

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Dead Center

By Robert B. Reich

The dismal fifth-place showing by Senator Joseph Lieberman in the New Hampshire primary on Tuesday serves as both reminder and motivator to the other Democratic presidential candidates on what it will take to win in November. For so long now, everyone has assumed that recapturing the presidency depends on who triumphs in the battle between liberals and moderates within the party. Such thinking, though, is inherently flawed. The real fight is between those who want only to win back the White House and those who also want to build a new political movement—one that rivals the conservative movement that has given Republicans their dominant position in American politics.

Senator Lieberman's defeat on Tuesday could be a good indicator of which side is ahead. To their detriment, Mr. Lieberman and the perennially dour Democratic Leadership Council have been deeply wary of any hint of a progressive movement, preferring instead an uninspired centrist message that echoes Republican themes.

On the other extreme is Howard Dean, who could be called the quintessential "movement" Democrat. His campaign is both grass-roots and reformist, and is based on the proposition that ordinary people must be empowered to "take back America." Similar threads can also be seen in the campaigns of Senators John Edwards and John Kerry. (Full disclosure: I've been helping Senator Kerry.) It was no accident after last week's caucuses in Iowa that a beaming Senator Edwards told supporters they had "started a movement to change America."

I hope that Mr. Edwards and the others will stay on message—and movement. After all, Democrats have seen what the Republican Party has been able to accomplish over the years. The conservative movement has developed dedicated sources of money and legions of ground troops who not only get out the vote, but also spend the time between elections persuading others to join their ranks. It has devised frames of reference that are used repeatedly in policy debates (among them: it's your money, tax and spend, political correctness, class warfare).

It has a system for recruiting and electing officials nationwide who share the same world view and who will vote accordingly. And it has a coherent ideology uniting evangelical Christians, blue-collar whites in the South and West, and big business—an ideology in which foreign enemies, domestic poverty and crime, and homosexuality all must be met with strict punishment and religious orthodoxy.

In contrast, the Democratic Party has had no analogous movement to animate it. Instead, every four years party loyalists throw themselves behind a presidential candidate who they believe will deliver them from the rising conservative tide. After the election, they go back to whatever they were doing before. Other Democrats have involved themselves in single-issue politics—the environment, campaign finance, the war in Iraq and so on—but these battles have failed to build a political movement. Issues rise and fall, depending on which interests are threatened and when. They can even divide Democrats, as each advocacy group scrambles after the same set of liberal donors and competes for the limited attention of the news media.

As a result, Democrats have been undisciplined, intimidated or just plain silent. They have few dedicated sources of money, and almost no ground troops. The religious left is disconnected from the political struggle. One hears few liberal Democratic phrases that are repeated with any regularity. In addition, there is no consistent Democratic world view or ideology. Most Congressional Democrats raise their own money, do their own

polls and vote every which way. Democrats have little or no clear identity except by reference to what conservatives say about them.

Self-styled Democratic centrists, like those who inhabit the Democratic Leadership Council, attribute the party's difficulties to a failure to respond to an electorate grown more conservative, upscale and suburban. This is nonsense. The biggest losses for Democrats since 1980 have not been among suburban voters but among America's giant middle and working classes—especially white workers without four-year college degrees, once part of the old Democratic base. Not incidentally, these are the same people who have lost the most economic ground over the last quarter-century.

Democrats could have responded with bold plans on jobs, schools, health care and retirement security. They could have delivered a strong message about the responsibility of corporations to help their employees in all these respects, and of wealthy elites not to corrupt politics with money. More recently, the party could have used the threat of terrorism to inspire the same sort of sacrifice and social solidarity as Democrats did in World War II—including higher taxes on the wealthy to pay for what needs doing. In short, they could have turned themselves into a populist movement to take back democracy from increasingly concentrated wealth and power.

But Democrats did none of this. So conservatives eagerly stepped into the void, claiming the populist mantle and blaming liberal elites for what's gone wrong with America. The question ahead is whether Democrats can claim it back. The rush by many Democrats in recent years to the so-called center has been a pathetic substitute for candid talk about what the nation needs to do and for fueling a movement based on liberal values. In truth, America has no consistent political center. Polls reflect little more than reflexive responses to what people have most recently heard about an issue. Meanwhile, the so-called center has continued to shift to the right because conservative Republicans stay put while Democrats keep meeting them halfway.

Democrats who avoid movement politics point to Bill Clinton's success in repositioning the party in the center during the 1990's. Mr. Clinton was (and is) a remarkably gifted politician who accomplished something no Democrat since Franklin Delano Roosevelt had done—getting re-elected. But his effect on the party was to blur rather than to clarify what Democrats stand for. As a result, Mr. Clinton neither started nor sustained anything that might be called a political movement.

This handicapped his administration from the start. In 1994, when battling for his health care proposal, Mr. Clinton had no broad-based political movement behind him. Even though polls showed support among a majority of Americans, it wasn't enough to overcome the conservative effort on the other side. By contrast, George W. Bush got his tax cuts through Congress, even though Americans were ambivalent about them. President Bush had a political movement behind him that supplied the muscle he needed.

In the months leading up to the 1996 election, Mr. Clinton famously triangulated—finding positions equidistant between Democrats and Republicans—and ran for re-election on tiny issues like V-chips in television sets and school uniforms. The strategy worked, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Had Mr. Clinton told Americans the truth—that when the economic boom went bust we'd still have to face the challenges of a country concentrating more wealth and power in fewer hands—he could have built a long-term mandate for change. By the late 90's the nation finally had the wherewithal to expand prosperity by investing in people, especially their education and health. But because Mr. Clinton was re-elected without any mandate, the nation was confused about what needed to be accomplished and easily distracted by conservative fulminations against a president who lied about sex.

As we head into the next wave of primaries, the Democratic candidates should pay close attention to what Republicans have learned about winning elections. First, it is crucial to build a political movement that will endure after particular electoral contests. Second, in order for a presidency to be effective, it needs a movement that mobilizes

Americans behind it. Finally, any political movement derives its durability from the clarity of its convictions. And there's no better way to clarify convictions than to hone them in political combat.

A fierce battle for the White House may be exactly what the Democrats need to mobilize a movement behind them. It may also be what America needs to restore a two-party system of governance and a clear understanding of the choices we face as a nation.

Robert B. Reich, former United States secretary of labor, is a professor of social and economic policy at Brandeis University and the author of the forthcoming "Reason: Why Liberals Will Win the Battle for America."