

The **DEMOCRATS**

Must Lead

The Case for a
Progressive
Democratic Party

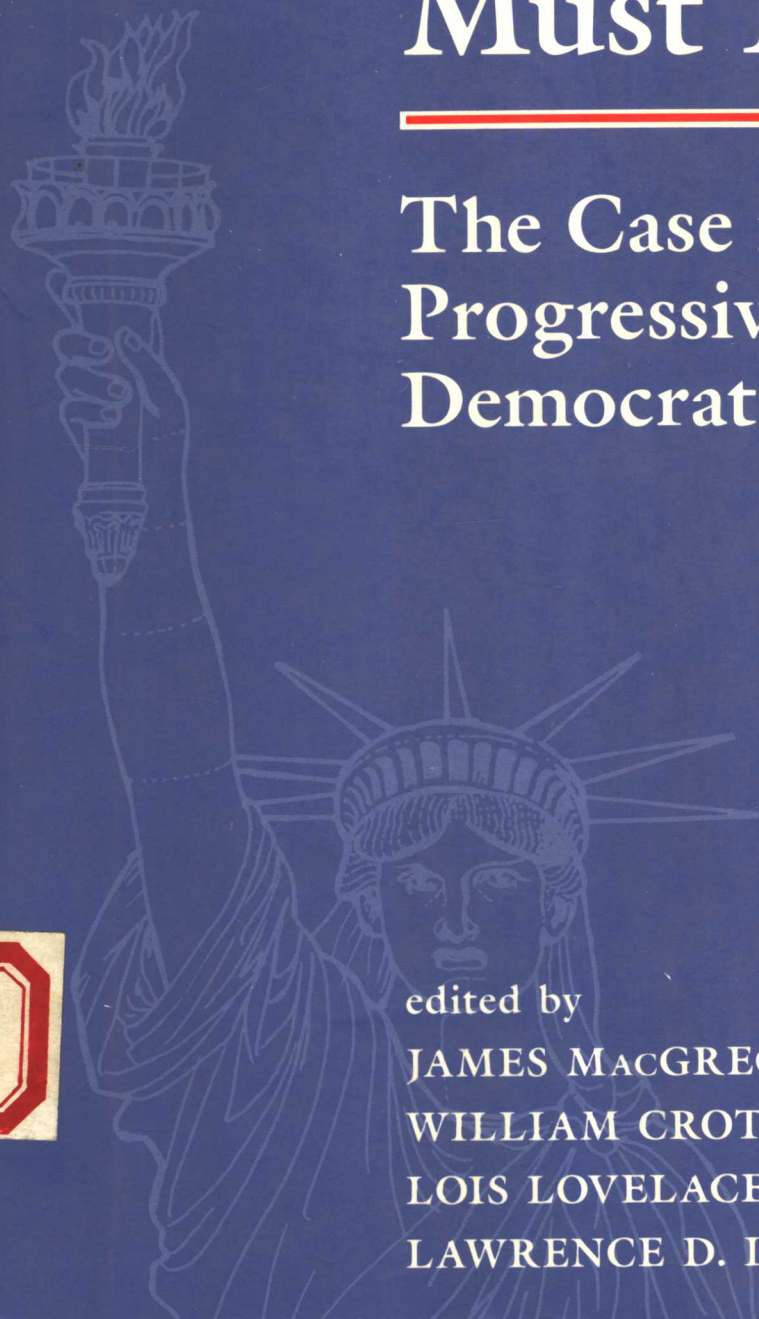
edited by

JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS

WILLIAM CROTTY

LOIS LOVELACE DUKE

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Preface

This is an unusual book. It is a book with a message, and a liberal one at that. Our belief is that the time has come to offer a viable liberal alternative to the Republicans and the conservative excesses of the last quarter of a century. And the political party to do this is the Democratic party: The Democrats must lead.

This book represents the views of leading academicians and political figures. Though relatively brief, it is intended to be clear in focus and argument and outspokenly liberal in orientation. In these regards, it is not a typical academic treatise—highly qualified in argument, somewhat dull in presentation, and limited in its appeal to a mainly professional audience. On the contrary, this presentation is advocacy oriented, direct, and aimed at a broad audience.

Each contribution makes a self-contained argument, which in turn is based on the most relevant of contemporary data and analyses as well as on the personal experience and knowledge of the particular author. Taken together, the chapters reemphasize the basic theme of the book: that the Democrats can win by appealing to a liberal constituency with liberal issues. The country needs a vibrant political alternative. The only party that can provide this alternative is the Democratic party.

