

Outlook: Hope for the Democrats?

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Highlight: As rising gas prices, decreasing support for the war in Iraq, the Abramoff lobbying scandal and a lack of progress on immigration reform cut into support for the incumbent Republican party, **Democrats** see opportunity in the upcoming midterm elections. In his Sunday **Outlook** piece, Washington Post staff writer Michael Grunwald asks the question on everyone's mind: "How can the **Democrats** use this to their advantage?" While pundits wonder what's wrong with the party, Grunwald offers a novel answer: nothing. Does the battle between liberals and centrists for the heart of the party really spell doom for the **Democrats**?

Body

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Michael Grunwald was online Monday, June 12, at 11:00 a.m. ET to discuss his Sunday **Outlook** article, [How to Reconnect With Voters and Realize Your Dreams of Victory](#), (Post, June 11, 2006).

The transcript follows.

Grunwald is also author of [How to Reconnect With Voters and Realize Your Dreams of Victory](#) .

Michael Grunwald: Hi there. I'll get right to it; I can see that a lot of you spent the weekend consulting with your inner pundits. (It's fun, isn't it?) But first I wanted to respond to the readers--and bloggers--who noticed that I didn't really provide a step-by-step advice guide for Dems, but an analysis of a lot of the self-serving advice bouncing around the punditocracy. In the dead-tree form of the paper, it was pretty obvious that the headline was a joke; the section was designed like one of those cheesy advice books, and the subhed was "All the Tips You Really Need to Take on the GOP, Take Back Congress, And Feel Good About Yourself, Too!" But there was really no way to catch the irony online. Sorry about that. As a self-serving pundit, I'd say there's an important lesson here about how vital it is to keep buying the print version of the Post.

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Washington, D.C.: If the battle for the heart of the Democratic party between liberals and centrists seems to doom it, why does the same not hold true for Republicans? They seem to be able to hold their coalition of fiscal and religious conservatives together well enough for one not to offend the other. Thanks for your insights?

Michael Grunwald: I don't think the basic center-left Democratic schism dooms the party; I actually suggested at the end of the piece that the **Democrats** are in better shape than they seem to think. But you raise a fascinating question: Why doesn't the Republican Party--which in my view has much more complex schisms than the D's--engage in the existential self-flagellation that D's seem to enjoy so much? The various R factions--social conservatives vs. moderates, foreign-policy interventionists vs. realists, deficit hawks vs. porkers, Wall Street vs. Main Street vs. K Street--squabble all the time, especially when things are going badly for the party. But they seem to do it without questioning their very purpose. The **Democrats** seem to act like one of those couples that questions their relationship every time they have a fight.

Baltimore, Md.: Is the Washington Post out of its collective minds?!? Even though an analysis of Democratic Party strategy (and their failure thus far to present a coherent, cohesive one other than a "Bush is evil" mantra) is most certainly fair game and good fodder for editorial discussion, the way in which it was presented--the whole title of the **Outlook** section, just for starts--is practically a gift-wrapped present of a huge target for conservative and media critics to claim liberal media bias in The Post. Think about it: what would the Post editors say if someone (oh, say, myself) demanded "when was the last time the Post outlined a step-by-step guide for Republicans to win when **Democrats** ran the White House and/or Congress?" Will we see a balancing "how the GOP can maintain its lead in the face of losing a president that can't be re-elected" series of articles packaged as a step-by-step guide? Lord knows, the current bunch calling themselves Republicans are not any better....

Michael Grunwald: That would be a good slogan: The Washington Post: Out of Our Collective Minds Since 1877. But you're right: We're getting bashed all over the place--especially, and I'm sure this will be a shock, by hard-left and hard-right partisans. But we can take it. We thought there were some new and interesting things to say about the age-old "**Democrats** in Disarray" cliché, and I **hope** if you read the entire issue you agreed. Don't worry: We pay plenty of attention to the Republicans, too.

