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Messing With Their Minds**By Sara Robinson
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Friday 29 February 2008

Make no mistake: When the conservatives set out to take over America 30 years ago, they were working off of a well-thought-out plan.

The plan was put in place by a wide variety of thinkers - but three of the main strategists were Howard Phillips, Richard Viguerie, and Paul Weyrich, each of whom wrote important books and papers laying out the goal of creating a conservative America, and showing specifically how the movement could make that happen.

The ideas in these plans went through various iterations through the decades; but their essential goals and intentions never changed much. And, as it turned out, they didn't have to: the plan worked so well and kept the conservative base so focused and engaged over the long term that it didn't need much more than an occasional refresher, or the odd subplan elaborating on how the main ideas should be applied in some specific domain.

Reading these plans now, as a progressive, it strikes me: We're now living in an America in which every institution is dominated by these guys. Every facet of our looming disaster was dictated by bankrupt conservative ideas; yet our very ability to visualize fresh alternatives has been constricted by the frames they deliberately laid around our language and discourse. Most of the country finds it hard to even contemplate or discuss our predicaments in anything but conservative terms. It's clear they've done more than merely mess up our country; they've also, quite intentionally, messed with our minds.

As it turns out, messing with our minds wasn't just one part of the plan; it was the essential goal of the entire plan of conquest. They used sociology, social psychology, linguistics, and a subtle understanding of human motivation to get into our heads and change the way we processed reality itself, in ways that made it impossible to question all the other things they were up to.

Ending conservative dominance will require us to undo the vast memetic and ontological damage they've wrought on two entire generations of Americans. We have no choice but to fight this fire with fire of our own. And the first thing we need to do is understand, very specifically, how they did it. Fortunately, this isn't hard: the basics are all laid out in their original written plans.

Last year, over at Talk2Action, Bruce Wilson dug up one of the most recent rewrites of Weyrich's version of the plan - a 2001 manifesto published by the Free Congress Foundation, written by Eric Heubeck that concisely summarized and updated the essentials of the plan Weyrich had been promoting since the early 80s. Wilson rewrote the document - mostly by replacing the word "conservative" with "progressive" and sprinkling in a few liberal philosophical points. The results are worth a careful reading, because in Heubeck and Weyrich's complaints and solutions, Wilson found a great deal of wisdom we can use about how to build a lasting progressive majority.

Over this and the next two posts, I'm going to revisit Weyrich and Heubeck's Free Congress manifesto, and lay out the specific lessons progressives can draw from the plans and strategies that drove 30 years of conservative movement-building. We'll get the map to the the battlefield they're really fighting on; and what it will take for progressives to engage them there and win. The same strategies that allowed them to take control of the country and change the shape of American history may, with some adaptations to our own liberal values, allow us to undo the damage as well.

The first post addresses the role ideas - which ones they specifically chose to promote, and why - played in the conservative renaissance, and should play in the coming progressive era as well. The second one will discuss the details of how these ideas are presented to the public. The last one discusses specific tactics that the conservatives used - and we might consider emulating - to embed their desired memes in the mass culture, ensuring their continued dominance of the discourse.

Many Tactics, One Goal: Promoting the Progressive Worldview

"The conservative movement is defensive, defeatist, depressed, and apologetic. It lacks self-confidence, virility, energy, intensity, vigor, aggressiveness, vitality, and a firm belief in the rightness of its cause ... This is because it

has relied solely on activism and politicking, without reaching out to change the underlying assumptions of the culture....The result of this misplaced focus is a society that does not recognize culturally conservative views, and is gradually coming to despise them.... imaginations are seldom captured by policy wonks on C-SPAN."

Heubeck and Weyrich argued over the years that their movement's single core task - the one that every other activity must align with and ultimately support, because it's the one that justifies the entire movement's existence - is the transmission and dissemination of the conservative worldview. Most of the foundational thinking on conservatism already existed, they argued, so there was no need to waste time re-inventing philosophical wheels. The movement's main job was to get those wheels rolling back out into every corner of the American countryside.

In other words: It's not a movement; it's a sales job. And the product we're selling isn't economics or policy or morality. It's much deeper than that: it's a worldview that determines the way you look at everything. Conservatives set out to give Americans a radical new way to analyze the essential questions of human existence. As Huebeck put it: "We must win the people over culturally - by defining how man ought to act, how he ought to perceive the world around him, and what it means to live the good life. Political arrangements can only be formed after these fundamental questions have been answered." (Italics mine.)