The indictment of Republican rule is massive: economic mismanagement, tax restructuring to benefit the wealthy, official corruption and exploitation of public office, a politics of racial division, environmental neglect, a disregard for civil rights and an intolerance for the concerns of minorities, recessions, joblessness, Savings and Loan bailouts, homelessness, an educational system in disarray, military build-ups, a series of undeclared wars, urban decay, out-of-control deficits, exploding medical costs in a limited-coverage health care system, and two constitutional crises—the Watergate of Richard M. Nixon and the Irangate of Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

Conservatism is an ideology of privilege, exploitation, and excess. Its time has passed. The country is looking for an informed and compassionate leadership willing to address the nation's fundamental needs and politically skilled enough to do something about them. The Democratic party can provide that alternative.

This book thus represents a call to arms by authors who share a commitment to a liberal political agenda and a rejuvenated, more combative Democratic party. It is a statement of the nation's political and social needs. It is a call for the Democrats to lead and to represent those who need representation. A Democratic party that addresses the country's real problems can win. This book is an effort to return the Democratic party to its roots. That is our purpose.

The chapters herein were developed under the auspices of the Political Scientists for a Progressive Democratic Party. The group was formed several years ago under the direction of James MacGregor Burns. Its intention, above all, is to offer policy alternatives and an ongoing source of ideas (representative of the liberal community in academics) to the political party most likely to act upon them—the Democratic party. But it hopes, as well, to provide options in a debate long dominated by conservatives and characterized by the sterility and class bias of a politics of privilege.

There are choices to be made. Liberals must reassert themselves; they must offer voters reasonable and attractive policy positions. The proposals contained within this book are meant to contribute to both these ends.

As editors, we are grateful to Jennifer Knerr and Amy Eisenberg of Westview Press, who have been supportive of and involved in this project since its inception; to Jane Raese, the book's project editor; and to Chris Arden, its copyeditor. We wish to thank a number of people who have contributed to the final result: Joel Tabin at Northwestern University; Marianne Blair at Clemson University; the Faculty Secretarial Office at Williams College; and, especially, Vicki Koessl at Lawrence University, who assumed and discharged with skill the considerable responsibilities of producing the book's final camera-ready typescript.

James MacGregor Burns
William Crotty
Lois Lovelace Duke
Lawrence D. Longley

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PART ONE

**A Party That Can Lead/
A Party That Should Lead**

1

JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS



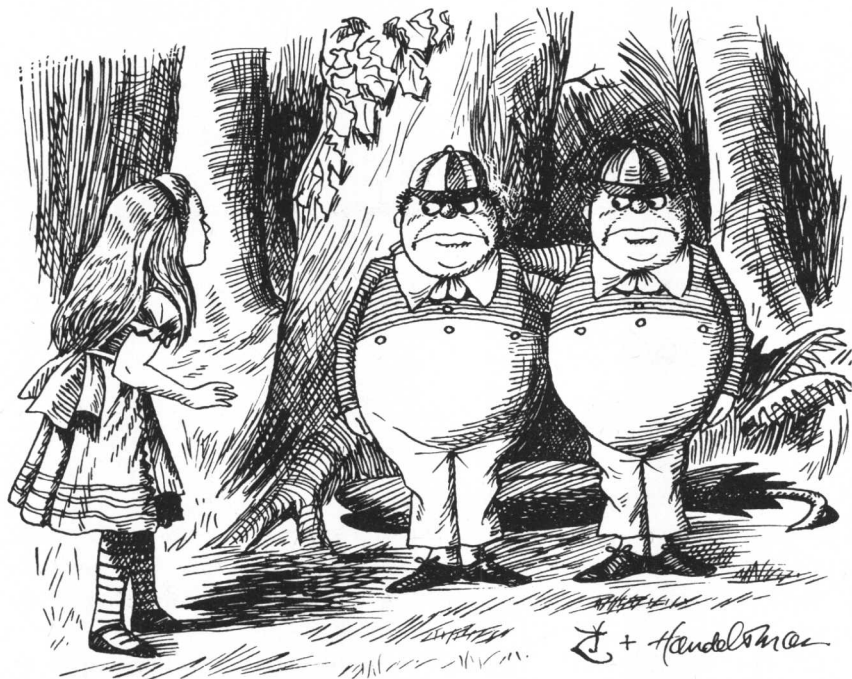
The Democrats Must Lead— But How?

