

The lost art of Democratic narrative.

Story Time

BY ROBERT B. REICH

DEMOCRATS ARE FINALLY waking up to the fact that Republicans have succeeded in framing the issues to their advantage. Tax “relief,” tort “reform,” regulatory “burden,” and “opportunity society,” for example, have all defined public debate in a way that benefits the GOP. But, though Democrats have finally started talking about how they can recast their ideas to best appeal to the public, they’ve failed to realize that the rhetorical challenge they face is deeper than simply finding the right words and phrases. For Democrats to win back the heart and soul of the electorate, they have to speak to the basic stories that have defined and animated the United States since its founding. For most of the last century, they did this instinctively, but, over the last ten years or so, they have tended to speak in technocratic terms while conservative Republicans have mastered the art of the political narrative and, in doing so, exiled Democrats from politics itself.

There are four essential American stories. The first two are about hope; the second two are about fear.

The Triumphant Individual. This is the familiar tale of the little guy who works hard, takes risks, believes in himself, and eventually gains wealth, fame, and honor. It’s the story of the self-made man (or, more recently, woman) who bucks the odds, spurns the naysayers, and shows what can be done with enough gumption and guts. He’s instantly recognizable: plainspoken, self-reliant, and uncompromising in his ideals—the underdog who makes it through hard work and faith in himself. Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* is the first in a long line of U.S. self-help manuals about how to make it through self-sacrifice and diligence. The story is epitomized in the life of Abe Lincoln, born in a log cabin, who believed that “the value of life is to improve one’s condition.” The theme was captured in Horatio Alger’s hundred or so novellas, whose heroes all rise promptly and predictably from rags to riches. It’s celebrated in the tales of immigrant peddlers who become millionaire tycoons. And it’s found in the manifold stories of downtrodden fighters who undertake dangerous quests and find money and glory. Think Rocky Balboa, Norma Rae, and Erin Brockovich. The moral: With enough effort and courage, anyone can make it in the United States.

The Benevolent Community. This is the story of neighbors and friends who roll up their sleeves and pitch in for the common good. Its earliest formulation was John

Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity,” delivered on board a ship in Salem Harbor just before the Puritans landed in 1630—a version of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, in which the new settlers would be “as a City upon a Hill,” “delight in each other,” and be “of the same body.” Similar communitarian and religious images were found among the abolitionists, suffragettes, and civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s. “I have a dream that every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low,” said Martin Luther King Jr., extolling the ideal of the national community. The story is captured in the iconic New England town meeting, in frontier settlers erecting one another’s barns, in neighbors volunteering as firefighters and librarians, and in small towns sending their high school achievers to college and their boys off to fight foreign wars. It suffuses Norman Rockwell’s paintings and Frank Capra’s movies. Consider the last scene in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, when George learns he can count on his neighbors’ generosity and goodness, just as they had always counted on him.

The Mob at the Gates. In this story, the United States is a beacon light of virtue in a world of darkness, uniquely blessed but continuously endangered by foreign menaces. Hence our endless efforts to contain the barbarism and tyranny beyond our borders. Daniel Boone fought Indians—white America’s first evil empire. Davy Crockett battled Mexicans. The story is found in the Whig’s anti-English and pro-tariff histories of the United States, in the anti-immigration harangues of the late nineteenth century, and in World War II accounts of Nazi and Japanese barbarism. It animates modern epics about space explorers (often sporting the stars and stripes) battling alien creatures bent on destroying the world. The narrative gave special force to cold war tales during the ’50s of an international communist plot to undermine U.S. democracy and subsequently of “evil” empires and axes. The underlying lesson: We must maintain vigilance, lest diabolical forces overwhelm us.

The Rot at the Top. The last story concerns the malevolence of powerful elites. It’s a tale of corruption, decadence, and irresponsibility in high places—of conspiracy against the common citizen. It started with King George III, and, to this day, it shapes the way we view government—mostly

Robert B. Reich, who served as secretary of labor from 1993 to 1997, is university professor at Brandeis University. His latest book, REASON: WHY LIBERALS WILL WIN THE BATTLE FOR AMERICA, was just released in paperback.

with distrust. The great bullies of American fiction have often symbolized Rot at the Top: William Faulkner's Flem Snopes, Willie Stark as the Huey Long-like character in *All the King's Men*, Lionel Barrymore's demonic Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life*, and the antagonists that hound the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Suspicions about Rot at the Top have inspired what historian Richard Hofstadter called the paranoid style in U.S. politics—from the pre-Civil War Know-Nothings and Anti-Masonic movements through the Ku Klux Klan and Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunts. The myth has also given force to the great populist movements of U.S. history, from Andrew Jackson's attack on the Bank of the United States in the 1830s through William Jennings Bryan's prairie populism of the 1890s.

