

Speaking Frankly

What's wrong with the Democrats and how to fix it.

By Congressman Barney Frank
(D-Mass.)

Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt from Congressman Frank's book by the same title. The themes and issues presented by Congressman Frank are particularly timely in light of the recent Republican take-over of both Houses of Congress. With Democrats setting their sights on the 1996 elections, analyzing what they have done incorrectly in the past is essential to understanding how they can improve their chances of presidential victory in the future and more effectively deal with the issues central to national elections.

IN RECENT YEARS, THREE ISSUES have been particularly damaging to our chances: national security, crime, and racial discrimination. Our task is to present positions on these issues that reflect the public-policy views of most Democrats while appealing to enough of the swing votes to win.

This is a complicated effort, in practice as well as in theory. In the United Kingdom, with the centralized political parties and tight party structures, there is at least a mechanism for doing this. Thus, Neil Kinnock was able at a series of Labor party conferences to move his party away from the militant leftist posture that doomed it to constant defeat. No such mechanism exists in our country, so no single act or series of acts can make any given view the policy of the Democratic Party.

What those who share my view can do is to articulate our view of how Democrats should frame the issues on the national level, and then work hard to support candidates who advocate this approach.

This means pragmatic liberals must be more willing than we have been in the past to explain why we differ with many of our ideologically militant friends. It means that liberal Democrats in public office who understand that we cannot win consistently until we adopt a different approach must be willing to get more deeply involved on behalf of this view.

In the following sections, I outline an approach to these troublesome issues which I believe preserves the moral core

of liberal positions while jettisoning much of the unpopular baggage we have allowed them to accumulate. What is central here is that liberals have to do this, not because we should be inclined to compromise away our basic commitments, but rather because we are serious enough about them to want them to become public policy.

No issue has been more important in the postwar years than national security.

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Since 1968, no issue has cost the Democrats more heavily. In the future, no issue holds more promise for democratic advantage.

The reason is that George Bush insisted that despite the complete collapse of the worldwide Communist empire, American taxpayers should continue to spend massive sums to help our wealthy European and Asian allies feel more secure, even though no one, including them, can point to any serious threats to their security, and despite the fact that they have become our economic equals, well able to spend more on their own defense, but wisely declining to do so as long as they can get Uncle Sam to pick up their military tab. Indeed, the single most effective thing we could do to diminish any Japanese or West European sense of vulnerability would be to announce that we will supply them in the future with as much military protection as they are willing to pay us to provide. As all of us freemarketeers understand, people usually demand more of a free good than of one they have to pay for. Confronted with a bill for the full cost of the American forces now defending Western Europe and East Asia, our

allies would almost certainly feel safer, and in need of far less protection than they claim they've needed.

As a result of Republican insistence that we continue to make an annual gift of well over \$150 billion in security assistance to our wealthy allies, what is an important opportunity to improve the quality of life in America has become an equally striking opportunity for the Democratic Party to reestablish primacy.

The Cold War is over. America has won. And as the winners, Americans are entitled to a victory dividend—the right to spend some of the vast sums that for forty-five years have gone toward containing Communism instead of on our pressing domestic needs. In recent years, we have been spending about \$320 billion per year in 1991 dollars on our national security, including the defense and intelligence budgets. Let us assume, as I do not, that all of this was necessary, that about 70 percent of it was for deterring Communism, and that the Communist threat at the end of 1991 was as great as one-third what it used to be; that still allows for an annual savings of \$150 billion. Given the vastness of our military might, qualitatively and quantitatively, and the total dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and total dismemberment of the Soviet Union, we can save more than \$150 billion every year from our current level of defense and intelligence spending without sacrificing our standing as by far the strongest nation in the world, or jeopardizing our ability to defend any vital national interest.

America should maintain a strong nuclear deterrent, retain the capacity to intervene in trouble spots where weak nations might be threatened by aggression, and be well able to defend our own vital interests—but that we need not spend a significantly higher percentage of our GNP on defense than do Britain, Germany, or France. And it holds that while we have both a moral obligation and an enlightened self-interest in alleviating the poverty that plagues much of the Third World, we have a right to treat the prosperous nations of Europe and Asia as equals: we should neither impose on them nor defer to them economically in the name of global security.

