

# Let Democrats be Democrats

## Vic Fingerhut's cure for the party's identity crisis

By Miles Harvey

**L**ATE IN THE 1968 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, consultant Vic Fingerhut offered candidate Hubert Humphrey some simple advice. Stress your party affiliation, said Fingerhut, and remind voters of the party's record on behalf of working and middle-income Americans. Don't listen to advisers who want to "remake" your image, Fingerhut warned, just *be a Democrat*. Humphrey followed his advice—and dramatically closed the gap on Richard Nixon in the last three weeks of the campaign.

Twenty-one years later—only four of them with a Democrat in the White House—the party finds itself incapacitated by a severe identity crisis. While the Republicans have been winning three consecutive landslide presidential victories, many Democratic leaders have been urging party candidates to out-GOP the GOP in order to woo "liberal Republicans," "yuppies" and "Reagan Democrats." As Michael Dukakis and Walter Mondale proved, however, a donkey trying to imitate an elephant only winds up looking like a big ass.

Vic Fingerhut, on the other hand, has been preaching the same old gospel: let Democrats be Democrats. He urged Jimmy Carter, then Mondale and then Dukakis to cast themselves as strong Democrats—Democrats willing to battle the abuses of big corporations, tax the wealthy, fight for the rights and health of working Americans, protect against foreign competition and take care of senior citizens.

Other Democratic advisers, shell-shocked by the Reagan Revolution, often roll their eyes at such talk. "That's old '30s stuff," they tell Fingerhut.

His reply: "We won in the '30s. Don't you remember?"

Fingerhut, president of Fingerhut/Granados Opinion Research Co., is a unique figure in the nation's capital. He's a Washington insider who is able to maintain an outsider's perspective, a pollster and media consultant who thinks the Democratic Party would be better off listening to working people than to its pollsters and media consultants.

Fingerhut—who polls for a variety of Democratic candidates and labor unions, including the Steelworkers, Machinists and Autoworkers—is worried about the party's polarization of "left/liberal, poor people, blacks vs. Robb-Nunn conservatism." He thinks there's another approach—he calls it populist—that casts the Democrats as the party of middle-income and working Americans and the party that attacks the abuses of corporations.

As part of its ongoing series on the future of the Democratic Party, *In These Times* recently interviewed Fingerhut by phone.

**You've argued that candidates Michael Dukakis and Walter Mondale failed in large part because they did not directly attack Republican programs that benefit corporations and the "super rich." Explain.**

All the polls continue to show that the greatest strength of the Democratic Party, even

at this late date, is that Democrats are best seen as representing ordinary working people. The greatest weakness of the Republican Party is that it is seen as favoring the rich and the big corporations.

It's interesting that even with a very popular president like Ronald Reagan, we were finding that when people were asked, "How's he doing on foreign policy?" he got very high ratings; "How's he doing as a person?" he got very high ratings. But when we asked, "How's he doing standing up to big business and representing ordinary working people?" he got awful ratings, as did Bush during the campaign, and as do the Republicans generally. That is clearly the Republicans' Achilles heel—and I think for good reason, because

### The DEMOCRATS:

#### Planning a party

in fact corporations and the rich are who they represent. It's remarkable to me that the Democrats have failed to zero in on that Achilles heel.

When you put a campaign—or politics generally—in who-represents-whom terms, the Democrats benefit. It's madness for the Democrats not to do that.

**But both Dukakis and Mondale were heavily funded by corporate money and the super rich. As a result they were able to build massive primary organizations and outlast their less-well-off Democratic opponents. How can such candidates then turn around and attack big-money politics in the general election?**

The fact of the matter is that people do believe that the Republicans are controlled by the rich, and they don't believe the Democrats are. Poll after poll continues to show that. We asked, "Which party do you think is best equipped to stand up to corporations?" and "Which party will fight to make sure corporations pay their fair share?" and overwhelmingly people said the Democrats.

So to some degree, regardless of what the facts actually are, they are significantly over-ridden by people's long and deeply held perceptions of the two parties.

**But let's talk about image vs. reality. You say the Democrats need a candidate who says he or she is for working and middle-income people as opposed to corporations. But isn't it more important to have a candidate who actually believes in those things and who has a proven, vocal history of fighting those battles?**

Obviously, that's better. But I think we could draw lines with the Republicans—in terms of Social Security deductibles, plant closings and the Republicans' record on the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, for example.

