

## BOOKS

[*Building Red America: The New Conservative Coalition and the Drive for Permanent Power*, Thomas B. Edsall, Basic Books, 320 pages]

# Democrats in the Doldrums

By Martin Sieff

THERE IS SOMETHING strangely dated, even archaic about Thomas Edsall's new book. It is meticulously researched, sober in its conclusions, and balanced in its analysis. It will clearly be flavor of the month in supposedly thoughtful and serious Democratic circles and think tanks. The usual round of worthy liberal panels will convene to debate its conclusions.

Yet the book appears to have been written in a time warp. It could just as easily—and far more relevantly—have been published 25 years ago. And therein lies not only its problem but the entire dilemma of the 21st-century Democratic Party.

Edsall's central thesis is that the Republican Party is running a determined, extraordinarily well-organized and co-ordinated master plan to make it the permanent majority party of the United States for the indefinite future. Well, duh?

The GOP has obviously succeeded in achieving that goal since 1980. In the 26 years since that election, the Republican Party has controlled either the presidency or one or both of the houses of Congress except for the fleeting two-year period between 1993 and 1995. It has usually done so, as Edsall notes, by narrow electoral margins. The GOP has never amassed huge majorities except when Ronald Reagan was running for president or boosting his heir George Herbert Walker Bush in 1988. And even

then, all of Reagan's extraordinary charisma and political skill was unable to break the Democratic lock on the House of Representatives, which stood until the epochal midterm elections of 1994.

It is therefore especially ironic that Edsall's clarion call for Democrats to rally around their embattled cause comes right before a midterm election when the Dems have their best chance at regaining control of at least one of the two houses of Congress, more likely the House of Representatives, for the first time in 12 years.

"It is the argument of this book," Edsall writes, "that unless the Democratic Party finds a way to defeat the Republican 'wedge' issue strategies; radically improves its organizational foundations; resolves its internal divisions on national security; formulates a compelling position on the use of force..." and does a whole list of other mom-and-apple-pie things, "the odds are that Republican Party will continue to maintain, over the long term, a thin but durable margin of victory."

The problem for the Democrats is that, not being entirely the dummies that Karl Rove's caricatures have painted them as, they have recognized these problems for at least 14 years—since the campaign of 1992. But except when they had the unique Bill Clinton to run, it has not done them an iota of good.

National-security issues, it should be remembered, had almost nothing to do with the election of 2000. It was Al Gore's *tour de force* to lose that race, which should have been a shoo-in for him, by an endless number of bizarre, self-inflicted political wounds. In 2004, the Dems chose a standard bearer with a heroic personal war record in Vietnam who had voted for the war on Iraq. His military record was turned inside out, and the inevitable complexities of his Senate voting history—every senator's voting record is inherently complex given the nature and functions of the upper chamber—were torn apart by the GOP attack machine.

In 2004, the Democrats wielded more financial clout than in any previous cam-

paign in their history. There was not a whimper of dissent among them publicly on national security. In Kerry and his rival contender Gen. Wesley Clark, they supposedly had the "credible military leadership" that Edsall recommends. They emphasized Edsall's prescription of "an economic program capable of generating—and generating belief in—wealth." In fact, since Bill Clinton articulated his Third Way in 1992, that has been the central theme of every one of the four subsequent Democratic presidential campaigns. And the party has certainly held together "a biracial, multiethnic coalition" since then, as Edsall urges. In other words, the Edsall prescription has been applied, and applied repeatedly, in both presidential and national congressional campaigns for 14 years. And it has fallen flat on its face almost every time.

The only hope the Democrats have is in a qualifying clause that Edsall apparently entered as an afterthought to his prescription: "Unless the population of the disadvantaged swells." Here, he skates over in seven words what should have been the central focus of his book. Americans have historically been content with what they have in national political leadership as long as it has reliably delivered prosperity and economic security. Only when a far-reaching economic crash—or a genuinely frightening breakdown of public security—occurs will they ditch the governing party of the previous generation and cast it into the political wilderness for decades to come.

Thus the Republicans did not get a whiff of national power for two decades following the Great Depression, and even when they finally made it back to the Oval Office, it was by accepting all the liberal, big-government policies that had become engrained over the previous 20 years from 1932 to 1952. The Democratic-liberal governing consensus only fell in its turn following the epidemic of race riots, other social pathologies, and the bungled war in Vietnam under Lyndon Johnson from 1965 to 1968.

