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It's Still the War, Stupid!

How congressional Democrats can save their seats

Terry Michael | September 14, 2010

It's not the economy, it's the war, stupid!

I'm talkin' to you, Democrats in the House and Senate. Scores of you are about to lose your jobs, while the rest forfeit coveted committee chairmanships because you don't realize the way to avoid defeat is to appeal to your base with an anti-war message.

No smoke and mirrors in the next seven weeks will convince Republican, independent, and conservative-leaning centrists—the *motivated voters* of 2010—that President Barack Obama and the congressional Democrats have a plan to restore home equity and retirement savings, stimulate investment, and reduce unemployment. Those are functions of the business cycle, impacted by the irrational exuberance that fueled the illusion that real estate and stock values could rise forever. Tea Partiers may irrationally blame Democrats for most of that pain, but they're certain big government—especially ObamaPelosiCare—is making things worse.

The left-liberal political consultant-driven neo-populism, which Democrats have been trying to sell to a dwindling number of the Industrial Era (it's over!) “working class” voters for decades, is folly. Waging class warfare against “the rich”—foolishly defined as anyone earning over \$250,000—will do next to nothing to inspire the Democratic base, while refusing to extend the George W. Bush administration's tax cuts only stokes the election day fury of Tea Party activists.

Every election is about energizing the base while winning over independents. But mid-terms, particularly for the House, have more to do with firing up loyalists, because most districts have been gerrymandered as Democrat or Republican. The Democratic base is in despair and inclined to stay home, just as it did in 1994 after HillaryCare gave Newt Gingrich the opening he needed to energize Clinton-haters and cultural and economic conservatives.

We usually see reelection rates over 90 percent for incumbents. This is due to *Baker v. Carr* (1962) demanding equal population districts, computers making it possible to configure districts block-by-block to determine partisan outcomes, and politicians waging year-round campaigns with taxpayer-financed staffs.

So, Democrats, if you can't control the anger of Tea Party activists, who are mad as hell about losing economic security, what can you do?

You can motivate your base by taking on your own president, energizing those voters who are mad as hell that the leader they elected to end a war decided to ramp another one up instead.

In a matter of months, Obama succumbed to the military-industrial-congressional complex and placed thousands more young men and women in harm's way in the corrupt non-state and graveyard of empires known as Afghanistan. The very year Obama was born, in fact, Dwight Eisenhower warned us of the threat to liberty posed by a huge standing army and the arms profiteers who fuel a perpetual state of war. Ike echoed James Madison, who helped found the Democratic Party with Thomas Jefferson, and who alerted us two centuries ago, "No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare." A former constitutional law professor, Obama apparently never internalized that observation by the architect of our Constitution.

As they face doom, congressional Democrats need to show guts—and political intelligence—and tell their base they intend to fight like hell to end the madness in Afghanistan, and bring home the 50,000 "advisors" Obama left in Iraq.

Democrats, like Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, abdicated responsibility when they made no principled case against the Iraq War in its run-up, just as the Democrats of the 1960's proved gutless by allowing President Lyndon Johnson to sacrifice thousands of young men in Southeast Asian jungles. Congressional Democrats have averted their eyes once again, remaining all but silent last year when Obama gave a George W. Bush-style war-making speech at West Point.

If Democrats need polls to stiffen their spines, the Associated Press-GfK survey last month reveals 58 percent of Americans oppose the war in Afghanistan, while only 38 percent support it. More significantly, the numbers of those most likely to vote based on the issue rests resoundingly with opponents, with 35 percent strongly opposing the war while only 17 percent strongly favor it. The numbers on Iraq are even more anti-war, with 65 percent opposing and only 31 percent supporting. (For the few politicians who prefer sound arguments to polls, they can cite Andy Bacevich's excellent new book, Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War.)

Democrats, give your base a reason to vote this November. Not so Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid can keep their jobs, but because you have a duty to oppose the "American exceptionalist" militarism that typifies the Republicans—and which has unfortunately seized the mind of still another Democratic president.

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