SPEAK TO THESE four stories and you resonate with the tales Americans have been telling each other since our founding—the two hopeful stories rendered more vivid by contrast to the two fearful ones. But the challenge isn't just to find a good speechwriter or a cunning political consultant, or to mine focus groups and polls. Candidates must say what they believe and speak the truth as they see it. (Americans can spot a fake thousands of miles away.)

These four mental boxes are always going to be filled somehow—if not by Democrats, then by Republicans—because people don't think in terms of isolated policies or issues. If they're to be understandable, policies and issues must fit into larger narratives about where we have been as a nation, what we are up against, and where we could be going. Major shifts in governance—in party alignments and political views—have been precipitated by one party or the other becoming better at telling these four stories.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, progressives and Democrats filled all four boxes. They accused leaders of big business of being the Rot at the Top. They argued that the large industrial concentrations of the era, the trusts, were stifling the upward mobility of millions of potential Triumphant Individuals and poisoning democracy. During his 1912 campaign, Woodrow Wilson promised to wage “a crusade against powers that have governed us . . . that have limited our development, that have determined our lives, that have set us in a straightjacket to do as they please.” The struggle to break up the trusts would be nothing less than “a second struggle for emancipation,” by a national Benevolent Community intent on restoring freedom and democracy. Wilson's Mob at the Gates, meanwhile, was composed of the large, bellicose states of prewar Europe who posed similar challenges to democratic freedoms. Wilson grimly rallied Americans to “defeat once and for all . . . the sinister forces” that rendered peace impossible.

Theodore Roosevelt, of course, shared Wilson's antipathy toward trusts, but, by the 1920s, Republicans were mostly apologists for big business and Wall Street. That was OK with Americans as long as the economy roared, but it left the Grand Old Party vulnerable in harder times, which soon

came. Their approach to foreign policy was mainly to avoid the Mob at the Gates—close the doors to immigrants, erect tariff walls, and isolate the nation. They celebrated the wealth of Triumphant Individuals but didn't champion upward mobility or equal opportunity, and they offered no particular view of the United States as a Benevolent Community. As such, they stayed firmly in the minority most of the first half of the twentieth century.

Indeed, the Great Depression and World War II presented the United States with palpable illustrations of the Democratic stories. By the 1930s, the Rot at the Top included Wall Street as well as big business. In the 1936 presidential campaign, Franklin D. Roosevelt warned against “economic royalists” who had impressed the whole of society into service. “The hours men and women worked, the wages they received, the conditions of their labor . . . these had passed beyond the control of the people, and were imposed by this new industrial dictatorship,” he warned. What was at stake, he concluded, was nothing less than the “survival of democracy.”

To cope with the Depression, Americans needed a national Benevolent Community. “I see one-third of our nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished,” FDR told a nation whose citizens clearly understood they were all in this together. He described the purpose of the New Deal as “extending to our national life the old principle of the local community.” “We are determined,” Roosevelt said, “to make every American citizen the subject of his country's interest and concern.” The Social Security Act was not just a social insurance scheme, but the very symbol of national solidarity. Henceforth, all American families would share the risk of becoming unemployed or losing the family's breadwinner or retiring without adequate savings. And then, of course, came Adolf Hitler's war, which cemented this national unity as FDR led the country into battle with the most fearsome Mob at the Gates it had ever encountered, over the objections of Republican isolationists.

DEMOCRATS MANAGED THE transition from Depression and world war to postwar prosperity and the cold war with only slight alterations in story line. The Benevolent Community remained at the core of Harry S Truman's Fair Deal, John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. The upwardly mobile Triumphant Individual depended on federal provisions—the G.I. bill, government-backed mortgages, a guarantee of equal civil rights. Meanwhile, the Democrats continued their assault on the Mob at the Gates, but now the Mob was the dangerous and expansive Soviet Union. Truman stopped the communists in Korea. Kennedy stopped them in Berlin and during the Cuban missile crisis. And he tried to stop them in Vietnam, which he saw as “the finger in the dike” holding back the Soviets. Johnson, of course, tragically tried and failed to erect a dam against the North Vietnamese and their patrons. While Republicans continued to wrestle with the isolationists and nervous Nellies—

such as Senator Robert Taft of Ohio—Democrats spoke of paying any price and bearing any burden to protect the United States.

