capitalism-as-we-see-it is not necessarily the last word in capitalism.

Another potential prophet of liberal capitalism is the South American economist Hernando de Soto. In *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*, de Soto stakes out a position between free-market fundamentalists (who claim that under-developed countries can become rich by setting capital free) and anti-globalists (who see only the potential for multinational corporations to rape and pillage the Third World). He writes:

It makes no sense continuing to call for open economies without facing the fact that economic reforms underway open the doors only for small and globalized elites and leave out most of humanity. At present, capitalist globalization is concerned with interconnecting only the elites that live inside the bell jars. To lift the bell jars and do away with property apartheid will require going beyond the existing borders of both economics and law.

I am not a die-hard capitalist. I do not view capitalism as a credo. Much more important to me are freedom, compassion for the poor, respect for the social contract, and equal opportunity. But for the moment, to achieve those goals, capitalism is the only game in town. It is the only system we know that provides us with the tools required to create massive surplus value.

The curious phrase *property apartheid* in the above quote is key to de Soto's analysis. Capitalism doesn't lift up the poor in the Third World, he claims, because they can't get into the property-owning game. To fix this, he proposes liberalized rules for recognizing squatter's rights, sweat equity, and the various other extralegal property conventions that exist on the fringes of society. His notion of "the people's law" is quite radical: Property is a social convention that needs to come up from the people, not down from the government. Capitalism only starts to hum *after* the establishment of a property system with top-to-bottom legitimacy. (In the middle of all this economic and legal analysis is a wonderful bit of neglected history: How did the United States resolve all the conflicting claims of King's grants, purchases from the Indians, and homesteading in order to create the orderly property system that we enjoy today?)

Finally, capitalism does not mean corporatism. ([According to Mussolini](#), fascism does.) Due to a mistake the Supreme Court made in 1886 – damn those activist judges! – corporations were declared "persons" and given the protection of the Bill of Rights. That's why it's so hard to get them under control. The First Amendment protects their political contributions, for example, while their right to privacy limits how much data the government can force them to reveal. (God help us if they ever start testing the limits of their right to bear arms.) Sadly, it will take a constitutional amendment to undo this, and we should get right on it. See Thom Hartmann's *Unequal Protection* for a summary of the issues (and even more fascinating neglected history).

Greider, de Soto, and Hartmann are not united behind any particular conclusions, but they share an attitude: Capitalism is not a given. Its workings were not established when God went back to work on the eighth day. If we look deeply into the roots of capitalism, we can understand it *better* than the conservatives do and find a way to make it our own.

The Party of Democracy

The Right may have mastered the art of winning elections, but it lacks a fundamental understanding and appreciation of democracy. A healthy democracy is not a herd of sheep that legitimizes its shepherd by taking a vote. In the long term, democracy requires an active, informed, responsible citizenry that participates in shaping and running its public institutions. Secrecy, propaganda, privatization, and the spreading of fear and distrust all work against democracy. The Left has objected to these developments one by one, but rarely pulls them together into the single issue they are: We support democracy; the Right undermines it.

7. Free citizens must have courage.

There's a reason why *The Star-Spangled Banner* links "the land of the free" with "the home of the brave." Citizens without courage will give up a little more of their freedom every time they get scared. Today, Americans are afraid of terrorism, and so our freedom is slipping away.

In a free society, especially a free society with guns, there's no sure defense against terrorism. (The D. C. snipers showed how much panic two guys with a rifle and a beat-up car can cause.) Good police work helps, but if you're looking for an air-tight guarantee that you or your loved ones won't be victims of terrorism, you need to move to a police state. You may not be brave enough to live in the land of the free.

When George Bush says, "We're fighting them over there so that we don't have to fight them over here," his implicit message is that ordinary citizens don't have to be brave – that's what we hire professional soldiers for. In the Right's vision, America only needs enough courageous citizens to staff the armed forces. The Romans went down this path: Originally they had citizen soldiers, then professional soldiers recruited from the citizenry, then non-citizen professional soldiers. Eventually, they had an army with no particular loyalty to the institutions of Rome. It didn't serve them well.

Somehow, we have let the Right make the topsy-turvy argument that civil libertarians are wimps. Real men, they imply, do whatever it takes to go get the terrorists. Actually, it's the Patriot Act that's wimpy – a cowardly Congress surrendered our freedom at the first sign of danger. Hit us once, and we start locking people up without trials. Liberals need to turn the language of courage rightside-up. The TV-western heroes of my youth – the Matt Dillons and the Ben Cartwrights – had the courage to do things right when more fearful men wanted to cut corners. Heroes stand up to the lynch mobs; they don't lead them.

8. Protect the Commons.

I steal this formulation from Lawrence Lessig's *The Future of Ideas: the Fate of the Commons in a Connected World*. That book is about copyright protection and the public domain, particularly as it affects the Internet. But in order to make sense of the apparently new problems that the Internet creates, Lessig had to back up and take an abstract look at public property and the public domain.

We all need to do that. Over the past few decades, the Right has taken the word *common* out of common political usage. We no longer talk about *the common good*, for example. Society, we are told, is not a real entity; it's just some kind of artificial construct, an abstraction with no definite meaning. As a result, most Americans have lost their sense of ownership of our common property and our public institutions. Public property doesn't belong to *us*, it belongs to *nobody*. The government isn't the steward of our common inheritance, it's some strange kind of usurper that keeps real people from owning property.

