

Elephants and Donkeys by Kathleen Klenetsky

Dems search for conservative image

The Democratic leadership is desperately scrambling to find a presidential candidate free of the ultra-liberal taint which led to the party's defeats in 1980 and 1984. Needless to say, it won't be easy. Every one even considering running is on record pushing policies bordering on treason.

This was the central focus of a strategy meeting which the Eastern Regional Caucus of the Democratic National Committee held in Washington in mid-June. Caucus chairman Lanny J. Davis delivered a blunt message to the 100 party activists: The Democratic Party has a rotten image among the public, especially on national security issues. The most damaging popular perception, said Davis, is that the Democrats are soft on defense and unconcerned about the Soviet threat. In addition, he said, the population believes that the Democrats are anti-business and thus anti-growth.

Bernard Aronson, a former speechwriter for Jimmy Carter, amplified the anti-defense theme. Whereas in the 1940s and 1950s, and even under President John Kennedy, the Democrats were active interventionists who held that Soviet expansionism represented the greatest threat, today the party says the greatest threat is the arms race, and puts arms control, rather than

containment, as its top foreign policy priority.

This has cut tremendously into the party's traditional base of support, said Aronson, and unless the party is willing to change, it will continue its losing streak.

The same concerns were the focus of another important party meeting held in Atlanta June 22. It was sponsored by the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), formed in 1984 by "centrist" elements of the party who thought they could avoid a replay of Mondale's wipe-out by giving the party a more conservative face.

The DLC has been the driving force behind the Super Tuesday primary March 8, where Democratic voters in 20 states, 14 of them in the South, will go to the polls.

The idea behind Super Tuesday was to give greater weight to the Southern—and more conservative—Democratic voters. This supposedly would help nominate a candidate who would have a better chance of getting elected.

DLC director Al From told attendees that the group is "trying to provide a counterpoint to pressures arising out of Iowa," where liberal organizations, like the UAW, exercise tight control over the caucus process "that if unchecked, will create a leftward tilt in the Democratic defense agenda."

Former DNC chairman Chuck Manatt proclaimed, "It's a different Mr. Wonderful we're looking for now. Super Tuesday has caused us to look more for someone progressive, centrist—someone strong on defense, for example."

This theme was reiterated by nearly every speaker. Chuck Robb, the former Virginia governor who, with Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), founded the DLC, told the 400-plus attendees, "We're looking for mainstream approaches to the issues. If you look at

the 1984 [Democratic presidential] debate, we were decidedly anti-defense and isolationist. That's changed now," he claimed.

And Sam Nunn—who is expected to throw his hat into the ring after Iowa and New Hampshire—said a lot of Democratic positions "are too far out for the average voter."

The big joke

It seems that some Democratic bigwigs have finally figured out that presidential candidates and party programs which toe the Moscow line on defense, and the views of the no-growth fanatics on the economy, simply don't hold water with the average American.

The real question now is what they intend to do about it. And here lies the rub: The hopes of the DLC and other centrists are pinned on Sam Nunn. Why? Because he's supposedly pro-defense. That's as big a joke as hearing Manatt—who, in 1984, steered the party into a grotesque propitiation of Moscow—promote a strong defense.

Nunn has certainly tried to make himself look like a serious-minded national security specialist. But once his record gets out, the DLC will have a hard time selling him as such.

After all, it was Nunn who proposed the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Western Europe back in 1984—a move which would have handed Europe to the Soviet Union.

Nunn has gotten worse as 1988 draws closer. This spring, he led the fight in Congress to retain the so-called "narrow interpretation" of the ABM Treaty, which would cripple the SDI. He has also fought consistently for defense-budget cuts.

How the Democrats intend to package this as "pro-defense" is the challenge of the century.