Since then, the Democrats have only made it back to the White House when the Republicans were sunk in the swamp of Watergate and when they ran their only authentic political master—Clinton—in 1992. Even then, Clinton could never have gotten there had not H. Ross Perot siphoned off far more conservative-minded GOP voters than Democratic ones in his campaign against the federal deficit. In those days, a lot of conservatives and Republicans really did believe that deficits matter, as indeed they do.

The long-term Republican hegemony, narrowly-based though it apparently is, is not going to be defeated by Democratic action unless the party proves capable of producing another Bill Clinton, something it has signally failed to do in the six years since he left office. It is increasingly clear that in his political intellect and cunning, Clinton was *sui generis*. Even weighed down by President George W. Bush's policies running up record federal deficits, the worst

balance of payments deficits of any trading nation in the history of the world, the catastrophic war in Iraq, the erosion of power and credibility of the U.S. military, the drowning of New Orleans, and the failure to hunt down Osama bin Laden, the Democrats may yet blow what ought to be a sure thing and fail to regain control of the House in the November elections. By simply pressing the national-security button and activating the pro-Bush phalanx of broadcast,

The Dems have repeatedly shown that they lack the courage and the integrity to open up their party to fresh blood and to launch any kind of genuinely principled broad assault on the disastrous Iraq policies of the Bush administration. On the contrary, would-be party strategic heavyweights like Michael Lind, Peter Beinart, and Will Marshall are trying to preach a new era of liberal interventionism, a fantasy based on the assumption of an American economic strength, invincible

## LIKE EDSALL, THE DEMOCRATS REMAIN A PARTY OF DON QUIXOTES.

Internet, and print-media opinion-shakers, Karl Rove is out-strategizing them yet again.

The real problem with the Democrats is their refusal to contemplate the very goal Edsall wishes for. He notes that there has been no significant realignment of American voters over the decades of Republican hegemony. But to effect such a realignment would transform the Democratic Party from what it is today—and what almost all its leaders want it to remain—into something unpredictably different.

The consistent policies by the party's liberal establishment spearheaded by Rahm Emanuel leave no doubt that the Democrats, for all their endless, numbing rhetoric about change, remain determined not to let the possibility of such a realignment even begin to occur within their doors.

The party's leaders eagerly went along with the GOP's highly successful efforts to caricature Cindy Sheehan as an extremist to prevent her from becoming a significant political contender for the party in California. They contemptibly sabotaged Marine Lt. Col. Paul Hackett's promising Senate campaign in Ohio to make way for old party loyalist Sherrod Brown. And they have deliberately starved Jim Webb's Senate campaign against George Allen of funds, though at the time of writing it appears that Allen's own ineptitude may foil the party's calculations and let Webb in anyway.

industrial might, and global clout that has already vanished, though they refuse to see it.

It remains feasible that the Dems will pick up at least one of the houses of Congress in November's election. And if GOP policies lead to either economic catastrophe or military disaster in Iraq or against Iran before the 2008 elections, some Democratic hopeful like Hillary Clinton or even Al Gore could get to sit in the White House one more time. But the Dems' continued obsession with kowtowing to the worst Bush and neo-conservative fantasies in foreign policy as well as their resistance to change at home guarantees that any such victory will be a last, exhausted throw of the dice, doomed to a consequent failure and national repudiation even more sweeping than those that enveloped Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter.

For like Edsall, the Dems remain a party of Don Quixotes, mired in their dreams of a romantic, imagined past, eagerly tilting at windmills that are already crumbling of old age and blind to the real dragons rising up on every side to threaten the Republic they have served so poorly for so long. ■

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[*Bakunin: A Biography*, Mark Leier, St. Martin's Press, 350 pages]

## An Enemy of the State

By Kirkpatrick Sale

MARK LEIER sets out to rescue not only Mikhail Bakunin, the great anarchist thinker, but the whole anarchist tradition, which he argues is a pertinent political force today: "The current interest in anarchism," he writes, "is not misplaced or irrelevant." He certainly accomplishes the former and does much to dispel the multiple canards that have surrounded this man, many of them fabricated by Marx and the Marxists, but I don't think he makes much of a case for the latter.