What is the meaning of life? How should we relate to each other? Our families and communities? Other nations? God? The planet? What is good, and how do we recognize it? What is evil, and how should we respond?

These are the basic ontological questions on which our ability to parse the rest of reality depends - the foundations of every human's cognitive model of the world. Change these underlying assumptions, and the way we prioritize and evaluate everything else in the world necessarily changes, too. The conservatives recognized this - and that's why they made selling the conservative worldview, via every possible channel, the central focus of their movement. Once they'd gotten us to accept their basic assumptions about reality, they knew, the rest of their agenda would follow naturally.

The conservative critique of the dominant liberal worldview was sharp and pointed; and they aggressively promoted it at every opportunity. (And if no opportunity presented itself, they weren't abashed about going out and creating one.) They set themselves up as a daring and controversial counterculture that offered an original and rebellious alternative to the prevailing set of cultural assumptions.

As Heubeck complains in the paragraph above, politics and activism are bloodless (and bloody temporary) unless they're rooted in this kind of deeper ontological shift. That's the real battlefield conservatives are fighting this war on; and we will not beat them until we can get down to that level and challenge them there directly. If their movement exists to sell a conservative worldview, then our movement must also zero its focus on the only goal that matters in the end: to proclaim and promote Enlightenment values throughout the land (and to all the inhabitants thereof). Our status as a mass movement begins and ends with our ability to inspire the masses to share our worldview. Promoting that worldview is the only goal that matters; and every action we take should be aimed at moving us toward that outcome. When that epistemology is widely accepted, implementing our policies will proceed easily and naturally, with minimal opposition.

Fortunately, we're starting from a place of strength here. Progressive ideals are far more compelling - and far more true to America's historical, political, and cultural legacies - than conservative ones ever have been or will ever be. Bruce Wilson, in his re-casting of Huebeck's 2001 article, produced a sharp summary of the progressive worldview we stand for - the product that our movement must exist to sell:

"Enlightenment values mean, in part, a tradition of respect for societal diversity and political pluralism and a spirit of self-restraint rooted in an altruistic commitment to the common good, an ethic of civic and political engagement, and a belief in free inquiry and the scientific method, and a belief that while we can never achieve absolute objective truth we must nonetheless distinguish opinion, ideology, and religious belief from that which science can tell us.

"Further, Enlightenment values hold that our society must be sustainable and in harmony with our essential human nature, and that we must learn what science can tell us of what our human nature actually is. Enlightenment values must, if they are truly held, include mechanisms by which they can be sustained and perpetuated in human culture lest they be overwhelmed by forces of ignorance, bigotry, religious and ideological zealotry, and barbarism. Enlightenment values are the opposite of those tendencies, which appeal to the lowest human instincts and drives; barbarism means fidelity solely to oneself, not to an enlightened social code worked out over centuries, representing the accumulated wisdom of generations of men and women.... Enlightenment culture at its best as "lucidity of mind, intellectual curiosity and hospitality, largeness of temper, objectivity, the finest sense of social life, of manners, of beauty." And this view of culture is clearly incompatible with abstracted ideology and zealotry of all kinds, and with mere egoism."

Everything Americans do - the institutions and physical infrastructure we build, the investments and decisions we make, the goals we set and the ideals we cherish - emerges from and is evaluated according to our essential assumptions about how the world works. Getting people to understand and embrace the basic premises of the liberal worldview is the first and most critical step to creating a lasting progressive era in the United States. When that's

accomplished, we can set about reforming every one of society's institutions so that it reflects those values - much as the conservatives hoped to do before they blew it all up so badly.

Even with the recent setbacks, though, we need to face the fact that the conservatives still control much of the ontological field. Their singular worldview has dominated and defined our national decision-making for nearly 30 years. People may be desperate for change and some new ideas - but even so, we'd be wise not to underestimate how much time it's going to take to remove all the constraints they've put on people's thinking. We'd be even wiser to become very energetic about promoting ourselves as a new, fresh alternative counterculture that's not afraid to confront a cruffy and crumbling status quo.

