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A Fighting Faith—Democrats Reject Urgently Needed Advice

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For decades, The New Republic has been one of America's premier journals of political opinion. Often, it has been a catalyst for ideological change among the political elite, and its editors have exerted considerable influence in political circles. Significantly, the magazine has a long—if checkered—tradition of dealing seriously with foreign policy and America's role in the world. Beinart, its current editor, continues that tradition in a bold way.

Beinart's article begins with a scene out of 1947, when some of America's most prominent liberal, political, and academic figures met at Washington's Willard Hotel and established what became known as Americans for Democratic Action [ADA]. Attendees at the meeting included Reinhold Niebuhr, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., John Kenneth Galbraith, Walter Reuther and Eleanor Roosevelt, along with 125 others. All had been members of the Union for Democratic Action, the only liberal group to have banned communists from its ranks during World War II.

As Beinart recounts, the founders of the ADA released a statement that declared the interests of the United States to be the interests "of free men everywhere." America was called to support and aid "democratic and freedom-loving peoples the world over." Accordingly, the ADA would push America—and the Democratic Party—to oppose communism, recognizing the communist threat as "hostile to the principles of freedom and democracy on which the Republic has grown great."

In recalling that meeting, Beinart is signaling the Democrats that some of their most illustrious heroes and heroines, ranging from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to Eleanor Roosevelt, had seen the threat of communism as sufficient to require a shift in the policies of their party and its approach to the world crisis. Furthermore, Beinart wants today's Democrats to see that the war on terror will require a similar transformation of the Democratic Party today, if the party is to survive.

In laying out his case, Beinart is perceptive and clear. He uses the model of the ADA and its success in reorienting the post-war Democratic Party and cites Schlesinger as observing that liberalism had "thus been fundamentally reshaped" by the knowledge of what the Soviet Union actually represented, "and by the deepening of our knowledge of man." As Schlesinger would explain, "The consequence of this historical re-education has been an unconditional rejection of totalitarianism."

The unconditional nature of their rejection of totalitarianism meant that the Democratic Party would, under the leadership of Harry S. Truman and, later, of John F. Kennedy, represent a stalwart anti-communism. Both Truman and Kennedy would shape foreign policies that would confront the Soviet Union and assert American principles around the world. Truman would stare down the Soviets in Greece and actually go to war against communism in Korea. Kennedy,

continuing and accelerating Eisenhower's efforts against world communism, would set the stage for Lyndon Johnson's war in Vietnam.

Beinart laments that American liberalism "as defined by its activist organizations, remains largely what it was in the 1990s—a collection of domestic interests and concerns." As he sees it, the Democratic Party is now captive to interests who have clear positions on issues ranging from health care to gay rights, "But there is little passion to win the struggle against Al Qaeda—even though totalitarian Islam has killed thousands of Americans and aims to kill millions; and even though, if it gained power, its efforts to force every aspect of life into conformity with a barbaric interpretation of Islam would reign terror upon women, religious minorities, and anyone in the Muslim world with a thirst for modernity or freedom."

In order to make his case, Beinart takes a close look at the 2004 presidential race. He rejects the argument that moral values cost John Kerry the November 2 election. Instead, he argues that Kerry lost because of his perceived weakness on issues of foreign policy and national defense. "Voters who cited terrorism backed Bush even more strongly than those who cited moral values," Beinart argues.

Kerry's approach was dead on arrival. His nomination "was a compromise between a party elite desperate to neutralize the terrorism issue and a liberal base unwilling to redefine itself in a post-September 11 world."

Even though Kerry saw himself as a centrist or moderate on the issue of war in Iraq, he put himself in an untenable position by pandering to the Democratic Party's vocal left wing as he attempted to wrest the nomination from former Vermont governor Howard Dean. In the end, Kerry pleased no one and seemed to be absolutely committed to a position that could only be described as a mass of confusion topped with an icing of irony. His "I was for it before I was against it" answer to questions about the \$87 billion supplemental request for Iraq became the fatal symbol for his presidential ambition, Beinart suggests. "Had Kerry aggressively championed a national mobilization to win the war on terrorism," Beinart insists, "he wouldn't have been the Democratic nominee."

Nevertheless, Beinart does not see John Kerry as the real problem. He was a flawed candidate, but he was saddled with a party with even greater flaws. "The fundamental problem was the party's liberal base," Beinart explains, "which would have refused to nominate anyone who proposed redefining the Democratic Party in the way the ADA did it in 1947. The challenge for Democrats today is not to find a different kind of presidential candidate. It is to transform the party at its grassroots so that a different kind of presidential candidate can emerge."

In order to do this, Beinart asserts that the Democratic Party will have to isolate Michael Moore and MoveOn.org the way that Democrats isolated Henry Wallace and the pro-communist left in the 1940s.

In another fascinating historical reference, Beinart cites the magazine *The New Leader*, which in 1950 argued that American liberals should be divided between "hards" and "softs." The hards opposed communism, saw opposition to communism as an absolute necessity for credibility in national leadership, and saw the nation's future as depending upon an effective anti-communist foreign policy, ready to confront the Soviet Union, China, or any other threat as challenges would arise.

The softs "refused to make anti-communism their guiding principle," arguing that American values were under assault from the right, rather than from the left.

Beinart identifies Michael Moore as "the most prominent soft in the United States today." Most troubling, most Democrats—including the party's base—appeared to agree with Moore on issues ranging from Iraq to the Patriot Act and hatred of George W. Bush. "What they do not recognize, or do not acknowledge," Beinart laments, "is that Moore does not oppose Bush's policies because he thinks they fail to effectively address the terrorist threat; he does not believe there is a terrorist threat." Beinart, editor of *The New Republic* since November 1999, presents an eloquent argument that the Democratic Party must recover what Arthur Schlesinger—now a 'soft' once again—called "a fighting faith" if it is to recover and go on to assert credible leadership in the future.

His advice has not been well received in Democratic circles. In effect, the vitriolic response to his argument proves his point. Kevin Drum at *Washington Monthly* acknowledged that Beinart made several cogent points, but rejected his main thesis. "I think the majority of liberals could probably be persuaded to take a harder line on the war on terror," Drum

advised. “But first someone has to make a compelling case that the danger is truly overwhelming.” In response to Drum, Beinart simply noted: “In a way, the response confirmed my theory: that many contemporary liberals, including many smart ones, don’t see defeating Al Qaeda as a paramount national challenge. And that’s a political problem, since most Americans do.”

Writing in *National Review*, Stanley Kurtz suggested that Beinart had missed his biggest target—the academic left. “The real institutional home of the Democratic Left is the academy,” Kurtz observed—suggesting, in effect, that the Democratic Party is more captive to Harvard than to Hollywood. “Discrediting Michael Moore won’t stop leftist professors from manufacturing Howard Dean foot soldiers,” he insisted. “Not everyone who goes to college becomes a Democrat. But the Democratic base is decisively shaped by the academy.”

Peter Beinart is a very smart man, and his argument is evidence of clear and courageous thinking. He received both Marshall and Rhodes scholarships while a student at Yale University, and received a graduate degree in International Relations from Oxford University. In “A Fighting Faith” he has offered the Democratic Party an essential and urgently needed word of advice. The fact that so many leading Democratic thinkers and strategists have rejected his advice out of hand is evidence that the problem is even worse than Beinart believed.

As columnist George F. Will has observed, we must hope that Beinart’s argument will reach at least some leading Democrats—for the good of the country, if not for the good of the Democratic Party. Nevertheless, the prospects don’t look good. When it comes to the war on terror, there seems to be no fighting chance that the Democratic Party will recapture anything close to “a fighting faith.”