I think any Democratic candidate, with the exception of a few right-wing types who have bad voting records, has legitimate creden-

tials to attack the Republicans on what they're doing to working people—on health and safety, on foreign imports coming in and taking American jobs, on foreign corporations buying out American companies, on the export of jobs to low-wage countries.

On all those things, the Republicans have zero record. And a fair number of Democrats have begun to speak out on those issues. So I think that the Democrats could have credibly made that assault in 1988.

But I totally agree with you that the more chicken the Democrats are on these issues, the less credible they are. And over time, the inheritance of Roosevelt and Truman and Kennedy and Humphrey is going to start wearing thin. Some people think that the more effective Democratic politics is to be wishy-washy, to be middle-of-the-road, not to take a stand on these issues. The fact of the matter is—and I think it's implicit in your question—the tougher, the more defined the Democrats are on these kind of issues, the better it is for them politically. In short, good policy equals good politics—and being chicken, being weak, being accommodationist is going to get the Democrats nowhere. I think they should have learned their lesson over the last few years.

The Republicans draw the lines on their issues—such as national defense and capital punishment—and they don't play for accommodation. On the issues where the public sees them as strong, they draw very strong lines. And they win elections by doing that. The Democrats should be drawing the same strong lines on the issues in which they're strong. If they don't do it, they're going to keep losing elections.

**You've criticized the last three Democratic presidential nominees—Carter, Mondale and Dukakis—for being too concerned with trying to woo "moderate Republicans" and "yuppies." Why?**

First of all, they don't get the moderate Republicans. No Democrat except Lyndon Johnson in 1964 has gotten more than 10

than 8 percent of the Republican vote, and they never get less than 5 percent in nine out of 10 elections. On the other hand, the Democrats have been losing 25 percent to 30 percent of self-identified Democrats. And the Democrats have been comprising 40 percent of the total electorate until fairly recently, so we're talking about the Democrats losing 12 percent of the total electorate.

So in trying to placate these mythological liberal Republicans—1 percent of the electorate—and forgetting about 12 percent of the electorate, they've been going after the wrong target. They've been going where the fish are not. It's just incredibly stupid. And, frankly, they still seem set on doing it.

**The kind of campaign approach you're calling for sounds like the same thing that many on the Democratic Party's left wing have been endorsing for years. Why is the party's right wing—the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), led by Sens. Charles Robb and Sam Nunn—controlling the debate?**

Let me put this thing very straight to you—I'm not advocating a poor people's program for the presidency. I'm talking about working and middle-income people. And that has to be clear. If we elect Democrats on those issues, we can help poor people.

When you start talking about left/liberalism you're talking about a whole mélange of things, some of which get us votes and some of which lose us votes. And the stuff that helps poor voters and minorities, that's important, but it's not the stuff that wins the swing voters that I'm talking about. In fact they go the other way on those issues.

We have to get white working people in the South and the Midwest. They're all for Social Security, Medicare, taxing the big corporations, keeping out foreign imports, long-term care. They're actually all for national health at this point.

But setting up the poles between left/liberal and the Robb-Nunn right-wing approach is wrong because that leaves out a whole other approach. And that is the "populist" approach I advocate—aiming the Democratic Party's message at working and middle-income Americans—which is neither left/liberal, nor is it the Chuck Robb "we've got to make believe we're Republicans" approach.

**Let's talk about the so-called "Reagan Democrats." The DLC and pundits like former Mondale aide William Galston argue that to succeed, the party must bring them back into the fold. But others argue that**

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percent of the self-identified Republicans in the U.S. The Democrats usually average between 3 percent and 8 percent of the Republican vote. And when you consider the fact that up until recently, Republicans only constituted 30 percent of the electorate at best, the Republicans who were likely to vote Democratic constituted less than 1 percent of the overall electorate.

The Democrats have been hypnotized by moderate Republicans—and it doesn't make a difference in the vote. They never get more

such efforts only make Democratic candidates sound like watered-down Republicans.

The Reagan Democrats are not voting Democratic because they're for Robb. My polling shows that the Reagan Democrats are the toughest on keeping out foreign corporations, the Reagan Democrats are tough on Social Security and Medicare, the Reagan Democrats want to stick it to the big corporations. The Reagan Democrats are not rich, conservative, country club types. The people





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Courtesy of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers

who voted for Reagan but are historically Democrats are with us on the traditional Democratic issues that benefit working and middle-income people—what I call "populist" issues. That's what people don't understand.

