A Rhetorical Strategy for Democrats in 2020

By Richard Cherwitz, Ph.D.

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In May I wrote an op-ed proposing that, prior to the first debate in June and perhaps subsequent ones, all of the Democratic candidates should convene an event broadcast on television nationally and streamed live. The Democratic National Committee then could run portions of this as an advertisement during the general election campaign, regardless of the chosen nominee.

The message communicated in such a convening, I argued, should be: “We are here tonight to make clear that, despite our differences which no doubt will emerge in the upcoming debates, as Democrats we are united on some of the most important domestic and foreign policy issues facing the nation, as well as in a sincere belief that our democracy and Constitutional norms can ill afford six more years of Donald Trump. That is why we refuse to be divided — no matter what Trump and his supporters say or do. This evening we shall discuss Democratic solutions for each of these issues, sharing our profound agreements. We also pledge that following the primaries and caucuses, all of us will campaign enthusiastically for our party’s nominee.”

What happened since I made this recommendation? Sadly, nothing! If anything, the Democratic candidates have increased their attacks on each other — including former President Obama who left office as one of the most popular presidents. This tactic seems to play directly into Trump’s hand.

In addition, Democratic presidential candidates have become bogged down in nuanced policy proposals wedging and amplifying a divide between so called “moderates” and “progressives” — something that makes a Democratic defeat in 2020 more likely, notwithstanding Trump’s many failures.

Since my recommendation, President Trump appears more erratic, increasingly out of control, and taking actions that place the country in danger economically, culturally, politically and from a national security perspective.

Many members of the Republican Party acknowledge this reality, even if they cannot voice it in public or stop the president. Other Republicans have chosen not to seek re-election.
The question is: When will the Democratic Party and its candidates discover and take to heart what must be done to defeat a rhetorically powerful incumbent President?

As someone who has spent over 40 years studying and teaching political communication, I offer a radical proposal. As silly and naïve as it may sound to some traditional party leaders and political strategists, perhaps for the first time in the nation’s political history Democratic presidential candidates should meet privately, put aside their own individual aspirations and egos, and agree on a ticket to rally behind. This might involve an early selection of Cabinet nominees for those not on the pre-selected ticket who withdraw from the race.

The Democrats then should spend the primary and caucus season and extending throughout the 2020 campaign making a unified case for what specific things the Democratic president, vice president and cabinet can and will do to heal America and concretely improve the lives of all.

This case also should be taken to every state where there are incumbent Republican senators and members of the House of Representatives. This must be a concerted effort to remove those Republicans who in a self-serving way blindly have stood behind Trump, enabled his unethical behavior and de-facto supported his efforts to create chaos.

Beyond the 2020 election, this unique practice might also establish a powerful precedent helping the country to transcend the rancorous and polarized political environment which currently paralyzes our democracy and makes it hard to govern effectively.

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