But, in the '60s, the Rot at the Top gradually dropped out of the Democratic message. Gone were tales of greedy businessmen or unscrupulous financiers. This was partly because the economy had changed profoundly. Postwar prosperity allowed the middle class to explode in size and the gap between rich and poor to shrink. White-collar workers were now abundant, and blue-collar workers got generous wage increases that could be absorbed by the huge postwar market. Rot at the Top rhetoric was also a casualty of the Vietnam War, which spawned an anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian New Left and split Democrats down the middle. For many liberals, the Rot came to be personified by Johnson, his defense secretary, Robert McNamara, and even the federal government itself. (Ironically, Richard Nixon's White House and the Watergate scandal would hurt the Democrats, too, by confirming that the Rot at the Top was to be found in government rather than among business elites.)

The Vietnam War also undermined Democrats' confidence about the Mob at the Gates. Soviet communism remained dangerous, to be sure, but the McGovern wing of the party had no clear plan of action. Indeed, its approach seemed redolent of the Republican isolationists of the earlier part of the century, who wanted the United States simply to turn its back on the Mob. And, after President Carter and the hostage crisis, even when Democrats did try to tell this story, they seemed uncertain of themselves. In short, Democrats and progressives came off as confused and conflicted about the dangers the United States faced. They stopped talking both about the Rot at the Top and about the Mob at the Gates, and thus ceased giving Americans convincing stories about what the nation was up against.

EENTER RONALD REAGAN, master storyteller, who jumped into the conceptual breach that Democrats had left open. For Reagan, the Mob at the Gates was not merely a Soviet Union that needed to be contained, but an Evil Empire that had to be destroyed. The Rot at the Top was big government—Washington insiders and arrogant bureaucrats who stifled Triumphant Individuals—and the Benevolent Community's foundation was not New Deal-style programs but small, traditional neighborhoods in which people voluntarily helped one another, free from government interference. (Social spending could be cut, therefore, without threatening the mythology of benevolence.) The Triumphant Individual, meanwhile, was no longer the little guy in need of a helping hand, but the business entrepreneur who would spawn new companies and industries if unencumbered by government regulations and taxes. Through the alchemy of supply-side ("trickle-down") economics, his self-enriching triumphs would, it was said, help us all. Reagan's overall message was as hopeful and upbeat as FDR's: "America is back and standing tall," Reagan said in 1984. "We've begun

to restore the great American values—the dignity of work, the warmth of family, the strength of neighborhood, and the nourishment of human freedom."

Democrats never regained the capacity to tell their versions of the stories. Even when the implosion of the Soviet Union ended one of the Republicans' most powerful stories and temporarily left the United States without a Mob at the Gates, the stories American politicians told remained Republican stories. The Rot at the Top was still big government. To be sure, Bill Clinton won the presidency in 1992 promising to "fight for the forgotten middle class" against the forces of "greed," but Clinton inherited such a huge budget deficit from George H.W. Bush that he couldn't put up much of a fight. And, after losing his bid for universal health care, Clinton himself announced that the era of big government was over—and he proved it by ending welfare. Clinton's Benevolent Community remained, as it was under his Republican predecessors, a nation of volunteers; Clinton appointed a commission on volunteerism and encouraged the private sector to offer jobs to former welfare recipients. And he urged would-be Triumphant Individuals (who were working harder than ever with no appreciable increase in pay and benefits) to embrace a new covenant of personal "opportunity and responsibility."

Under George W. Bush, the stories have changed somewhat, but all continue to reflect Republican values, crowding out Democratic interpretations. The September 11 terrorist attacks, of course, powerfully revived the Mob at the Gates tale, and, although Bush never quite connected the dots between global terrorists and his Axis of Evil (including Saddam Hussein), the basic story line he offered was familiar enough to give the Bush presidency a compelling mission. By Bush's second inaugural, that mission had grown even larger—a battle against tyrants and oppressors all over the world, similar to those Wilson had railed against almost 90 years before, and perfectly fitting the mental box Americans have always reserved for the Mob at the Gates.

Bush's Triumphant Individual, meanwhile, is a property owner who achieves the "dignity and security of economic independence" by getting rich off his assets, as Bush put it in his second inaugural. The "ownership society" is intended, as Bush explained, to make "every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny." In this universe, there is no more need for national benevolence. In fact, Social Security—which had been the very symbol of FDR's Benevolent Community—is to be turned into private accounts that Triumphant Individuals can use to gain personal wealth. In Bush's retelling, the Benevolent Community is found in religious congregations—in "faith-based" organizations that "rally the armies of compassion in our communities to fight a very different war against poverty and hopelessness, a daily battle waged house to house and heart to heart." Not even the Indian Ocean tsunami initially deserved much by way of official government aid. U.S. benevolence found expression instead in the voluntary contributions of corporations and private citizens. "The greatest source of America's generosity is not our govern-

ment,” Bush explained when he appointed his father and Clinton to head a relief commission. “It’s the good heart of the American people.”

