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STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Thinking, from a progressive standpoint, is more than just reasoning step-by-step, or articulating a worldview, or using frames and metaphors. The most powerful form of thinking is strategic. It is not just a matter of thinking ahead. It is matter of changing the landscape of thought and action. It is a matter of setting many things in motion by setting one thing in motion. It is a matter of reconfiguring the future by doing one thing in the present. Conservatives have been very good at strategic thinking. Progressives have not.

Strategic initiatives are policy proposals in one area that have an impact far beyond the explicit change promoted. They can be classified into two types. The first is the multifaceted initiative, where a targeted policy change has far-reaching effects across many areas. It advances a range of goals through one change.

For instance, tax cuts constitute a conservative multifaceted strategic initiative. They are not simply about lowering taxes. They are a kill-all-birds-with-one-stone approach to getting rid of social programs and protective or regulatory government oversight—an overarching goal of the conservative movement.

Another multifaceted conservative strategic initiative is “tort reform,” which has been made to sound like it is just about capping large damage awards and lawyers’ fees. It is really a destruction of the civil justice system’s capacity to deter corporations from acts that harm the public, since it is the lawyers’ fees that permit the system to function. Moreover, if successful, it will also dry up one of the major sources of campaign finance for progressive candidates, which comes from trial lawyers.

On the progressive side, investment in renewable energy is a multifaceted strategic initiative for better environmental policy, increased security, job creation, Third World development, and economic stimulation. George Lakoff has discussed this in detail in *Don’t Think of an Elephant!*¹

A second type of strategic initiative is the domino initiative. Such policy changes are meant as a first step toward a broader goal, where the next steps are easier or inevitable. So called partial-birth abortion is a conservative domino initiative to ban abortion. School vouchers are a similar ploy toward eventually privatizing the education system and giving religious schools public funding and a major educational role. President Bush vetoed the stem cell research bill because he saw it as a first step down a slippery slope to the acceptance of abortion.

Conservative strategic initiatives have one critical component: Their ultimate goals are typically not explicit. So when conservative leaders discuss “tax relief,” they rarely say that their ultimate goal is to get rid of progressive government and eliminate social

programs. These strategic goals are typically framed in private, in the confines of think tanks, policy sessions, and strategy talks. Thus, the Cato Institute published an article in 1983 on privatizing Social Security.² Though the proposal was far from secret, public discussion of creating private accounts are framed as ways to protect Social Security, when the real goal is to destroy it.

But there is a bright side to the need for such deception. It tells us that Americans are too progressive to endorse the strategic ends of tax cuts and privatization. Americans do not want to see government stripped of its public interest functions. That is why a lot of conservative strategic initiatives have covert goals—because most Americans will not support them.

Instead, they couch their initiatives in positive terms, like tax initiatives in terms of “tax relief.” Conservatives frame the initiative as helping individuals, giving them back their money so they can spend it how they see fit. In a sense, tax relief is framed as a progressive policy: government helping and showing compassion for the public.

One way for progressives to counter such hidden agendas is to discuss them openly. We need to get beyond how conservatives are framing the issues publicly and point out their real goals.

And there’s no bigger current issue than the Iraq war to show how a strategic initiative of the conservatives is framed in progressive terms and hides a much longer-term conservative agenda.

THE IRAQ WAR

As with tax cuts, there was an explicit justification for the invasion of Iraq that is well-known. It was the primary frame of the war discourse:

- Find and destroy the weapons of mass destruction.
- Oust Saddam Hussein and free the Iraqi people to establish their own democracy.
- Allow Iraqi businessmen to establish a free market.
- Use the profits from Iraqi oil to build the infrastructure for the people of Iraq.
- Allow Iraq to become a shining example of liberty, free markets, and democracy in the Middle East.

Those are all generally progressive goals, which explains the broad support of the Iraq invasion. Americans wanted to believe we were doing good, we were promoting an open and free society, we were showing our empathy for Iraqis. After all, it is progressives who champion international aid, the protection of human rights, and the ideal that the proceeds of a country’s resources should go to the people of that country. The Bush administration framed the Iraq invasion in terms of a humanitarian mission in order to gain the support of progressives and biconceptuals.