Convince Americans We're Trustworthy to Lead

In the early years of their revolution, the biggest problem conservatives faced was that the public simply didn't trust them to lead. Goldwater's defeat, Reagan's turbulent governorship, and Nixon's disgrace defined the narrative about their trustworthiness - and it wasn't a pretty tale.

So, through the 1970s, they focused on fixing that perception. Reagan was their main asset here: he had a gift for communicating conservative values to Americans in ways that made them sound almost reasonable if you didn't think too hard. He convinced them that he and his party were worthy stewards of our tax dollars and the public trust; and, by coining phrases like "tax-and-spend liberal" and invoking non-existent welfare queens in Cadillacs, he also persuaded the country that the Democrats - and government in general - were venal, corrupt, inept, and completely unworthy of trust.

(This core imperative also explains why they were so rabidly driven to tear down Bill Clinton. By the early 90s, movement conservatives (and a good share of the country) had thoroughly bought into the idea that Democrats were inherently untrustworthy and hence illegitimate stewards of the public trust. In many parts of the country, Progressives are still working upstream against that "don't trust liberals" meme - and we will yet be for a long time to come.)

The Great Democratic Moment of 2008 came about partly because we've gotten so much smarter about organizing ourselves - but we also owe much of it to the conservatives' spectacular bull-elephant blundering that carelessly shattered the precious trust that Reagan had so carefully cultivated. It's not enough for people to vote for Democrats because they hope for change this cycle. If we want a permanent progressive majority, we have to reach out to inspire and keep the country's deep trust in our ideas and our leadership. We need their loyalty for the long run.

Align Strategy With Tactics

Heubeck bemoans the fact that, among conservatives, "those who think do not act, and those who act do not think." Their movement has struggled with a disconnect between strategists like Phillips and Weyrich and the activist base - though, evidently, they did eventually find a way to resolve it, because the path they ultimately followed to dominance was in fact the one their strategists originally laid out for them.

I've heard (and had) the same conversation with any number of strategically-minded progressives. We have a growing army of wonderful, energetic, skilled activists out there doing the organizing and moving the message. We also have a smaller and very much neglected cadre of strategic big-picture thinkers who are looking way out ahead, figuring out where we want to go and how best to get there. And not only do the two factions seldom talk - when they do talk, they often find they're not even speaking the same language. Activists dismiss strategists as thinking too big-picture, and not understanding the realities on the ground. Strategists see the activists running off in all kinds of directions, instead of aligning their energies and focusing them on well-chosen small battles that will pay off in much bigger victories down the road.

(This disconnect may explain some of the criticisms making the rounds about Barack Obama. Obama speaks in large generalizations about principles, values, and large-scale visions of what the world should be. This is energizing to strategic thinkers, who see the same big picture he does and who understand that you have to create that kind of overarching vision of the change you want to create before you can fill in the details. However, that same style drives wonkier folks crazy: they're very uncomfortable with that lack of detail. They don't want the big-picture stuff; they want to know exactly what they're hiring him to do. Neither side is wrong; but Obama's much better at speaking to the former than the latter.)

It's cheering to realize the conservatives have had ongoing issues with this exact same problem. But it also points up the sobering truth that we won't beat them unless we also learn how to bridge that gap so we can maximize the skills of both groups. We need to get the people who are capable of plotting long-range strategy linked up closely with the people who have the tactical skills to execute it - and both sides need to have the wisdom to know and respect that they're bringing different but important things to the same party.

But Invest in Creating Elite Tacticians

In Weyrich and Huebeck's model, no successful movement goes anywhere without a tightly-knit, trusted, trained core of elite activist leaders who are all working for the same goal. Huebeck writes: "It is more important to have a few impassioned members than a large number of largely indifferent members." If the core is energetic, smart, and strong, all the rest will naturally fall into place around it.

We need to be equally insistent on finding and cultivating brilliant leaders and organizers - but do it in a way that respects the progressive mindset. Conservatives have a strongly hierarchical worldview supports the creation of an inner-circle elite that directs policy, strategy, and action for everyone else; and also attracts people who are quite happy falling into line behind these leaders. Progressives, on the other hand, tend to think in networks, systems, and matrices - multilayered thinking that grants temporary authority to whoever's most skilled on the subject at hand, but otherwise holds everyone to be more or less equal. We value open communication, broad networks of trust, and empowering people to take charge and run their own show. Deference and status games don't come nearly as easily to us - and we like it that way.

