

September 8, 2008

<p>TO: Interested Parties</p> <p>FROM: Rachel Laser, Director of the Culture Program and Jim Kessler, Vice President for Policy</p> <p>RE: Handling the Culture Wars</p>

Senator John McCain's choice of Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate indicates that part of the conservative strategy over the next two months will be to reignite the dormant culture wars.

McCain himself has never been much of a culture warrior. Indeed, he ran in 2000 calling Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson "agents of intolerance." This cycle, his rumored top choices for VP (Joe Lieberman and Tom Ridge) were never major players in this war or were seen as combatants for the other side. But Governor Palin's selection was made specifically to please social conservative activists. Her speech, along with others at the Republican Convention, seemed designed to reignite old cultural battles. As a result, it is likely that issues like abortion, gay rights, guns, and religion in the public square will become more prominent in the weeks ahead.

Progressives must not take the bait—Americans are not pining for a return to the culture war battlefield. Instead, progressives should try to own the olive branch. In our view, Americans on all sides of these debates are hungry for fresh thinking and consensus building on these issues that for too long have been used to divide the country. This has helped spark a movement among many progressives and Evangelicals bringing these two populations closer together, not just on noncontroversial issues like poverty, the environment and Darfur, but also on the most hotly contested cultural issues of our times, including abortion, gay and lesbian issues and the role of religion in the public square. It is now clear that even on these traditionally divisive issues, overlapping values and goals exist, and many on both sides are eager to move past these battles.

This memo recommends a single, overarching theme, which we apply to each of the issues listed above, to help progressives react constructively to the provocative cultural battle being waged by conservatives:

Progressives are seeking to find common ground and to move the nation forward where we have shared values; conservatives are seeking to reignite the culture wars of yesterday that paralyze the nation for the sake of short-term political gain.

Below we offer guidance on applying this message to the four hottest culture war issues:

Abortion

This issue is likely to be the central front of the culture wars. We suggest the message:

I support abortion rights, but we can find common ground to reduce the need for abortions in America while still protecting a woman's right to have one. Conservatives want to tear this country apart and throw people in jail. I want to reduce the need for abortions by preventing unintended pregnancies and supporting pregnant women.

This message allows progressives to maintain the core principle of legal abortion, but allows them to address people's moral concerns through the goal of reducing the prevalence of abortion. It should be accompanied by an explanation of the two policy tracks that accomplish this goal: preventing unintended pregnancies through policies like education, increased access to birth control and teen pregnancy prevention programs, and support for pregnant women in need, new families and adoption.

Our poll on abortion demonstrated that this message is popular. Sixty-nine percent of respondents said they were likely to support a candidate who "supports abortion rights, but believes we can find common ground to reduce the need for abortion while still protecting a woman's right to have one."¹ And 74% wished "elected leaders would look for common ground on the issue of abortion." Our poll also revealed that fewer than 20% of all Americans believe that abortion is so wrong that people should go to jail for performing them or having one.

This common ground language is also reflected in the Democratic Party platform, which has staked new center ground on this issue.

Gay Equality

This message should track the work of the Evangelicals and progressive leaders who are forging new coalitions even on this issue. It should invoke *dignity and freedom*. We recommend a critique of conservatives that accuses them of stoking the flames of divisiveness, not one that charges them with discrimination, homophobia, and bigotry. We suggest the message:

Protecting the God-given human dignity of all, even those with whom one disagrees, is an American value and a high moral and religious calling. Conservatives are employing a divide and conquer

strategy. They are seeking to make people fear gays and lesbians and preventing the country from advancing where we all agree. My hope is to bring people of faith together with advocates of change so that we can start a reasoned dialogue and move forward as one nation.

Guns

One of the greatest predictors of voting behavior is gun ownership, and roughly 45% of the nation has a gun in the home. For most of the past eight years, John McCain has been enemy number one among NRA enthusiasts (based on his authorship of the gun show loophole bill and campaign finance reform). He has now made amends with NRA leadership and the choice of Palin makes this a NRA dream ticket. (See the cover of this week's Newsweek.)

Be aware that while Americans generally hate special interest groups, they have a modestly positive view toward the NRA. At the same time, they are tired of the fight on this issue like on other culture issues. We suggest the following message:

I take a back seat to no one in support of Second Amendment rights, but those rights don't extend to terrorists and criminals. That is why I support the John McCain bill to close the gun show loophole. Conservatives are up to their old tricks. There is no argument over the Second Amendment; they just want to pick a fight and divide this nation for short term political gain.

Progressives should make clear that they support both an individual's Second Amendment right to own firearms for protection, collection, and sport, and also reasonable restrictions to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and terrorists. There is no contradiction in this message, and it's also popular. A poll we conducted on guns revealed that 89% of voters believe the Second Amendment confers an individual right to own firearms; however, 73% believe that the right allows for reasonable restrictions.²

Religion

As we stated earlier, there is a new movement among progressives and Evangelical Christians to move past the culture wars. This movement aims to broaden the definition of values issues to those "above the belt," but also to identify our shared goals on those issues that have traditionally fostered distrust and divisiveness, while enabling both sides to preserve their core beliefs.

On the role of religion in the public square, we suggest the following messaging, derived from this new movement:

One of America's greatest strengths and foundations is its religious vibrancy and diversity. Religion plays an appropriate public, not just

private, role in American life. As Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated, religion can help guide an entire movement and inspire a better America. And respecting religion and its role in the public square should not and need not conflict with the First Amendment non-establishment of religion.

Conclusion

Americans are tired of fighting over cultural issues. They see complexity and nuance where the culture warriors claim moral certitude. They yearn for compromise and shared understanding, not the demonization and political posturing of the past. Conservatives—particularly since the Palin nomination—are harkening back to the culture wars of yesterday. They do not see how the landscape has changed. Progressives can not only neutralize but actually win the battle of reasonableness on issues like abortion, gays, guns and religion if they take a big-tent, common-ground approach, while still preserving their core ideals. Progressives can take the country from a time when culture issues paralyzed us into a new age where we can move forward together on our shared values.

Endnotes

¹ Third Way poll, The Feldman Group, national survey 1,003 likely voters, July 10-15, 2007.

² Third Way poll, Penn Schoen and Berland, national survey of 1,200 voters, October 1-6, 2003.