The DLC types think these people are going to vote for us if we make believe we're Republicans. That's precisely what's not going to happen.

The Reagan Democrats will vote for us when we act like Democrats. These Reagan Democrats think the greatest presidents in history have been Roosevelt and Kennedy—not Coolidge and Hoover. And that's critical to understand.

This whole issue is of crucial importance in the South, home to a huge percentage of those "Reagan Democrats." Galston and the DLC point out that Southern and border states account for 155 of the 270 electoral college votes needed to win the presidency. Thus they say, the Democrats must reach out to conservative Southern whites. Are they right?

Well that's what Galston did in the 1984 Mondale campaign, and he got his ass kicked. He's had a test of it—it doesn't work.

Instead of talking about the millions of American jobs that were being lost by foreign takeovers and foreign trade, the Mondale campaign avoided the trade issue and talked like Herbert Hoover about balancing the budget. And they got killed. Galston's approach has been absolutely disproven. It's a disaster.

In 1980, I tried to help Carter. But he sat by while Americans lost their jobs in 1979-80, because the Carter people weren't going to do these "old, outmoded, Roosevelt-Truman-Kennedy" things like protect American jobs—either by using trade policy or public works to get people back to work. So he sat by in the spring of 1980 while millions of Americans lost their jobs in the big industrial states and made believe he was a Republican.

I was on an advisory group for the Carter campaign chaired by former Democratic Na-

tional Committee Chairman Robert Strauss. The committee met with Carter's Treasury secretary, G. William Miller, in 1980, and I told him "Mr. Secretary"—I was trying to be polite—"I know you have big problems with inflation, etc. But a million working people, mostly Democrats, have lost their jobs in the key industrial states in the last six months, and we've got to do something to get them back to work."

And he gave me an answer that was just classic. He talked about the "confidence of Wall Street" and the "confidence of the business community" and the "confidence of the foreign money markets."

And I was sitting there listening and thinking, "This is a Democratic secretary of the Treasury. This is who we elected. And I knew at that moment that we're going to get killed. It was all over. We'd thrown people out of work, and we expected them to vote for us. You've got to be crazy to expect that."

The incident led me to two conclusions. One was that the Democrats were going to lose, and probably deserved to lose. It also led me to believe that labor should play a more aggressive role in the Democratic Party. Because any guy who worked on a factory line across the country could tell you in 1980 that "we got half our guys out of work, and they ain't gonna vote Democratic."

You didn't need some Wall Street secretary of the Treasury to be making the critical decisions about the future of this country and the future of the Democratic Party. If you would have had a random assortment of Autoworkers, Steelworkers and Machinists, they would have told you that what Miller was saying was inane. Totally inane.

And that just kind of tells you where we are. Frankly, my view—and this reflects, obviously, my own institutional allegiances—is that I'd rather have a random assortment of 50 political activists from various unions making strategy for the Democrats. Those people would have a better sense of what the Democrats should do in the next election than the kinds of people who compose the

strategy groups that normally run Democratic campaigns.

In 1984 Gary Hart was able to paint labor as a "special interest." What sort of long-term damage has this done to the Democratic Party?

It's interesting that the Republicans have limited their attacks on that, because they're very nervous about playing that game.

When DLC types get up and criticize the Democrats for being the party of "labor, blacks and poor people," they give a credence to a claim that when the Republicans make, people say "bullshit." But the DLC types have reinforced those Republican attacks.

I mean, we were known as the "party of labor" in the '30s, and that was a period of bloodshed in labor disputes. And Democrats still won elections. It's when the Democrats shy away from representing working people that they lose elections. Our tie to working Americans is not our downside.

Mondale didn't lose in 1984 because of his association with labor. He had no message. He even attacked working people. He didn't lay a glove on the big corporations. He didn't say a damn thing about trade until he was forced to, when he mumbled a few minor things at the end.

Mondale ran a Galston campaign—they talked about the deficit. I mean, people don't believe the Democrats could balance a checkbook, let alone the national economy. And for Democrats to run on Republican issues in just fundamentally absurd.