However, as with “tax relief,” there are strategic goals of the Iraq adventure that are not often publicly stated but many progressives have understood. It is because of these strategic goals, and the realization that the humanitarian goals either could not be

achieved or would take a backseat to the strategic goals, that many progressives opposed the Iraq invasion. Among the Bush administration's strategic goals of the Iraq invasion:

- Show that the global order can be reshaped to our advantage by military means, and show enough force to intimidate other countries in the Middle East.
- Use the war—linked to the “war on terror”—as a way to establish domestic war powers and much greater political control in the United States for the president and the administration.
- Shift domestic spending from social programs to the military, and shift domestic wealth and power to defense contractors and the oil industry.
- Establish a controllable “client state” government in Iraq.
- Gain access to the world's second-largest oil reserve.
- Establish permanent military bases in the heart of the Middle East to gain a strategic position, particularly with regard to Iran.
- Use the war as a rallying call for electoral advantage in America.
- Allow American corporations to take control of a significant portion of Iraq's economy.
- Privatize military functions in order to (a) maximize the effect of fighting forces, (b) increase profits for military contractors, and (c) remove accountability from the military for such actions as torture and bribery.
- Establish the dominance and independence of the United States in world affairs by ignoring the will of many of our NATO allies and the UN.

None of those is a progressive goal, which is why the war proponents do not often state them. Americans are just too progressive to accept them. However, many of these goals can be found in think tank publications and right-wing magazines. Many of the architects of the war—Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, World Bank President and former undersecretary for defense Paul Wolfowitz, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad, I. Lewis Libby (former chief of staff for Cheney), William Kristol (editor of *The Weekly Standard*), and Governor Jeb Bush of Florida, among others—explicitly endorsed such an agenda as part of the Project for the New American Century in 1997.³

If we recognize that these strategic goals are the important focus of the Iraq invasion, then what we see in Iraq is not “incompetence,” as has been the pervasive criticism from progressives.⁴ The conservative architects of the war, and those in charge, were less interested in the humanitarian mission of the war than in these strategic goals.

Progressives have generally fallen into the “laundry list trap,” choosing limited policy initiatives and acting issue by issue, advancing a host of specific programs, none of which highlight—or are articulated as promoting—our values. Unlike conservatives, we have no multifaceted strategic initiatives with far-reaching consequences.

And because we act program by program and issue by issue, we have failed to come together as a movement. Environmentalists, labor unions, feminists, health-care activists, consumer advocates, immigrants' advocates, etc., all work on their own

programs, all have their own funders, their own publications, their own lobbyists, and so on.

The issues and programs these groups advance are extremely important, but by acting alone, each of them—and all of us—is losing.

We can win, if we act strategically. We must begin to identify multifaceted initiatives that are long-term, that work across issues, that unify progressive groups and the grass roots, and that express our common values and advance all of our goals simultaneously. And we can act on these initiatives at the federal level, the state level, the regional level, or the local level.

And unlike conservatives, we can act strategically, without hiding our strategic goals. Our initiatives broadly advance the common good. You will not find us trying to dismantle government, or increase American hegemony, or diminish the common good.

While there are many progressive strategic initiatives we can all rally behind, we will look at four possibilities by way of example: clean elections, healthy food, ethical business, and transit-for-all. Our goal here is not to be prescriptive and offer a list of legislative measures to advance these initiatives; we discuss these to illustrate how the initiatives can be far-reaching, how they might promote progressive values, and how they offer an opportunity for progressives to collaborate and work together as a movement.

CLEAN ELECTIONS

Most Americans are aware that politics is dirty and that what makes it so is the corrupting influence of money. The recent DeLay-Abramoff scandal is just the latest of many reminders. David Sirota's *Hostile Takeover* is a guidebook on how corporations use political donations as investments in largesse from the government.⁵ Our campaign finance system—a system of legalized bribery and quid pro quo—is primarily to blame.

Most politicians—conservative or progressive—have paid lip service to the idea of “campaign finance reform,” because they know Americans want it. But a host of legislative measures in Congress have only tinkered around the edges. Some have been mildly successful, while others have failed. It may be time for progressives to seize the opportunity to put their strongest support behind a crucial strategic initiative: clean elections.

The idea is simple: Provide full public financing of elections for qualified candidates. That is, give candidates who have established a broad base of community support a grant to run their campaigns. If candidates accept public funds, they must agree to forgo any private contributions.

Clean elections grants equal opportunity to run for public office. It ensures that elections are fair by stripping away the corrosive influence of money. Elections are a public good and should be supported by the common wealth.

Clean elections has far-reaching consequences beyond limiting campaign spending and curbing corruption—it's been called the “reform that makes all other reforms possible.” It hits on almost every political issue because it impacts the basic functioning of our government.

Clean elections actually saves the public money—lots of it. Although there is a cost to the program, far more money is saved because elected officials will no longer use public funds to pay back their donors many times over—sometimes hundreds or thousands of times over—for their electoral contributions. The paybacks are in the form of subsidies, no-bid contracts, pork, regulation changes, tax breaks, and so on—all ways the special interests feed at the public trough. There may be no better way to cut government spending on corporate giveaways—vast transfers of wealth from the public treasury to wealthy stockholders. The public gains by not losing.