But it is in the retelling of the story about the Rot at the Top that the younger Bush and his cohorts have departed most from preceding Republican versions. Rather than big government, their Rot is lodged in America’s “cultural elites”—depicted as influential liberals in prestigious coastal universities, the upper strata of New York and Hollywood, and the media. This Rot disdains ordinary working Americans, rejects religion and patriotism, celebrates Hollywood’s licentiousness, and seeks to impose sexual permissiveness—including abortion and gay marriage—on good, God-fearing Americans. A TV advertisement aired in 2003 by a conservative group during the Democratic primary campaign described this new Rot as a “tax-hiking, government-spending, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, *New York Times*-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show,” and, in the general election campaign, Republicans repeatedly attacked John Kerry as a “Massachusetts liberal” who was part of the “Chardonnay-and-brie set.” Bush mocked Kerry for finding a “new nuance” each day on Iraq, drawing out the word “nuance” to emphasize Kerry’s French cultural elitism. “In Texas, we don’t do nuance,” he said, to laughter and applause. House Republican leader Tom DeLay opened his campaign speeches by saying “Good morning, or, as John Kerry would say, ‘Bonjour.’”

WHAT WERE DEMOCRATS to do? All their stories had been replaced. In the 2004 election, Kerry argued forcefully that Bush’s Iraq policy would not succeed against terrorism and that Bush’s tax cuts for the wealthy should be repealed in order to generate enough revenue for a modest step toward universally affordable health care. But Kerry failed to place these and his other policy prescriptions into the four stories that Americans had always heard and that made sense of the world they knew. As a result, Kerry’s policies lacked context and meaning. Where did Kerry want to take the United States? What did he stand for? Absent a clear narrative about the Mob, the Rot, the Benevolent, and the Triumphant, his policies were just . . . policies. As such, they were no match for Bush’s convictions about what America should do—no match, in other words, for Bush’s recasting of the Mob at the Gates as vicious terrorists that had to be killed or would kill us (and against whom, he said, Kerry could not be trusted to use force); of the Triumphant Individual as people free to pursue individual wealth (whom Kerry would smother with taxes); of the Benevolent Community as a collection of religious people with heart (of whom Kerry was contemptuous); and of the Rot at the Top as an arrogant cultural elite (of which Kerry himself was a member).

The challenge for Democrats and progressives is not simply to manufacture a new set of stories but to find and tell stories that match their convictions. The stories must also resonate with what Americans sense to be the truth. Demo-

crats might say, for example, that the Mob at the Gates isn’t global terrorism and it’s not despotic tyrants. Terrorism is a technique, and tyrants exist all over the world (are we going to invade China?). There is a Mob out there, though. They are global gangs of thugs like Al Qaeda—and they are dangerous. They must be met by force. They must also be policed—their movements monitored, their access to dangerous weapons denied, their ranks infiltrated. But the United States can’t police them alone. We need a new global alliance against terrorist organizations, led by the United States. (Democrats created NATO; maybe now it’s time for GATO, a Global Anti-Terrorist Organization.) Meanwhile, America’s potential Triumphant Individuals depend critically on two things to prosper in the new economy: a good education and good medical care. (This was the subtext of the riveting story Senator Barack Obama told at the 2004 Democratic National Convention.) Almost every American family is struggling to obtain them. Yet, if we join together in a Benevolent Community to provide them to every American citizen, all of us stand to gain. The rising tide of productivity and wealth will lift the nation as a whole.

In this retelling, the main thing holding us back is the Rot at the Top—concentrated wealth and power to a degree we haven’t seen in this nation since the late nineteenth century. Mammoth corporations and hugely rich individuals have abused their power and wealth to corrupt our democracy, take over much of our media, give executives stratospheric pay packages while firing workers, and pad their nests with special tax breaks and corporate welfare. In this, they have been helped by a Republican Congress and White House whose guiding ideology seems less capitalism than cronyism, as shown time and again through legislative sops to the pharmaceutical industry, the credit card companies, and Wall Street. (Indeed, with its mounting ethical troubles, the GOP’s congressional leadership is fast becoming another example of Rot at the Top—an example the Democrats could seize on as Gingrich and company did in 1994.) Or, as Al Gore said in 2000, in a remarkably prescient speech, George W. Bush was bankrolled by “a new generation of special interest power brokers who would like nothing better than a pliant president who would bend public policy to suit their purposes and profits.”

Gore came in for a lot of criticism after his defeat from Democrats who felt uncomfortable with his description of a nation divided between “the people” and “the powerful.” But Al Gore was on to something. After all, he got the most votes. ■

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