Many Democrats felt betrayed when Michael Dukakis, then away from being identified as a "liberal," was there damage to the party?

I think he made a mistake by even engaging in the discussion. He should have put the thing back on partisan terms like Harry Truman did in 1948 and Hubert Humphrey did in the last three weeks of 1968. He should have made it a contest between "Democrats, who represent working people" and "Republicans, who represent the big corporations."

"Liberal" and "conservative" contain a

whole bunch of connotations. Up until recently there were three Democrats in this country for every two Republicans—although that's now narrowing a bit. But at the same time there were three Democrats for every two Republicans, there were three self-identified "conservatives" for every two self-identified "liberals." So it made sense for the Republicans to emphasize liberal vs. conservative. And any Democrat who bought into that rhetoric was an idiot.

The Democrats should talk strictly in terms of party and define party in terms that are strongest for us—who's for working people and who's for the big corporations.

But isn't the Democrats' real problem not that they listen to the wrong image-makers and pollsters, but that they listen only to image-makers and pollsters? Many Americans don't feel the party actually believes in much of anything.

I'm not sure that's it. I think part of it is that we've had second-rate pollsters and media people. The Republicans—the Richard Wirthlins and the Doug Baileys—they're just light-years ahead. They're just brighter than our guys. I don't want to get into personalities here, but they just happen to be smarter.

For example, in 1984 you can compare the Wirthlin team to Mondale's team. The Democrats had a 10 point lead in terms of party identification—40 percent to 45 percent of the American people say they are Democrats. And we got 40 percent of the vote. We didn't even get up to our party ID number. The Republicans, the party that represents 28 percent to 30 percent of the American people, got 60 percent of the vote. They actually doubled their party ID number.

That demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt their skill and our lack of skill. We're sitting there with this huge majority that Franklin Roosevelt has handed us, and basically we're pissing it away. The Republicans are sitting there with this terrible heritage of being the party of the Depression and the party of big business, and they're still beating us. It's amazing.

Second, you have the culture of the people who comprise the decision-making apparatus of the Democratic Party. They tend to be upper-middle class, and those that aren't have some business influence. That's why going after the yuppies and the liberal Republicans has so much appeal to this kind of decision-makers—because these are basically the kind of people they are.

I think there's also an element you raised earlier about who the Democrats are beholden to. One of my partners is a Democrat in the Maryland legislature. And he told me this story that I thought was very revealing. He got elected running the type of strong Democratic campaign we've been talking about. But he says that once you get there, you get all these businessmen coming up to you and saying, "You know, we're not so big on the Democrats, but you're special. You're a great guy."

Then you start getting all this political action committee (PAC) money—but not because you're a Democrat. You're getting this PAC money because you're an incumbent. The day that you're not an incumbent, you're going to be in the wilderness.

But all of a sudden you think that instead of getting 51 percent of the vote, you can go for 100 percent. The businessmen can love you just as much as Democrats can love you.

I think that's when we get into trouble—when our guys start believing that

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# EDITORIAL



David Klein, United Feature Syndicate

## Imperial mindset lives despite new moderation

The Reagan administration represented what might be the last serious attempt to reverse the anti-imperialist tide that has swept the world since the end of World War II. The former president did his best to bring back the glory days of empire—the time when an American president could overthrow a rebel government in Latin America with a show of the fleet or, in a pinch, a Marine battalion or two. Yet while Teddy Roosevelt exercised American power by speaking softly but carrying a big stick, Reagan was forced to do the reverse. He ranted and raved about Nicaragua and the Sandinistas, and he caused the Nicaraguan people untold misery by creating and loosing the contras on an otherwise peaceful people. He was unable to send in the Marines, however, or to overthrow the upstart government.

Now we have George Bush, who appears to be a transition from Reagan to reality. Unlike his predecessor, Bush is indecisive. He seems to understand that the old days of uninhibited domination are gone, but the old lordly mindset persists. Bush has given every indication that he recognizes the necessity—if the United States is not to isolate itself completely in Latin America—of not attempting an overthrow of Panama's dictator by force and violence. Instead he has pleaded for other Latin nations to help isolate Panama economically and diplomatically in the hope of driving Noriega out. Yet old ideas and ways of acting die hard. In a show of force he has sent 2,000 American troops on a militarily unnecessary journey to the Canal Zone, and his rhetoric has been imperious.