Another way the public gains is in the area of proposals that serve the public good but not the corporate good. When progressive groups fight for change—no matter how popular or public-spirited their proposals are—their reforms are typically met with staunch resistance in Congress (or in statehouses or city councils) because industries invest in our elected officials to stop these proposals.

If we want universal health care, we need to end the influence of HMOs and drug companies. If we want sane environmental policy, we need to turn off the campaign finance spigot from the oil, timber, coal, nuclear power, mineral, and agribusiness industries. If we want a living wage and acceptable labor standards for workers, we need to eliminate the money pipeline from big business to lawmakers. If we want sustainable development in our communities, we need to stem the flow of cash from real estate developers, who are almost always the biggest contributors in local politics.

If we want local, state, and national budgets that reflect the priorities of the public—money for schools, transit, health care, parks, etc.—we need to end the influence of all special interests that undermines the will of the people. If we want a balanced budget and sane fiscal policy, we must end the massive corporate subsidies that result from campaign contributions. If we want to have our elected officials do their jobs, instead of spending their time raising money for their next election, we need to end the fund-raising rat race. If we want more candidates, and a more diverse range of candidates, we need to end the disparities in fund-raising ability.

We can do this all with clean elections.

HEALTHY FOOD

A fundamental responsibility of government is to advance the common good. For instance, we expect government to keep our water systems clean, so that we have potable running water. We expect government to manage and preserve our forests and parks, so that our children may enjoy Earth's natural wonders. We expect government to regulate the production of drugs, so that pharmaceuticals are safe. While the realities can fall short of these expectations, these are nevertheless the goals we seek.

Our expectations should be no less for our food.

Unfortunately, our government is shirking this responsibility. It is supporting the production of commodity agriculture—plants that are typically used in processed foods manufactured primarily by large companies. These processed foods have few nutrients and lots of empty calories, and are contributing to an obesity epidemic. What's worse,

government subsidies help to make commodity and processed foods cheaper and more accessible than fresh produce and wholesome foods.

We are in the midst of a food crisis.

This is a crisis in which the federal government has had a very active role. For instance, the federal government spends more than \$20 billion a year to subsidize the production of cheap commodity corn.⁶ This creates an overabundance of inedible corn that is the raw material in processed foods. The corn is turned into a variety of products, like high-fructose corn syrup, or fed to maltreated animals on factory farms that are slaughtered for cheap meat.

Further subsidies go into the production of other commodity crops—generally grown by large industrial farms—like wheat, cotton, soybeans, feed grains, and tobacco. Often, it is proxy owners—not the farmers who work the land—who reap the benefit of these subsidies. Agribusinesses like Archer Daniels Midland and Cargill are rewarded with a cheap supply of commodity products, subsidized by the government, to turn into processed foods. Industrial agriculture—a petroleum-heavy process—also gets the added benefit of cheap oil, subsidized to the tune of billions of dollars each year.

Adding insult to injury, taxpayers are expected to pick up the tab for “externalization” of costs in industrial agriculture—cleaning up contaminated water systems from pesticide runoff; treating obesity, diabetes, and other food-related diseases; cleaning up air pollution from intense tilling or from fertilizers; and disposing of waste.

Government policy has a lot to do with the types and quality of food we have access to. It’s time we begin to redirect this system with a healthy foods initiative.

This initiative requires one major change in government policy: Shift the massive subsidies that currently find their way to agribusiness and use that taxpayer money to create the infrastructure for a healthy, affordable food system. This will not happen overnight; it is a long-term initiative that could eventually bring us a sustainable agricultural system.

Let’s make a compact with America’s farmers, ranchers, fishermen, and all others who feed us from nature’s bounty. In exchange for growing healthy food for our communities and protecting the sanctity of our earth and our commons for future generations, we will invest in sustainable farming. This can be done on a local and regional level (as it has initially grown), on a state level, or on a national level.⁷

This may be done in many ways. We can provide tax credits for farmers who reduce their dependency on pesticides and herbicides, which would get rid of the cancer-causing chemicals in our food. Our tax policy can be structured to promote family farm ownership, rather than absentee and corporate ownership. When farms are family-owned, there is a vested interest and pride taken in the quality of the food and the management of the local ecosystem. We could subsidize the creation of land trusts for farmers and ranchers who sustainably manage the land. We can invest in community gardens, to provide a space for growing food in urban areas. In fact, many current government policies could stay the same, except that the loans and subsidies would guarantee a price for food grown sustainably. Government could have an enormous impact in reducing the cost of and increasing access to healthy, locally grown, organic, and sustainable foods.