But republican reluctance to let Americans have a genuine victory dividend is not the only precondition for the Democrats' being able to win back much of what we have lost politically on this issue. It is essential that we use this as the chance to show the electorate that we

have, finally and decisively, unlearned the bad old habits of our post-1968 presidential politics, and freed ourselves from the self-imposed tyranny of the "not-sapostas." If we allow our debate on how America should respond to our victory in the Cold War to be dominated by fear of offending the sensibilities of our activists on the left, we may not only not gain on this issue, we could find ourselves at even greater political disadvantage.

The liberal Democratic position is and should be that America has done much of the job it set out to do in 1945: now that Communism is a spent force, Eastern Europe has been liberated, Western Europe and Japan are prosperous and democratic, we can apply most of the resources we dedicated to accomplishing these tasks to other purposes, including fighting poverty in the Third World and working on behalf of human rights everywhere. Most of all, we can use vast sums that have been freed up by our international victory to alleviate difficult problems at home.

CRIME MARCHES ON

For the last twenty-five years crime has helped Republicans. Of all of the themes they have used to portray our party as out of touch with the values of average Americans, crime has been the toughest one for us to handle. What makes that fact even more frustrating is that the kinds of street crimes that most worry voters are exactly the types over which federal policies have the least influence. Yet, in one of the crueler political paradoxes for liberals, this very fact compounds our political disadvantage, because Democrats have tended to respond to Republican charges that we are soft on crime by stressing how little the federal government can do to alleviate the problem in the short term. For many of the swing voters this only confirms the notion that the Republicans are seeking to get across: that we won't do anything to protect the safety and property of law-abiding citizens against the criminal element.

Crime is the most troubling problem for our political strategists for several reasons. First, it has staying power. Of all the issues George Bush used to discredit Michael Dukakis and erase the Democrats' lead in 1988, only crime has been a growth stock for Republicans. National security should become a Democratic issue. And when George

Bush's lips on taxes turned out to be no more reliable than Milli Vanilli's, that issue also lost its potency. But crime marches on. In fact, Bush used the crime bill in 1991 as one of his major points of attack on congressional Democrats. Second, crime causes Democrats maximum political grief because it, more than any other area of public debate, is the place where liberals take unpopular views not just in symbolic terms, but on specific policy issues. Majorities of voters support the death penalty for certain

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types of crimes and oppose many procedural safeguards for accused criminals; they also oppose restrictions on the police. Liberal disagreement with majority opinion on how to combat crime has been overstated, in part, because ideological Democrats have made it acceptable for mainstream liberals to support some anticrime measures only as long as we remember we are not supposed to brag about it. Nevertheless, there are some undeniable conflicts between traditional liberal doctrine and popular positions on how to fight crime.

This point leads to the third reason that crime clouds the Democrats' political horizon. Because it is the area where liberal positions on some issues are least popular, it has the greatest potential for causing serious dissension within the party. In no other debate is the effort to combine Democratic positions with political reality as likely to mean that charges and countercharges of "sellout" and "fool" will rattle off the walls.

On crime more than any other issue, those on the Democratic left must understand that the status quo is intolerable from both the electoral and policy standpoints. Continuing the orthodox liberal approach to crime will not only mean that liberals will be under a substantial political handicap. It makes it likelier than not that any federal crime policy will be mindlessly harsh and unproductively rigid. Further, it will maximize the

extent to which negative attitudes on liberalism and race, which originate from the Democratic rhetoric on crime, will carry over and damage our position on other critical issues, such as civil rights enforcement and urban policy.

RACE AND CRIME: TROUBLE FOR LIBERALS

Race and crime together show the "not-saposta syndrome" at its worst. Liberals are "not-saposta" take note publicly of the statistical fact that young black males commit street crimes in a significantly higher proportion than any other major demographical group. We are "not-saposta" admit this because we fear that if we do, we will give aid and comfort to those who will draw wholly inaccurate, racist inferences about African Americans and crime.

