

The Progressive Identity Complex

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In the last week, there has been a great deal of discussion in progressive circles about big ideas. The sparks were [an essay](#) by Michael Tomasky in *The American Prospect* and a [report](#) by John Halpin and Ruy Teixeira on that magazine's web site, attempting to lay out for progressives, in Tomasky's words, "a big idea that unites their proposals and converts them from a hodgepodge of narrow and specific fixes into a vision for society."

I read these works with a great deal of interest, since my new book, [Being Right Is Not Enough: What Progressives Must Learn From Conservative Success](#), spends a good deal of time attempting to answer just this question. The answer that Tomasky and Halpin and Teixeira arrived at, to significant praise, is that progressives must put "the common good" at the center of their identity.

I couldn't agree more on the substance--but there are some critical points of presentation that progressives must consider as we move forward. It isn't enough to put a big idea before the American people; contrary to what the press corps would have people believe, the left has plenty of ideas. Progressives' problem has been how they present themselves. In other words, their key challenge is to forge an identity the public understands and is attracted to.

The reason for all this is the need to find a counter to what I call the Four Pillars of Conservatism. If you ask ordinary citizens what conservatives stand for, chances are they'll give you some version of the Four Pillars: small government, low taxes, strong defense and traditional values. This forms the core of conservative identity, a simple, easily understood core of beliefs that gets repeated over and over. But if you ask people what liberals stand for, chances are they'll give you the conservative caricature of liberals: big government, high taxes, weak defense, moral relativism.

This is no accident. Unlike liberals, conservatives have understood that articulating contrasts is essential to building a political identity. It isn't just about who you are, it's about who your opponents are as well. Each of the Four Pillars of Conservatism implies its opposite, the bad thing liberals are supposed to favor. So when progressives articulate their fundamental beliefs, they have to present a coin with two sides: the positive things they want people to believe about them, and the negative things they want people to believe about conservatives.

This is why I offer a variant of the "common good" idea, one that is likely to perform its political function more effectively. The answer to the question, "What do progressives believe at their core?" is this: *Progressives believe we're all in it together.*

One might ask, isn't this just a quibble over language? It is most definitely about language, but it's anything but a quibble. First and most importantly, my formulation implies its opposite: while progressives believe we're all in it together, conservatives believe we're all on our own and we're all out for ourselves.

Second, these ideas can be easily presented in vernacular, so that candidates and advocates can explain them without beginning to sound like philosophy professors. Part of the power of the Four Pillars of Conservatism is that nearly all conservatives believe in them, and repeat them--in speeches, in campaign ads and in the mission statements of conservative organizations.

Unlike "the common good," furthermore, the idea that we're all in it together doesn't necessarily imply personal sacrifice for others' sake--that you have to give something up to benefit the common good. If I'm selling Americans' altruistic instincts a little short in arguing that a more direct appeal to sacrifice has political limitations, so be it. But being all in it together speaks to finding solutions that benefit everyone--yourself included. It's not about setting aside our interests, it's about finding where our interests and our values converge. (To see how this core idea leads to five basic progressive principles and then to any policy issue, see the excerpt from Chapter 5 of *Being Right Is Not Enough* [here](#).)

Last month, former Virginia Governor Mark Warner was doing some Q&A after a speech at Harvard, and a questioner asked him to describe why he's a Democrat. According to the account in ABC News' "The Note,"

Warner quickly said he was 'not sure Democrats are ever going to get to those three or four magic phrases' that sum up their party and their candidate. He then went on for several minutes to issue a stream of an answer that mentioned Karl Rove, Democratic support for public schools and the party's belief in opportunity for all.

The idea that someone contemplating running for the Democratic nomination can't give a one-sentence answer to the question, "Why are you a Democrat?" is fairly remarkable. But then, Warner was also quoted in a *New York Times Magazine* profile as blurting out, "That's why America hates Democrats" after a less-than-friendly encounter with a Democratic donor over the issue of abortion. Let me suggest that as he's considering why he's a member of the Democratic Party, Warner might give some thought to whether other members would want to choose someone who believes "America hates Democrats" to lead their party.

But I suspect Warner is not the only prominent Democrat who can't come up with a coherent answer to the question, "Why are you a Democrat?" Too many of them have spent so much time apologizing for their beliefs and their values that they can't give a simple explanation of what they're for.

Which brings us to the final benefit of having "We're all in it together" as the core statement of progressive identity: *it is, in fact, what progressives actually believe*. It's what progressives have in common, no matter where they live or how much money they make, even if they disagree on abortion or guns or the war in Iraq. It's why people with health insurance still think we need a national health care plan, why parents whose children are grown are still willing to pay taxes to fund good public schools, why people who are economically comfortable believe we need to increase the minimum wage. It's about how you look at your family, your community and your country. It's what makes you a

progressive, and makes you different from a conservative.

Every Republican campaign has as one of its major themes that the Democratic opponent is weak--not just weak on matters of war and peace, but weak in all things. This, by the way, is the Democrats' "problem" on national security: not that their ideas about foreign policy and defense aren't shared by most Americans--because they are--but that Americans have been convinced that Democrats are just plain weak. No 10n-point policy plan will solve this problem, because it isn't about policy--it's about identity.

When Democrats start demonstrating courage, voters stop thinking of them as weaklings. Think about it this way: who comes to mind when you hear the words "strong Democrat"? Someone like Joe Lieberman, or someone like Paul Wellstone? Someone who frets about whether his vote on the next war might be used against him, or someone who does what he knows is right? To use just one tough progressive as an example, no one ever called Martin Luther King, Jr. weak, and he was a pacifist. His courage was evident in his words and actions--he didn't need to advocate war to be considered strong.

In order for a fundamental statement of belief to do its political work, it has to be stated with conviction. When you stand up for what you believe in without fear and show how you're different from your opponents, Americans come to see you as principled and strong. That's what conservatives have been doing for decades, and as a result they've achieved success after success at the ballot box despite the fact that the public has been opposed to most of the policies they want to enact. If progressives can join their popular agenda to an identity based in courage, conviction and contrast with conservatives, there are few limits to what they can accomplish.