The above suggestions are offered only as various possibilities. This is a strategic initiative that all progressives should rally around to figure out how best to work toward

it. It's about protection: The government should make sure we have healthy food. It's about equality: Good and healthy food should not be a luxury reserved for the rich. It's about diversity: having a polyculture system and distinctive varieties of food. It's an expansion of freedom: Everyone should have access to good food. It's using the common wealth for the common good to promote public health and increase quality of life.

The benefits of such a strategic initiative do not end there.

It will have positive consequences for public health. Processed food and fast-food chains are making us unhealthy and fat. This is particularly true in low-income and minority communities. Because of food-related illnesses, the current generation of children is the first generation in American history that will likely have shorter life spans than their parents.⁸ So a healthy foods initiative is a class issue, a race issue, and a public health issue.

Industrial agriculture also requires massive inputs of petroleum, erodes the soil, uses excessive amounts of water, and contaminates the air and water systems through the use of chemicals, to name a few consequences. So a healthy foods initiative is an environmental issue and a foreign policy issue. If we changed our food production system, we could greatly reduce our dependency on foreign oil.

Such a strategic initiative would also support and promote local, neighborhood-based farmers' markets—which are great places to enjoy quality food and build community. They also create bonds between urban centers and surrounding rural communities. So a healthy foods initiative is a civics issue and a quality-of-life issue.

The impact of agricultural subsidies doesn't end at our nation's borders, however. Much of our surplus of commodity crops is sold overseas, for below-market prices (because it is subsidized). This has forced many subsistence farmers off their land because they cannot compete with the subsidized prices. Ironically, these subsidies have contributed to both obesity and hunger (as Michael Pollan has pointed out)⁹—making us fat while starving foreigners. Without other opportunities, these farmers have had to leave their lands in search of work. But little awaits, so they have emigrated, many to the United States. Thus, a healthy foods initiative is also a world hunger issue, a poverty issue, an economic issue, and an immigration issue.

Finally, the move toward industrial monoculture—growing only one crop on a farm—has increased the size of farms and their efficiency (in terms of laborers per acre, not necessarily food production per acre). This has caused an exodus from our rural communities. Additionally, the homogeneity of our agriculture puts us at a security risk. When we plant so much of one crop and raise animals in close confines, a change in weather from year to year (say, because of a climate crisis) or a disease (avian flu, mad cow disease) could wipe out much of our food supply. By diversifying, we can better protect our food system. So healthy food is a rural vitality issue and a security issue.

A healthy foods initiative can also unify us as progressives. It can bring together environmentalists, labor activists, fair trade proponents, social justice advocates, civil rights activists, and many others.

ETHICAL BUSINESS

The market is a tool to enhance the common good. As we saw in Chapter 5, failure to meet this expectation is rightly perceived as market failure. The rules that govern the market should create incentives to enhance the common good, but they should also punish violations of the common good.

Unfortunately, the current charters of corporations—a legal privilege given to business—strays far from this expectation. Corporations' foremost aim is to maximize profit for their shareholders. This creates incentives to lower labor costs, provide fewer health-care benefits, push environmental laws to their limits, and externalize as many costs as possible. The only real incentive for a corporation to act for the common good is if it is perceived as good for business. This usually means for public relations purposes—if charity or community works provide good PR, they should be done.

This is not to say all corporations are evil. Indeed, many corporations are good and provide excellent and essential services for the public. And many people working for those corporations are public-spirited and rightly see their mission in business as enhancing the common good. But all too often, corporations violate the public interest because they can be legally required to do so. If managers do not maximize corporate profit, they may be sued by their shareholders.

It does not have to work this way. There are two general approaches to ethical business. One is to leave the corporate model essentially intact but to alter the rules and landscape of the market in which corporations act. This idea, put forth by Working Assets founder Peter Barnes, is to assign all Americans property rights to the commons—through an air trust, an ocean trust, watershed trusts, soil trusts, an Internet trust, an electromagnetic spectrum trust—and charge businesses for the use of the commons (which, currently, are usually given away for free). For instance, to slow global warming, an air trust would give a certain amount of greenhouse gas credits every year, and businesses would have to bid for these credits. Every year, the spigot would be turned down, allowing fewer greenhouse gases to be put in our atmosphere. This would create incentives to reduce global warming—contributing to it would eventually become costly. The money raised from this system could be used to clean up our atmosphere and invest in renewable energy.

