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The Democratic Convention—An Exercise in Evasion

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In essence, the Democrats have decided to run on a political strategy fueled mostly by opposition to President George W. Bush. While slapping each other endlessly on the back about running a positive campaign and avoiding criticism, the platform speakers at the Democratic National Convention spent a considerable portion of their airtime in both direct and indirect criticism of the President and his policies.

Will it work? The Democrats are betting their strategy on the presumption that they must not take clear public stands on most of the critical issues of the day. The 2004 platform adopted by the party is a gigantic exercise in banality and evasion. This is true across the board—including issues of national security, the war in Iraq, and the struggle against terrorism. Most crucially, however, the platform is deliberately vague on issues related to the great moral and cultural crises of the day. The platform, remarkably brief for a Democratic Party document, says just enough to assure party stalwarts of liberal intentions, but not enough to reveal to most Americans what is really at stake.

In a blatantly manipulative tactic, the Democrats trotted out an all-too-willing Ron Reagan, son of the late president, to serve as a shill for stem cell research. Ron Reagan is well established as a liberal activist, but it was a stroke of dark political genius to bring him to the podium during prime-time news coverage in order to repudiate his father's moral legacy even as he used his father's illness for political capital. Of course, Ron Reagan joins the Democratic conspiracy in confusing the issue. In her speech introducing her husband to convention delegates, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke of the need for a new president to lift President Bush's "ban on stem cell research."

Senator Clinton knows full well that there is no "ban" on stem cell research. Even those opposed to embryonic stem cell research support ongoing research using adult stem cells. The current Bush Administration guidelines do not ban any form of stem cell research—even using cells derived from human embryos—but do limit the use of taxpayer money to existing lines of stem cells that require no further destruction of human embryos.

Nevertheless, the Democrats were united in avoiding any reference to the embryo at all. While claiming to pit "science" against "ideology," the Democrats hoped to confuse the American people into believing that all stem cell research is held hostage to an administration mired in the moral dark ages. This lack of honesty—not to mention the assault on human dignity—will be to the shame of the Democratic Party for many generations.

The party platform states: "Stem cell therapy offers hope to more than 100 million Americans who have serious illnesses—from Alzheimer's to heart disease to juvenile diabetes to Parkinson's. We will pursue this research under the strictest ethical guidelines, but we will not walk away from the chance to save lives and reduce human suffering." Those words amount to nothing less than intentional dishonesty. First, there are currently no therapeutic applications utilizing stem cells and, regardless of who wins the presidential election in November, no therapeutic applications are likely to emerge for some time. Nevertheless, the Democrats continued to put up a smokescreen by pledging to conduct the

research “under the strictest ethical guidelines,” while failing to stipulate any particular moral significance to the embryo.

No candidate will win the Democratic presidential nomination without proving himself worthy of Planned Parenthood and the National Organization for Women on the abortion issue. Accordingly, Kerry and the 2004 platform have pledged to “stand proudly for a woman’s right to choose, consistent with *Roe v. Wade*, and regardless of her ability to pay.” Furthermore, the platform states that the party is “firmly against Republican efforts to undermine that right.” The words “regardless of her ability to pay” represent code language intended to signal taxpayer support for access to abortion. Of course, if the Democratic National Platform Committee had been more honest it would have proposed language clearly signaling a call for taxpayers to pay for abortion, regardless of moral conviction.

Senator Kerry claims to oppose same-sex marriage, but he also opposes the Federal Marriage Amendment. He was a vociferous opponent of the Defense of Marriage Act, and is at a loss to explain exactly what distinction he draws between same-sex marriage and the civil unions he supports. It appears that his opposition is simply reducible to the word “marriage.” That’s all.

Continuing in a cloud of generalities, the 2004 Democratic Platform promises support for “full inclusion of gay and lesbian families in the life of our nation.” Furthermore, the party pledges to “seek equal responsibilities, benefits, and protections for these families.” The only direct reference to same-sex marriage is the platform’s statement that “marriage has been defined at the state level for 200 years, and we believe that it should continue to be defined there.” Therefore, the party condemns “President Bush’s divisive effort” to promote the Federal Marriage Amendment.

Reading these statements most charitably, and in an anguished attempt to draw clarity out of the confusion, one is left with the judgment that the Democrats are for same-sex marriage but do not want to say so. On one of the most momentous issues of the day, the party is explicit only in its condemnation of the Federal Marriage Amendment and in its self-serving goal “to bring Americans together, not drive them apart.”

In his acceptance speech, Senator John Kerry employed the same strategy of coming marginally close to saying something. Pundits and commentators were generally quick to praise his oratory, but several were troubled by the lack of specificity and content that marked the address. In an editorial statement, *The Washington Post* judged the speech “in many respects a disappointment.” Most pointedly, the paper chided Kerry for failure to provide specifics concerning how his policy in Iraq would differ from the current administration. Beyond this, the editors of the *Post* suggested that the Senator “missed an opportunity for straight talk.” The editors of the *Post* are clearly on to something here. When Senator Kerry spoke of leading the nation to energy independence, he failed to take responsibility to explain to citizens that this would mean a massive lifestyle change for all citizens and a fundamental restructuring of the economy. Put simply—it isn’t going to happen, and Mr. Kerry knows it. The actual policies necessary to achieve his goal would be unacceptable to his own party, much less to the American public.

All this gets back to a fascinating analysis offered by *The New York Times*. In a comprehensive survey released just prior to the Democratic National Convention, the *Times* reported on a survey of delegates, indicating that nine out of ten of the registered delegates to the convention believe that the war in Iraq is wrong and that the troops should be immediately called home. Nevertheless, the delegates overwhelmingly adopted a platform that states just the opposite. On issues from abortion to homosexuality and same-sex marriage, the delegates to the Democratic National Convention stand far to the left of the platform they adopted.

Welcome to American politics in the twenty-first century. The political conventions have been largely reduced to four-day “infomercials” providing the parties with an opportunity to present a choreographed advertisement disguised as a serious political event. It’s going to be a long summer.