Bowie, Md.: How do the **Democrats** counter the image that their party is about wealth re-distribution (via either government or private-sector mandates) to blacks, gays and feminists. And that every American who isn't a member of those groups, is part of the privileged power structure that owes them things?

Michael Grunwald: So many questions like this one; I'm going to take a wild guess and say that this reader isn't a liberal, because liberals don't usually complain about the D's tilting left. Of course, one could also ask: How do the Republicans counter the image that their party is about wealth redistribution from the middle class to the rich? In a 50-50 country, both teams take a risk when they move away from the middle. But discouraging the base is a risk, too.

Fairfax, Va.: I enjoyed your **Outlook** article but don't understand why you pose the intraparty Democratic conflict as between liberals and centrists. How can there be Democratic centrists if there is no Democratic right wing? What are the "centrists" in the center between? In terms of voting behavior on key issues, with few exceptions, centrists vote conservative; so why not call them that and discuss the Democratic split as mainly between the liberal and conservative wings of the Party? When Democratic senators like Lieberman and Nelson(either one) give away crucial votes to pass the Republican conservative agenda on judicial appointments, tax cuts or the invasion of Iraq it would help **Democrats** to understand that they keep losing one vote after another because at least a third of their own party is aligned with Republican conservatives. Calling Democratic "centrists" conservatives would clarify that the "center" has moved to the right and give **Democrats** a better picture of what their party really stands for, making the choices **Democrats** face in 2006 clearer. Adopting this approach would also put in perspective the MSM's

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hyping of the possibility of a "Democratic" takeover in 2006 when in fact regardless of "Democratic" gains the conservative would likely continue their one party control of our country.

Michael Grunwald: Now we hear from a liberal (I'm guessing) who wants the D's to be more liberal. It's funny: Many of the liberals who get angriest at Democratic centrists--and come on: There's a big difference between Lieberman/Nelson and Bush/Inhofe--also seem to believe that the country is extremely conservative. If that were true, then why would it be a good strategy for the D's to tack left?

San Jose, Calif.: Thanks for your piece yesterday. It was very well thought out and informative.

Do you think that the Democrats can appease both the liberals and the moderates in their party? I believe that the trick is to do both. I believe that they can talk tough about national security, both here and abroad and speak intelligently about a plan for Iraq, as well as speak unapologetically and unwaveringly about more liberal issues such as abortion and the environment.

One candidate that I have seen doing this as of late is Russ Feingold. His talking points about Iraq and homeland security are right on and he speaks without caveat about the marriage rights of the gay community. Do you think he has the capacity to cast doom on the Republicans in '08?

Michael Grunwald: Thanks for your kind words. The answer is: I don't know. My sense from the polling data over the last few elections is that America had a problem with John Kerry, but not with Democrats in general. Feingold is a very interesting character: voted for John Roberts, against the Patriot Act, voted with the R's on some of the Clinton impeachment trial votes, left of most D's on gay rights. I have no idea of his chances, but from the outside he appears to be someone who actually says what he believes. (I don't know him well enough to be sure if that's true. And full disclosure: He's one of the only Congressmen who's pushed to reform the Army Corps of Engineers, my white whale.)

Gwinn, Mich.: When are the Democrats going to finally start calling a spade, a spade? This war was a stupid waste of blood and treasure from the git-go. Are Feingold and Murtha the only alpha Democratic males left? Will Democrats have the courage to campaign in the south?

Michael Grunwald: Lots of debate over the proper Democratic strategy for dealing with the war. There's pretty broad agreement that Kerry's every-side-of-the-issue approach was lousy--voted for the funding bill before I voted against it, would have supported the war even if I knew there were no WMD's but Bush conned us into this, etc. But centrists tend to say that the Democratic strategy should be: competence and victory. Most liberals want a full-throated attack on an increasingly unpopular war.

Williamsburg, Va.: With all the corruption and all the scandals and guys like Byrd remaining in the Senate for 500 years, why is it that we do not have term limits on Congress the same way the President has limits?