**Give and take:** Satirist Peter Finley Dunne once wrote that Andrew Carnegie, who had a habit of bestowing libraries on cities throughout the nation, had a peculiar kind of generosity. "He's generous," Dunne's character Mr. Dooley said of Carnegie. "Every time he gives a library, he gives himself away in a speech."

Something similar can be said of our president, who recently gave a speech to the Council on the Americas. The president of the United States—holder of the mightiest office on earth—started off saying how pleased he was to be "in such high-powered company once again—with David Rockefeller, the chairman of this illustrious council"—and other wealthy and powerful men. Then he launched into a scolding lecture about Nicaragua.

In his mind, Bush clearly continues to carry the white man's burden. He talks about Nicaragua as if it were one of his "little brown" grand-

children. Latin America and the Caribbean, he told this ruling-class gathering, are proving fertile ground for the ideas of "free government and free enterprise," but unlike the rest of Latin America, Nicaragua hasn't met his standard of freedom.

All in all, Bush sounded like an overbearing parent speaking about a juvenile delinquent. "Within Nicaragua," he said, "we want to see a promise kept—the promise of democracy, withheld by the Sandinista regime for more than a decade." And to encourage Nicaragua to fulfill this alleged promise, he said, the contras would be kept intact through February 1990, when elections are scheduled. Meanwhile, Bush will be watching to see if Sandinista behavior is satisfactory. Both the conduct and the outcome of those elections would be used to decide whether the Sandinistas can be left in peace. Presumably, even if the conduct passes muster, the outcome will be deemed unsatisfactory and the election will be declared another fraud if the Sandinistas win.

**Separate standards:** Part of the conduct that Bush thinks appropriate for Nicaragua is for there to be "outside observers given unfettered access to all election phases and all proceedings"—a suggestion that could never be made of a nation considered an equal. Imagine, for example, Japan or the Soviet Union demanding that their observers be given similar access to American elections.

Bush also complained about Nicaraguan restrictions on foreign campaign contributions. The Nicaraguan law—apparently passed with an eye on the desperate need for foreign exchange—allows foreign political contributions, but requires half of them to go to the government's Supreme Election Council. Bush wants unlimited freedom to finance the opposition campaigns and considers it unfair that this is denied. But would Bush want West Germany, not to mention the Soviet Union, to have a similar freedom to intervene in American elections? And Bush condemned Nicaragua for continuing the prohibition of private ownership of TV stations, even though this has been a common practice of democratic countries. Both Britain and France—to name only two countries—forbade private TV stations for many years.

**Protecting our interests:** All of these demands made on Nicaragua are seen by Bush as a test, which, "if the Sandinistas fail...will be a crisis waiting to happen." But if this is so, the crisis will have been created by the administration out of whole cloth, just as a series of similar crises were manufactured in the past. Bush may have forgotten the past, but Central Americans remember that the United States sent troops into Nicaragua seven times between 1894 and 1933, that Marines were stationed there almost continuously from 1912 until 1933, and that, according to an official State Department document, "their work included activity against the outlaw leader Sandino in 1928." All of this was done "to protect American interests," which means American companies doing business there. To those "interests," Sandino was indeed a bandit—much like Pancho Villa in Mexico. But to the Nicaraguans, who named their revolution after him, Sandino was a democrat and a national hero.

In the good old days that the Reagan crowd longed for, what we now call the Third World was seen by our rulers simply as a series of investment opportunities. When our "little brown brothers" worked hard and didn't complain too much, business was good and all went well. But when they tried to control their own destiny, they were hunted down and slaughtered. Bush recognizes that those days are gone, but the habit of thinking about Latin American nations as subject to our will and duty-bound to accommodate themselves to the needs of our business class dies hard—and not only among conservatives.

Since the beginning of the Cold War, Republican and Democratic leaders have been able to mask this way of looking at the world with rhetoric about the threat to national security posed by Soviet clients in "our" hemisphere. Now that that threat is no longer credible, Bush relies on his self-appointed role as protector of "free government and free enterprise" where he chooses to find it endangered. Given his background and the interests he represents, this is not likely to change. But it is entirely possible for the public to force a change in the attitude of Democrats in and out of Congress. This nation was founded on opposition to foreign domination and control. That stance is part of what's best in the American tradition. It's time to start applying it to ourselves.

### Summertime, and the reading is easy

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