In the rhetoric of the Right, the government itself doesn't belong to us. (Except for the military. The troops are *our* troops, and it's patriotic to take pride in having the biggest, baddest team in the Military League.) The word *government* is used to distance the American people from their property and institutions. The Right talks about *our* troops, but *government* schools, *government* regulations, and *government* land. To feel the

full force of that framing, try the experiment of reversing it: *our* schools, *government* troops.

The Left needs to resuscitate the notion of the common good, and even the notion that we form a commonality at all. Americans are united by more than just the fact that we root for the same military team. America, and the communities that make it up, are real entities. *We* own property, *we* create institutions, *we* select a government to represent us, and *we* protect ourselves with regulations. The air, the water, the parks, the broadcast spectrum, the intellectual property of the public domain – they don't belong to *nobody*, they belong to *us*. They are *the Commons*. If you want a government that will take good care of *all* of your property, public as well as private, then you want a liberal government.

9. America is worth paying for.

One of the many great examples in George Lakoff's *Don't Think of an Elephant!* is the ingeniously evil phrase "tax relief." The phrase subliminally puts forward an entire constellation of dubious ideas: Taxes are a harsh burden. People who try to relieve you of that burden are good, and people who stand in the way of your relief are bad. The "relief" framing implicitly justifies doing whatever you need to do to get out of paying taxes: Under-report your income, construct elaborate legal facades, move your corporate headquarters to Bermuda – whatever. It's an unfair burden; you need relief.

The Left needs a new frame for taxes. If the government is some strange Other, then taxes are a kind of theft. But if the government really belongs to us, then taxes just move our money from one account to another. From our personal accounts we can buy personal goods; from our common account we can buy common goods. If that notion sounds strange, think about stockholders and corporations. When a corporation retains its earnings for future investment rather than paying them out as dividends, the stockholders don't scream about theft. The corporation just owns that money for them; as long as it manages the money well, the stockholders are happy.

Taxes are your fair share of the expense of keeping the country going. And a good country is worth paying for. People who try to get out of paying taxes are denigrating our country. They're saying that America is not worth paying for. They are unpatriotic.

It's all the more appalling that the people who try hardest not to pay taxes are the ones who benefit most from living and doing business in America – the rich and their big corporations. How many billionaires come from Bangladesh? How many people want to carry the Croatian Express card? A progressive tax system recognizes the obvious fact that the rich gain the most from America; they should pay the most to keep it going.

10. Democracy means trusting the people.

Underneath the Right's positive, focus-group-tested phrases (like *ownership society*) is an ugly message of distrust: You have to own your own, because you can't trust anybody else's. You need to own your own retirement benefits, because you can't trust young people to fulfill the generational contract of Social Security. You need school vouchers, because you can't trust your community to provide a decent public school. You need a gun, because you can't trust the safety of your neighborhood. The legal system needs tort reform, because juries made up of people like you can't be trusted. The Constitution needs a long list of amendments, because you can't trust judges. The government can't be trusted to spend your taxes wisely, so you need to take that money back and spend it yourself. It goes without saying that international organizations like the UN or the International Criminal Court are not to be trusted; that's why we need to approach each international crisis *de novo* and establish a new coalition-of-the-willing.

The Right frequently raises trust as an issue, but they mean personal trust *in the candidate*. As in: "You can trust me, but you can't trust him." Put together, it is a bizarre and dangerous message: You can't trust your fellow citizens, you can't trust your public institutions, but you can trust your Leader. The Leader demands a

lot of trust: Trust him to decide which nations we need to attack preemptively. Trust him to decide which American citizens are enemy combatants, so that they can be locked up without trials. Trust his administration with unprecedented powers of investigation and surveillance. Trust it to operate with unprecedented levels of secrecy.

How long can America survive as a democracy with this configuration of trust and distrust?

Democracy does not just mean elections and a constitution. Democracy is a structure of trusted public institutions through which the people shape their lives. The Right does not understand this. (That's why they consistently underestimate the difficulty of bringing democracy to other countries. We can give Iraq a constitution. We can oversee an election that chooses a government. But we can't make Sunni trust Shia.)

The Democrats need to be the party that promotes *public* trust – open government, accountability to the people, support for public institutions. Public trust needs to be coupled with public responsibility. We should not be defensive about the failures of public institutions, but should turn the discussion to remedies that make the institutions better, not ones that eliminate public institutions in favor of private ones. Every problem with a public institution should be an opportunity to impose more openness, more accountability, more democracy.

The Right wants to reduce the people to consumers whose simple buy/don't-buy decisions are amalgamated by the Market to shape society. Consumers have no need to think about the common good or the long-term direction of the nation. They only have to decide what to buy next. The Left needs to inspire people to be citizens, not just consumers. We need to involve them in the processes of government, to have them look up from the purchasing decisions of today and consider the world they want to leave to future generations.

America needs citizens, not just consumers. Otherwise government of the people, by the people, and for the people *shall* perish from the Earth.

Don't wait for a candidate

My purpose is not only to encourage you to push and develop these ten ideas, but your own ideas as well. If there's something you're waiting to hear from a candidate, stop waiting and say it yourself. Tell your friends, write letters, start a web site, arrange classes at your local library – do whatever you can to popularize the next set of liberal ideas. Maybe in four or eight or twelve years, the candidate on the Left can be the one who seems to have clear, simple, common-sense solutions – because we've worked hard to make the sense of those solutions common.

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