

Clinton tells Democrats to mobilize citizenry

by William Jones

Although media attention has been focused on President Clinton's State of the Union message on Jan. 24, the real indications of Clinton policy for the next two years were more succinctly laid out in a little-noted speech before the Democratic National Committee (DNC) plenary session on Jan. 21. On that occasion, the President issued clear guidelines for the direction the Democratic Party must take in order to mobilize its base for the battles ahead.

Several weeks earlier, in a speech at the National Press Club on Jan. 11, fellow Democrat Sen. Edward Kennedy (Mass.) had upbraided his party colleagues, many of whom, out of fear for what they believed to be the "mood" of the electorate, had run away from the President and from the issues which the Democratic Party has traditionally stood for, and were trying to out-Republican the GOP. Kennedy had warned that this had created havoc for Democrats in the November elections, and was a recipe for sure political disaster for the Democratic Party.

"If Democrats run for cover, if we become pale carbon copies of the opposition and act like Republicans, we will lose, and deserve to lose," said Kennedy. His call to his party colleagues to return to the traditional principles of the party of Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy, provided the background for the President, in his speech to the DNC, to give the troops their marching orders.

The purpose of government

While House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) was declaring his cohorts in the Conservative Revolution to be the successors of the Jacobins of the French Revolution, threatening again to tear asunder the very fabric of government, President Clinton gave a strong affirmation of the true purpose of government.

Clinton took on Gingrich's "Third Wave" babbling by noting that the new Speaker had praised Franklin Roosevelt, and admitted that the Democrats did almost every good thing that had been done in the 20th century, but he says that now, "in the Information Age, they're irrelevant. . . . Because in the Information Age, well, government is just intrinsically a part of the problem."

In contrast, declared the President: "I don't believe that government is inherently bad." What the founding fathers said the government is for, he continued, "is the best statement we could ever make: We hold these truths to be self-

evident, that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

"And government was instituted to help the American people pursue those ends. That is what I believe," he added, evoking lively applause.

The President attributed the losses in November to the fact that voters had been treated as "consumers of politics" rather than as "participants in it." "And the American people become political couch potatoes," said Clinton, "very often no more involved in politics than they are in the Super Bowl." The President called on party activists to "change the way we are conducting politics; to make citizenship matter; to let people become actors, not couch potatoes, in the great drama that is unfolding."

Clinton threw down a challenge to the leaders of the Republican Party. "You won a piece of responsibility; exercise it," he told them. "Stop the politics of demonization and division and let's think about exercising joint responsibility." He pointed to the various crises faced by the nation during the last two years, crises in which quick and decisive action taken by the federal government had prevented untold hardship for the victims. "When California had their terrible earthquake," Clinton said, "we got that highway rebuilt in about half the time—the busiest highway in America—they said they could do it." Ironically, it has been California's own governor, Pete Wilson (R), who has twice benefitted in the last two years from swift federal emergency action—in the Los Angeles earthquake and this year's flooding—who has been one of those crying the loudest for the federal government to let the states "fend for themselves."

The President also attacked Republican attempts to abolish "unfunded mandates," thereby preventing efforts by the federal government to set some basic standards for the states in the area of social assistance and medical care. "We shouldn't repeal the law that will make it possible to immunize all the kids in this country against serious diseases who are under two years old," he warned.

Clinton admitted that there is a need to reform the present welfare system in order to put a greater stress on child-rearing, education, and getting people back into the workforce, but he rejected attempts by Republicans to eliminate the safety net of federal assistance to those thrown out of work or otherwise disabled. "I believe the American people desperately want a change in the welfare system," Clinton said, "but I don't believe they want to punish parents and children just because they're poor or because they've made some mistakes in their lives." Any reform must be conducted "in a way that builds people up, not tears them down."

Clinton then issued a rallying call. "The number-one lesson is not to be cynical, not to give up, not to turn back, but to bear down and go forward and do what is right by the American people. It will come out all right in the end if we stand up for what is right and do what is right," the President said.