Yet when those of us who understand that the racial disproportion in street crime has to do with specific social and economic conditions and has absolutely nothing to do with any inherent racial characteristics become embarrassed by the subject, we leave a clear field to the vicious and ignorant who are prepared to race-bait. Whenever something is obvious and has a significant impact on people's lives, those who try to make believe it does not exist cede control of the debate to those who are willing to talk about it.

What happens, of course, is that liberal efforts to ignore the racial aspect of crime today rarely work, and when we do address the issue, we do so defensively and in a manner that exacerbates our political difficulty without effectively combating racism. Liberals overargue the point that social and economic conditions are the cause of crime, and particularly of the disproportionate amount of crime committed by some minorities. By asking people to believe too much of this argument, we end up with their not believing as much of it as they should.

Of course, the point that social and economic conditions heavily influence the crime rate should be central to the liberal approach to this issue. And given the history of racism in this country, which begins with slavery, goes through legal segregation, and continues in lesser but still serious form today, African-Americans suffer most from these conditions and most often manifest their effects. But we must avoid the mistake of appearing to justify—or even mitigate—the actions of individual criminals by

stressing the poverty and racism around them as if that made their actions less heinous. Poverty, racism, social disorganization—these all explain the prevalence of crime to some extent, but in no way do they justify it. We liberals have allowed ourselves to be restrained from saying what the public at large wants—and has every right—to hear: that people who assault, rape, rob from, or otherwise terrorize others are bad people from whom the innocent majority must be protected. Nothing in the contemporary political scene causes liberals more political harm than the perception that we are as sympathetic to criminals as we are to their victims. And we bring this on ourselves by telling each other not to speak too harshly of muggers and thieves lest we contribute to racism and an already excessively harsh penal code.

My disagreement with some of my friends on the ideological left on this issue is intellectual as well as political. I believe that some on the left allow their social sympathies to get in the way of their intellectual powers when they think about street crime. Assaulting or stealing from others is vicious behavior and society has an absolute obligation to protect the innocent against these thugs and then to punish them if protection fails. But my goal here is not so much to persuade those who disagree with this as it is to encourage those who do agree to feel freer about articulating it. For the fact is that out of a wholly admirable loathing of racism and a less admirable fear of offending our left, too many Democrats fail to say in public what they know to be both intellectually true and politically important: that society has the right to take strong action against antisocial individuals.

A related mistake liberals make is to use the bad social conditions that lead to crime as if it were an argument that will help persuade people to support social equity programs. In effect, we are telling voters who bitterly resent the incursions that crime has made on their lives that if we improve welfare benefits, fix up public housing, provide more job opportunities for minority teenagers, and do a better job of integrating our work force, the beneficiaries of this largesse will be less inclined to rob or beat them. This does not advance our chances of success.

What happens through this process is that a series of morally justified, sensible programs to improve social conditions comes to look like a form of sophisticated bribery. Measures to combat racism and

reduce inequality have a far better chance of gaining popular support when they are defended on their inherent merits than when they are presented in a way that makes the swing voter see them as proffered rewards to get people to stop behavior that they should never have adopted in the first place.

The third major area of the crime debate where liberals must change our rhetoric has to do with law enforcement agencies, most particularly the police. There is no greater example of the way in which liberals have driven away our natural supporters than the recent political role of police officers.

At the federal level, the Democratic position throughout the eighties has been the one that would have put more money into the hands of city and state governments, the entities that have the responsibility for fighting the kinds of crime people worry about. Ronald Reagan and George Bush did far more to protect Denmark and Belgium from attacks by Poland and Hungary than they have to protect elderly Americans from attacks by punks in their neighborhoods. But we have let them get away with winning through rhetoric what they should have forfeited by their actions.

Protecting people—especially the poor and racial minorities of the inner cities—is preeminently a responsibility of government. Nothing more clearly illustrates the political problem of liberals than our inability to understand and act on this central fact. And reversing ourselves is a key to a Democratic presidential victory.