Michael Grunwald: I believe that Byrd has only served for about 250 years. Republicans said they wanted term limits in 1994, but somehow they never got around to enacting them once they seized control of Congress.

Sherman, Tex.: Do you think that the death of al-Zarqawi will have an effect on the November election? While I feel sure it may have a temporary positive result in better poll numbers for the President, in reality will any military events have permanent results with a public that is strained by continuing costs in lives and funds?

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Michael Grunwald: Once again, I'm going to have to resort to the three words pundits hate the most: I don't know. But Iraq is certainly the biggest thing going. This happened far enough before the election that presumably we'll know by November whether Zargawi's death calms down the violence and eases American anxieties about the war.

Spring, Tex.: What can be done to give Democratic leadership some backbone? They have been spineless in the face of Republican excesses.

A life-long, "Yellow Dog" **Democrat** from Texas

Michael Grunwald: Usually, it's liberals who attack the Democratic leadership for being "spineless." Centrists tend to attack the Democratic leadership for being "liberal." And of course everyone assumes that the American people agree with them.

Detroit, Mich.: In your Sunday piece, you state that a likely problem that occurred in the early 2004 Democratic primaries was that people voted "like pundits". Yet despite any faults of Kerry and his background, in the 2004 general election, voters were given what I think had to be one of the starkest contrasts of candidates in the past few decades. Bush already had almost four years of presidency behind him and it should have been obvious to voters how lacking as a president he was. Yet he won. It certainly indicated to me how out of step I am with much of the country. Those people who voted for Bush in 2004 who now give him poor ratings in polls have only themselves to blame as there is nothing new about him that wasn't known before the last presidential election. How **Democrats** can win over people who seem to be so blind is not obvious to me.

Michael Grunwald: Bush was unpopular--though not this unpopular--even in November 2004. He had dangerously low approval ratings for an incumbent facing reelection. But he succeeded in making the election as much about Kerry as it was about him--and most Americans did not want to give Kerry the job.

Avon Park, Fla.: As a **Democrat**, I am disturbed that many party operatives in Washington seem to think that they don't have to have their version of the Contract with America. They seem to think that negative national headlines concerning Republicans will win the election. The Democratic vision needs to be summarized on one paper. Why don't you and others who have written books about the **Democrats'** problems actually tell Congressional members and strategists what you write as opposed to just writing books and op-eds and **hoping** that **Democrats** wake up one morning and somehow reach your conclusions?

Michael Grunwald: Oh, believe me, there's no shortage of pundits who write books and advise Democratic leaders. (My book, incidentally, has nothing to do with the fate of the Democratic Party.) Actually, though, the Contract with America has been mythologized a bit--the R's didn't publicize it until late September 2004, and hardly any of their candidates actually campaigned on it. Maybe we can post an article I wrote a month ago that talked about this, my stirring defense of tired old ideas.

Hampton, Va.: Poor **Democrats**. All the hand-wringing, whining, and gloom-and-doom from the media has to hurt. This is your finest hour! Poised to put Nancy Pelosi in charge of the House and Hillary Clinton in the White House, all your wildest dreams are within your reach. So why do your media cheerleaders bad-mouth you? Is it because even the most partisan journalist can see that Pelosi and Clinton aren't what America wants?

Michael Grunwald: Here's an attack from the right--plenty of those today, too.

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Southern Md.: I think the liberals and centrists can find common cause by jointly opposing the reactionary agenda being pushed by the GOP's social conservatives. As I see it, the proposed amendments against flag burning and gay marriage are traps for centrist **Democrats**, as well as ways to deflect voters' attention from Bush and Iraq. Hillary Clinton has already given in by endorsing the flag-burning amendment. These are traps because **Democrats** who voice sensible objections are branded as anti-American and anti-family, both untrue. How can both Democratic factions successfully combat this strategy?