But we would do well to develop a tradition of valuing and respecting our most experienced leaders, extending them a little more trust, and learning how to be good followers when the occasion demands it. It's a common liberal conceit to think that any one of us could do what they do - but the hard fact is, the skills that make a great activist aren't all that common, and we need to take better care of the ones that emerge from our midst. There's a time for big consensus-building all-in conversations; but there's also a time to stop talking, fall in line, and do what needs to be done without backbiting or second-guessing the decision. We lose a lot of good leaders simply because they get tired of trying to keep all the frogs in the wheelbarrow, which takes their focus off of the more important task of getting the wheelbarrow where it's going. It's one of the most typical ways in which we burn out our own most talented folks. More cooperative frogs would help us keep those people around - and also allow them to save their energy and attention for the things that really matter.

Never Miss a Chance to Challenge the Dominant Ideology

We must be prepared to confront and openly reject conservative ideology wherever it appears - and use those teachable moments to present the case for a truly progressive counter-culture based on the excellence and rigor of our own values.

Heubeck's manifesto categorically rejects "materialism, hedonism, consumerism, egoism, and the cult of self-actualization." Oddly, most progressives would agree with all of these, save the last one. But, unlike conservatives, we reject these values not only in individuals; we also resist them when they appear in private and public institutions. We reject materialism and consumerism that lead to the desecration of the planet; hedonism and egoism that lead people to deny their connections to the larger whole; and the cult of self-actualization that's been so permissive in allowing corporations to do whatever is necessary to ensure their survival and profits.

The conservatives promoted their worldview by 30 years of constant criticism of the left, attacking our very legitimacy at every turn. Huebeck declared: "We will not give them a moment's rest. We will endeavor to prove that the Left does not deserve to hold sway over the heart and mind of a single American. We will offer constant reminders that there is an alternative, a better way."

Americans have had enough of the conservatives' tired old ideas, and are ready and eager to hear about our better way. Like the conservatives, we should not pass up a single chance to present our alternative vision. And if the teachable doesn't present itself, we also need to emulate the conservative example, and be assertive about creating those moments for ourselves.

Welcome Converts

Since the goal of the conservative movement was to change the world, one person at a time, they got very organized about how they welcomed and integrated new converts to the movement. We'll look at that in more depth in the third piece of this series; but for now, it's enough to say that suspicion and recrimination have no place in the moment that a newcomer appears at our door.

We need to respect how very hard it is to leave behind your old worldview and intentionally cross over to a new one - especially one that you've been taught to hate, and that everyone you know despises. People feel disoriented for a while. They don't know whom to trust, or where they fit in. Bumping up against progressives who reject them because of their faith or their rural roots or their funny clothes is a sure-fire way to send them back into the fold. When people have had enough of the corruption of conservative culture, we need to embrace them and make them feel at home among us.

However, Heubeck also makes it clear that they need to come to us voluntarily. Yes, building a movement is a sales job - but the sale is closed when they accept our terms, not when we bend to meet theirs. The conservatives understood that their worldview and principles were absolutely central to the entire enterprise, and should never be compromised for anyone. If someone didn't agree, fine. Take it or leave it. We will not fudge our own convictions in

the hopes of drawing off a few more votes from off some sub-group or another. In time, the conservatives knew, those little compromises form the cracks that undermine the entire movement.

Keep Your White Hats On

Weyrich thought it was vital that the rising conservatives be seen as a purely defensive movement. The public needed to understand that they didn't start this fight (though, of course, they did) and weren't imposing their views on anyone (though, in fact, they were); they were simply doing what was necessary to protect American traditional culture, resolutely standing guard against terrifying incursions by a barbarian horde from beyond the gates of civilized society. (Yes, most of them really do see themselves this way.) When they go forth to do battle with evil and corrupting forces of liberalism, "Defender of Civilization" is the motto emblazoned across their shining white helmets.

Furthermore, that Good Guys In White Hats position is a perfect set-up for creating martyrs for the cause. Heubeck and Weyrich anticipated this prospect eagerly. "As our movement grows, the Left will become increasingly likely to try to use the powers of the state to squelch our movement, using whatever pretext they are able to invent." (As we all understand now, the conservative capacity for projection has no known limits.) This persecution would create sympathy, they noted, and lend further credence to their social critique.