Once we make clear to the voters that we share their intense desire to punish those who assault or steal from others, that we value hard work and believe in a free-enterprise system that rewards hard work, and that we are striving as hard as we can for a society in which group identity will be irrelevant and individuals judged entirely on their merits, our support for specific legislation like the 1991 civil rights bill will have little political fallout for Democrats. We are suffering here because of what we have allowed people to think we stand for, not because of what we are in fact seeking to accomplish. What we must do in response is not to retreat on specifics—which would be morally wrenching for most of us—but rather work to put those specifics in a better, more politically appealing context. Fortunately, it is a context in which most of us do believe, and which we have refrained from affirming yet again

because of a mistaken political focus on those to our left when our problem is with those in the center.

The best thing we can do to advance the fight against discrimination and to wage a successful national campaign on this issue is to make clear that we oppose bigotry as a sign of our commitment to American ideals, not as the forerunner of an all-out assault on how Americans live. Those of us who believe that America is good and just but capable of being better and fairer have a decided political advantage over those who view our society as a mean and selfish one in need of radical surgery. We err—and we lose elections—in sacrificing that advantage because we think the angriest people on our left insist that we do so.

IS WINNING EVERYTHING?

Politics ain't beanbag, Mr. Dooley said, speaking scornfully of reformers. That's true, but it ain't football either—at least not in Vince Lombardi's sense that "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."

Politics should be concerned with issues. People who seek the power to influence the lives of others through elected or appointed office ought to be doing so because they have a vision of how they can improve things; power sought for its own sake is unattractive, and those who are in politics solely to win elections don't deserve to.

But while winning isn't the only thing, to borrow Mr. Dooley's construction again, it ain't nothing either. It is hard to understand how people can profess to be seriously concerned about important public-policy goals when they minimize the importance of winning elections. People who do not win elections do not get to implement their ideas; their moral commitments then serve primarily to make them feel better, but not to advance the cause of those about whom they sincerely care.

Indeed, partly out of necessity, winning has come to be undervalued by some of my friends on the left. "There are worse things than losing elections," many of them argue. In one or two instances they are right. But from the standpoint of the liberal principles I care about, I cannot think of anything worse than losing election after election. Theoretically, political activists can have significant influence on the electoral process—even if they never

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his party, Clinton needs to change his communications strategy in order to bring public perceptions in line with the record. The Clinton record is a record of achievements and fulfilled promises; the promise to improve the economy, create more jobs, cut the deficit, restructure the federal government, fight crime, and most importantly to improve the lives of middle class Americans. IB

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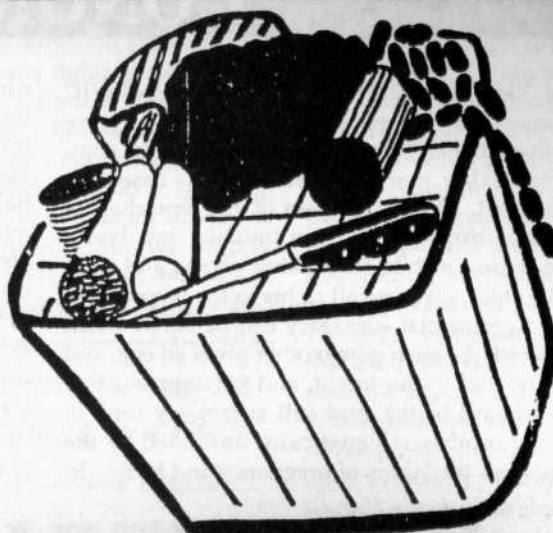
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win elections—by using it to advance their ideas. But in fact, the result of the approach many of the most committed liberals have taken in the last twenty-five years has been exactly the opposite. I believe that the public-policy goals we care about have been retarded and not advanced by the mistakes that we've made.

It is precisely because we care about public policy outcomes that we are morally obligated to think hard about how to win. Adapting one's basic principles and the public-policy commitments that grow out of them to electoral reality

is a complicated and uncertain business.

On several of the most difficult issues for liberals, I have tried as hard as I can to advance a strategy that maximizes both our chances to win and our ability to implement our public policy goals if we do—of course the better the room for considerable debate about the choices I have made in trying to do this. But the issue that is not debatable is our need to make some hard choices. We cannot be certain that any particular approach to making liberalism more attractive to the voters is going to succeed. Anyone who has paid serious attention to American politics in the last twenty-five years must understand that we have to try.

A politician is an animal that can sit on the fence and keep both ears to the ground. - H. L. Mencken