Bakunin, aptly called "the hairy Russian giant," was born to a noble family of only modest means in a village north of Moscow in 1814. As the firstborn male, he was destined for a military career and at 15 was sent to a rigid, anti-Western military school, where he chafed at the arbitrary discipline and the narrow curriculum—much less encompassing than the homeschooling he had experienced before. He gradually learned to resist the system in minor ways and soon lost all interest in formal studies, reading instead in philosophy, history, and languages (none of which were in the official curriculum), getting himself expelled from school in 1834 for poor grades and assigned to barracks on the Polish frontier. He liked that no better, went AWOL after a year, and eventually, in 1836, landed in Moscow, gravitating to a circle of students and intellectuals, most of whom were sharply critical of the repressive tsarist regime.

Bakunin spent the next four years, supported apparently by loans that he couldn't repay and occasional handouts from his family, voraciously reading—English and French Romantics and German philosophers, in particular—and writing for little Russian magazines. This provided the basis for his later the-

ories, but he was not yet an anarchist and like many of his circle saw his task as developing a critique of the tsarist state—though not too openly or the police would be on him. When he left Russia to go to study at the University of Berlin in 1840, pursuing his deep interest in Hegel in particular, he was a highly regarded writer, "in the vanguard," Leier says, "of progressive Russian thinkers."

Western Europe around this time was surging with ideas about freedom and justice and political reform that would lead to the 1848 revolutions, and Bakunin's thoughts took a new turn. He became a convinced atheist and began to think about ways of obtaining liberty in a new kind of state ("Liberty today stands at the head of the agenda of history"). By 1842, he was arguing that "the passion for destruction is at the same time a creative passion," by which he did not advocate violence and terror, as he is sometimes accused of, but only meant that if there was going to be movement toward democracy and freedom, the reactionary state had to be done away with. He was developing a revolutionary position, arguing that it was impossible to reform the state: what's needed "is not only a particular constitutional or politico-economic change, but a total transformation of that world condition."

Publishing this kind of material did not sit well with the German government, and the paper he published it in was shut down, leading Bakunin to flee to Switzerland. But the Swiss government told the Russians that he was there and hanging around in revolutionary circles, so the Russian ambassador ordered him to return home. When he refused, the tsarist regime ordered him stripped of his noble rank and sentenced him to hard labor in Siberia, whereupon he fled again, to Paris, in 1844.

It was a lively, political city at that time—George Sand, Marx, Louis Blanc, Proudhon were all there—and Bakunin fit in with the growing passion for revolution, giving speeches, writing articles, making a name. But as an anarchist, not a socialist: socialists were "more or less authoritarians" who wanted "to organize

the future according to their own ideas" whereas he was for liberty and against authority.

When the revolution came in 1848, Bakunin was on the barricades—Marx said it wasn't the right "stage" and went to London—and was part of the quasi-anarchist Republican government. He was given money by the Republic to go foment revolution in Poland, which he tried, and then to Prague, where he tried again, and then, in 1849, to Dresden for an uprising against the king of Saxony. That revolution, like all the others, was put down ruthlessly, and this time Bakunin was arrested, sent to prison, found guilty of treason, and then in 1851 handed over to Austria where he was once again found guilty. The Russians stepped in and took him to Moscow, where he was imprisoned for the next seven years and finally, inflicted with scurvy and heart problems, sent to exile in Siberia.

By 1861, Bakunin was well enough to plot an escape and managed to get on a ship that ultimately led him to Japan, then San Francisco, New York, and finally London. For two years he agitated and spoke to the radical circles there, then went to Italy, where in 1866 he wrote his basic manifesto, now as a full-blown anarchist. He called for the "radical overthrow of all presently existing religious, political, economic, and social organizations," to be replaced by a society built "on the basis of utmost equality, justice, work, and an education inspired exclusively by respect for humanity," a world in which liberty meant "the absolute right of all adult men and women to seek no sanction for their actions except their own conscience and reason ... responsible to themselves first of all, and then to the society of which they are a part, but only insofar as they freely consent to be part of it." Labor would be social and collective rather than individual, land and resources would be shared equally by all, and women would be the absolute equals of men in all affairs. It was a dramatic picture drawn in complete contrast to the world of Europe at his time—and ours.

In 1867, Bakunin and a small band of followers moved to Switzerland, where