Michael Grunwald: This is a thoughtful question, and I don't want to seem to be mocking it, because in fact liberal and centrist D's do have a lot of common ground--especially when it comes to opposing Bush on tax cuts, social issues, Katrina, etc. But I often sense from liberals (and I'm guessing this writer is one) that they think centrists are really liberals who only espouse moderation because they think liberals can't get elected. Maybe that explains Hillary's vote; on the flag I'd say that's probably a fair guess. But some moderates are actually moderates.

washingtonpost.com: [How to Reconnect With Voters and Realize Your Dreams of Victory](#), (Post, April 2, 2006)

Washington, D.C.: Why did the article include two Republicans in the quotes without identifying them as such? Mary Matalin and Frank Luntz are hardly the most open and honest dispensers of advice on how the **Democrats** can do better. (Or did you want to buy that bridge?)

Michael Grunwald: Oh, come on. We ran an entire issue about **Democrats**, with three articles written by **Democrats**, plus two more articles by Post staffers about the **Democrats**. Then we added something like 20 quotes from **Democrats** in the margins around the stories. And you're complaining about two quotes from Republican consultants?

Crystal City, Va.: I did not see in any of your write ups a realistic plan for the Democratic party to avoid losing the South in future presidential elections. How can the party **hope** to regain the White House if they continue to write off the fastest growing section of the country.

Michael Grunwald: This is an interesting question that I didn't really address in the story. One of the fights going on within the Democratic Party is between Howard Dean (who believes D's need to be competitive everywhere, including the South) and Rahm Emanuel (who wants to start by focusing on swing states). I don't want to speak for Emanuel, but what the hell: He'd probably say that in a 50-50 country, D's don't necessarily need to win the South to win the White House. They just need to win a couple states (or one state!) more than they've been winning. And Mississippi ain't gonna be that state.

Alpharetta, Ga.: You bring up the centrists-liberals' quabbles. Although there are many differences in terms of issues, it seems that a large part of the squabble is style. The liberals really want to stand proud of being a **Democrat** and progressive reform, whereas in their eyes the moderates are too accommodating, timid, and inoculate more liberal beliefs.

Michael Grunwald: This is an interesting idea, but I think it's the other way around. I sense that the complaints about style (too accommodating! too timid!) are really proxies for ideological complaints (too moderate!).

Dallas, Tex.: Why don't the **Democrats** go for the throat, corruption? 90% of it is Republican so they can't do themselves any harm. Just follow the Public Campaign Finance plan that Connecticut legislated last year. It

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included outlawing gifts or campaign contributions to Congress, administration and Judiciary, with limited campaign funds from the state, only.

Michael Grunwald: The R's will certainly try to throw William Jefferson into the D's faces any time they mention corruption. I think there's a strong substantive case to be made that the massive corruption scandal unfolding in Congress--the Abramoff scandal--is a Republican scandal, inextricably linked to the Republican machine that has controlled DC in recent years. Politically, I have no idea if that's a winning case. It's hard to imagine if a Republican lobbyist was elected to Duke Cunningham's seat, although that was a heavily Republican district.

Harrisburg, Pa.: History has shown that whenever Republicans slide in popularity, they grasp an easy to understand issue that makes Democrats look like wimps that rallies the public behind them. Democrats were soft on communism. Then Democrats were soft on crime. Shall I presume the gay marriage issue is the next tactic that Republicans think will rally the public behind them? Or do they fear the public is finally getting upset with useless Mom and apple pie rhetoric and wants something different?

Michael Grunwald: Without judging the merits of the Republican attacks, my historical sense is that they've worked better when there were at least elements of truth to them. (At least about communism and crime, which were real concerns for voters.) The gay marriage thing seems to be a play to the GOP base, which has been mighty irked lately, and I don't know if it will work. Your handy Outlook section on Sunday had some fascinating poll data about how Americans are becoming less hostile to gay marriage and gay rights. At least that's what they're telling pollsters.