Yeah, it's obvious they've watched just wayyy too many Charlton Heston movies. But that righteous sense of defending everything we hold sacred against the incursions of a profane enemy is a powerful way to animate a movement. And we have a story of our own to tell: We are defending the Constitution, the Enlightenment traditions of the country's Founders, and the animating ideals of America itself against a cabal of the very same kind of economic royalists and religious zealots who forced our nation into the last Revolution. The battle we face is the same one they fought; and we owe it to their memories to fight it hard and well.

It should also be noted - as Valerie Plame, Don Seligman, and Siebel Edmonds would be the first to testify - the Right hasn't hesitated to use the powers of the state to crush our movement, and persecute progressive martyrs. They've apparently forgotten Heubeck's warning that every one of these they create only adds to the public sympathy for our cause.

Don't Underestimate the Resistance

Heubeck and Weyrich advise conservatives to be ready for trouble from any direction at any time. They declare: "There is no excuse for ever being surprised by the ferocity or ingenuity of [liberal] attacks."

Conservative paranoia - rooted in the fundamental belief that humans are essentially evil and untrustworthy - lends itself nicely to this ever-ready, always-sleep-with-your-eyes-open posture. Liberals, who start from the premise that humans are usually good and trustworthy at heart, find it much harder to think defensively; and most of us have strong ethical lines beyond which we simply will not go.

But if we're in this fight to win, we need to get serious about being prepared for the worst. After all, we have far more to fear from them than they do from us. Those people are not our friends; and they've proven over and over that they will stick it to us any way they can, any time they can - without regard to manners, friendship, ethics, or the limits of the law. The ends will, in all times and places, justify whatever means are at hand. We underestimate their capacity for mischief at our own peril.

Avoid Groupthink

Heubeck and Weyrich were deeply worried about the insularity that too often sets into activist communities. "An excessive amount of intellectualization divorced from application in the real work is a kind of escape from reality, or the creation of a virtual reality. Thinking becomes tired, static, and inward-looking. People become more interested in creating mental utopias than having a real impact on society. Scholars become mere pedants; ideas are no longer creative and vital. Ideas interest us only insofar as they offer a guide to action. There is a place in society for abstract, academic discussion. This is not that place."

Discussion lists, warns Heubeck, are too often traps for the unwary. (Blogs didn't exist yet, but I'm sure that that if they had, he'd have included them, too.) We spend so much time sharing our esoteric enthusiasms, complaining about stuff nobody else cares about, and reaffirming each others' worldview that we fail to do the real work of the movement, which is getting out there and winning new hearts and minds to the cause. We become hypersensitive (and sometimes downright surly) in the face of earnest questions from outsiders who don't understand the secret language of our groupthink. We build up walls that keep new members out, and harden into a cloistered elite that has no room for newcomers.

If the goal is to build a mass movement, those developments are absolutely fatal. And the only way to avoid it is to insist that our groups stay open to new members and ideas, and actively engaged with work that promotes our ideas in the larger non-progressive world.

Even When We Lose, We Win

Americans, more than anything, want to know what their political leaders stand for. They don't even have to like it - they just want to know where your moral center is, and whether or not you know what The Right Thing looks like so you can do it when the job demands it. Invariably, we think more highly of conservative politicians known for standing their ground (a reputation John McCain worked to his advantage for decades, and Ronald Reagan rode all the way to the White House) than we do of liberal ones who are seen to be twisting in the latest breeze. (This is where the flip-flopper libel was born, and why it will not die until Democrats grow a spine.)

Weyrich, Phillips, and the other conservative strategists understood from the very beginning that, as long as they stood on principle, they would win the war even if they lost every battle. In their own minds, conservatives never lose; even when they're knocked flat on their butts, they figure it was just another small step toward the inevitable day that they win. The lesson they learn isn't: "Don't try that again." It's "Come back and do it better next time."

That's why the best thing Democrats can do is push their agenda hard, taking boldly progressive stands that openly challenge the Republican status quo. Yes, they'll lose a great many of those challenges. But every loss can be turned into a bit of political theater, a morality play that proves a larger point: There are enduring principles that are worth more to us than a mere political loss or a little public embarrassment. We will stand for these things through whatever comes, because they are the very reason for our political existence. We, too, will keep coming back for as long as it takes.

In the next post, I'll look at some of the specific communications strategies conservatives adopted to increase the appeal of their ideas, and embed them deeply in American mass culture.