Like the Federal Reserve, these trusts would be managed by federally appointed trustees, insulated from political pressures, to protect our common wealth for the public interest and for future generations. The trustees would have a fiduciary responsibility to leave, in the words of John Locke, “as much, and as good” for others, including our children.¹⁰

The money generated from these trusts can be used to clean up our air, invest in renewable-energy technology, provide job training and placement assistance for people who have lost their jobs from outsourcing, or a whole host of other projects to promote the common good. This is the idea advanced by Barnes in his new book, *Capitalism 3.0*.¹¹

The other approach to ethical business is corporate rechartering, writing into the governing structure of corporations an interest for stakeholders—citizens, workers, communities, ecosystems, etc., who are greatly impacted by what a corporation does but do not necessarily own corporate stock. A corporation would have to renew its charter

every so often, say, every ten years. To be renewed, a corporation would have to demonstrate its commitment to stakeholders and to social responsibility. Therefore, a corporation would not have to sacrifice the interests of its stakeholders to eke out greater profit margins for its shareholders. To demonstrate this commitment, a corporation might raise wages, clean up a local ecosystem, take steps to reduce pollution, support local sports teams, and so on.

A strategic initiative could take either of the above approaches or contain a little of both. Such an initiative would advance the progressive idea of the common good and counter the conservative notion of the “free market.” Like other strategic initiatives, it brings progressives of all stripes together. It’s a labor issue, giving workers a legal stake in business. It’s an environmental issue, changing the rules of the market so that business does no harm to the commons. It’s a community issue, promoting the notion that businesses should enhance the communities where they are located and which they serve. And it’s a health issue, because reducing pollution means better health.

TRANSIT-FOR-ALL

The way we move shapes almost everything about our nation. Our dependence on cars pollutes the environment, harms our personal health, restricts social and economic mobility, and chains us to foreign oil. With one multifaceted change over the course of many years, a “transit-for-all” initiative can help slay all of these beasts. Simply put, the idea is to take the \$70 billion a year that currently goes to subsidizing cheap oil—the essential ingredient of our car culture—and shift it toward building and promoting public transit systems. Additional funding could come from the over \$250 billion a year that is currently spent on building and maintaining the highway infrastructure.

Transit-for-all means expanding and improving public transportation at the local, regional, and federal levels. It means investing in bus and light rail in urban areas to create clean, convenient, reliable, and accessible webs of transportation. It means making our city cores more bike- and pedestrian-friendly. It means expanding commuter rail, to connect urban and suburban centers typically served by car transportation. It means investing in high-speed rail, to move people, goods, and services from city to city. Moving within urban cores and connecting urban and suburban hubs, these webs would extend to all auto-dense areas.

Transit-for-all is about values. Improving public transportation is about giving all Americans the freedom of equal access to social and economic opportunities that enhance our quality of life. Investing in alternative transportation is using the common wealth for the common good. It is an expansion of freedom, creating more diverse transportation.

Transit-for-all is a progressive strategic initiative to advance many of our goals at once.

It’s an economic issue. It would increase mobility of goods and labor. It would revitalize neglected neighborhoods. And it would spur growth and attract development.

It’s a labor issue. It would create many jobs—construction workers, engineers, bus drivers, rail operators, administrators, ticket vendors. Many of these jobs are sustainable

union jobs. An increase of union jobs empowers labor to negotiate better contracts and helps develop better conditions for workers throughout the community.

It's an environmental issue. By now the relationship between fossil fuels and the environment is well understood and accepted. Burning oil releases into the atmosphere greenhouse gases that destabilize the climate. Mass transit reduces society's dependence on oil and helps remediate some of the dangers of global warming.

It's a public health issue. Our air quality is abysmal and getting worse. The dirty exhaust from cars is driving an air pollution crisis that increases health hazards and claims tens of thousands of American lives, not to mention millions of dollars, every year.¹² And no one needs to be reminded of the physical, emotional, and economic damage of six million annual auto accidents. Better public transportation helps us transition out of this dirty and dangerous technology. In doing so, it could rescue millions of Americans from debilitating health problems and even death—and save the public from bearing the burden of preventable medical expenses.

It's a national security issue. Kicking our oil habit not only benefits human and environmental health, it secures our nation. Greater energy autonomy frees us from our dangerous dependence on a volatile region.

With a transit-for-all initiative, laborers, economists, environmentalists, and security buffs could walk under the same banner. An investment in a transit-for-all strategic initiative is an investment in freedom, health, the economy, and national security.

It is time for progressives to start thinking strategically. The most effective long-term strategies start with the most commonplace activities: eating, traveling to work, and working in a business. Home is where we live. Start there.