Fairfax, Va.: Please explain what you mean when you say there is a big difference between "centrists" like Liberman and conservative Republicans. Bush nominated right wing judges Roberts and Alito and Lieberman et al made sure the Democrats couldn't use their only weapon, the filibuster, to stop those appointments. Results the same, isn't it and now we have to live with it for generations. God Bless the "centrists".

Michael Grunwald: I think Joe Lieberman has voted with Democrats and against the president something like 85% of the time. If that's not a difference, I don't know what is. I'm reminded of Nader voters who insisted there was no difference between corporate-controlled Al Gore and corporate-controlled George Bush. It turns out that actually there is a difference.

Crawford, Tex.: Mr. Grunwald, What hope is there for this country when this administration operates without checks and balance, and abuses executive power?

Michael Grunwald: Here's a view from the ranch.

Philadelphia, Pa.: I think it's important for Democrats/liberals to once in a while take risks and not be terrified of failure. I mean last year a lot of pundits were trying to tell Dems to formulate a Social Security plan, but they didn't, and they managed to stand together and unequivocally oppose it, and they defeated the Bush social security plan. I mean, obviously, you do have to be politically cautious at points, but once in a while risks pay off--look at Reagan's win in 80 or Contract with America in 1994.

Michael Grunwald: Was opposing Bush's Social Security plan really a risk? I'd say proposing that plan was probably more of a risk. Either way, I tend to agree that some risk-taking would probably help.

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Tampa, Fla.: The Dems' power base seems to reside in Congress, especially the Senate. This seems to favor decentralized authority, in contrast to the GOP. Their power in 1994 rested in the marketing organizations (aka "think" tanks), the religious right, and big business. All these are outside Congress and can far more easily compromise and agree on a unified party line than Members who have to worry about reelection and their own fundraising. Outfits like MoveOn.org seem too diffuse to match the GOP machine. The GOP had a few bug donors like Richard "I earned my money the hard way I inherited it" Scaife while the Dems haven't had the long incubation period with patriots like George Soros and others who actually worked for their money. And, of course, the Dems have nothing like drug, I mean, talk, radio and Fox Commissariat of Propaganda. So it's not surprising the Dems are having more trouble unifying now than the GOP did 1994.

Whaddya think?

Michael Grunwald: I think...I'm not following you. But I'll post this, because maybe someone out there has better reading comprehension than I do.

Princeton, N.J.: In 1948 when I was 10, my Dad explained politics to me. "The Republicans are the party of the Rich. The **Democrats** are the party for the rest of us." Once you understand this, it is clear why the Repubs will always be more cohesive than the Dems. On one side you have tiny group of the (super-) Rich that control the Republicans party. On the other side you have poor, middle income, upper middle income, etc. in great numbers.

But wait, you say. Why do the Repubs win elections? You say there are lots of poor Repubs. My Dad had a saying for that, too. There's nothing dumber on the face of this earth than a poor Republican." These are the dups. Read "What's the matter with Kansas?" These suckers have nothing to do with running the Republican party.

Michael Grunwald: Ah: What's the matter with Kansas? Here's a liberal who (like Tom Frank) thinks working-class heartland voters are getting taken for a ride. Centrist **Democrats** tend to argue that D's need to do a better job reaching out to those voters by nominating less citified and elitist and liberal candidates who assume that rural evangelicals are bigoted rubes. That's part of the debate...

Michael Grunwald: I'm out of time, and there are still a lot of questions I didn't get to answer. It's amazing how this debate rolls on and on; it was a long time ago that Will Rogers said he didn't belong to an organized political party--he was a **Democrat**. I remember at the 1996 Democratic convention a very wise political editor told me he didn't think there would BE a Democratic party within a decade--and that was a pretty upbeat convention for the **Democrats**! Somehow, I suspect that even if the **Democrats** take back the House in 2006 and the presidency in 2008, we'll still be pondering what's wrong with the **Democrats**.

And lest I forget: Hi Mom! Hi Dad!

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