What does it take to lead? Realistic grasp of party heritage and party potential. Political sense of concrete problems and realities. Above all, moral purpose and conviction. In sum, thoughtful, practical, and principled leadership on the part of men and women at every level of the Democratic party.

But first the Democrats must take psychological leadership—of themselves. Party debate during 1991 consisted mainly of pessimistic talk about Democratic changes in 1992, bleak poll results, abject failures of Democratic party leaders in Congress to carry the fight to President Bush, and divisive debates among Democrats as to the best strategy for 1992 and the rest of the 1990s.

It was not a Republican but a Democrat, for example, who most sharply castigated the party for its failings. The party, he said, was torn between the Twin Peaks of the American political psyche: greed and guilt. The Democratic party had lost the capacity to be morally indignant. It did not dare to lose, because losing was seen as a character flaw. These were the words not of a young Turk sitting on the sidelines but of the head of the Virginia Democratic party. One Democratic aspirant to the White House early in 1992, with fine impartiality, called the politics of both parties "brain-dead."¹

The media lost no opportunity to savage the Democrats as divided, irresolute, and weak—in short, as political wimps. The announced presidential aspirants were rated about C-plus in quality. Senate and House Democrats were called trimmers, opportunists; they were seen as utterly lacking in creative leadership. The party as a whole was pictured as a weak clone of the GOP. Meg Greenfield castigated the party's "big guys" for not



"I beg your pardon," said Alice, "but which of you is the Democrat?"

Drawing by Handelsman; © 1991. Reprinted by permission of The New Yorker Magazine, Inc., December 16, 1991, p. 42.

daring to run against Bush, leaving the fight to the "second-tier" aspirants.² And cartoonists had a field day; one pictured Alice-in-(political) Wonderland confronting Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum and asking, "But who's the Democrat?"

HOW DEMOCRATS WIN—AS PROGRESSIVES

As usual, the ideological war among Democrats—though a bit muted during an election year—is almost as intense as the attacks from reactionary Republicans. When conservative Democrats—or "centrists" and "mainstreamers" as they prefer to be called—challenge the progressive Democrat

wing of the party, they rarely attack progressivism itself. To do that would be to attack the best of the party legacy. No, from their pulpit—the Democratic Leadership Council—comes the argument that the party has lost five of the last six presidential elections primarily because its candidates were too liberal, too out of touch with the voters, too radical especially on "social issues."

Hence the best strategy, the centrists contend, is to choose presidential nominees representing the widest consensus in the party, candidates who are moderate and "reasonable," candidates always willing to negotiate and compromise with the opposition, even Republicans. That is the way to win.

Historically the opposite has been true. "Let's look at the record"—the historical record, that is—but we must start at the party's beginning, in order to understand the whole rich party heritage and the almost two centuries of lessons our earlier Democratic leaders have taught us.

In 1800 Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and their zealous supporters made a strong appeal to the people with their attacks on John Adams's elitism and heavy defense-spending taxes, as well as on Federalist violations of Bill of Rights liberties. They won with this kind of "progressive" attack. Granted, many domestic policies were left to the states to formulate and carry out; but Jefferson, under the "new federalism," was no passive president. He and James Gallatin framed new fiscal policies, he and his supporters in Congress carried through the Louisiana Purchase, and he dispatched historic expeditions to the West. The Jeffersonian momentum carried over to the Madison and Monroe presidencies. At both the national and state levels the early Jeffersonians were often bold activists.

No one ever accused Andrew Jackson of standpattism. His attack on the elites of the day doubtless would be condemned today as "negative campaigning," but in office he quickly established himself as a tribune of the people. Against conservative and respectable advice from fellow Democrats, he attacked the "Nullifiers" during his first term and Nicholas Biddle's bank during his second. The Jacksonian impetus carried over to Martin Van Buren's election victory in 1836 and to his administration as well.

The Democrats won in 1844 with an activist candidate, James K. Polk, who had old Andy Jackson's support. They won again in 1852 and 1856 with candidates who supported the Compromise of 1850, but the party fell apart in the face of the rising conflict over slavery. There was no Jefferson nor Jackson to lead the party in a bold and principled direction. The Democracy was at its nadir from the Civil War to Woodrow Wilson's election in 1912. Whereas the Republican party frankly spoke and acted for the burgeoning high-tariff corporate interests, the Democrats failed to offer clear alternatives, except on the corruption issue. Woodrow Wilson,

however, took progressive positions on domestic issues in both his campaigns.

After another period of centrism and defeat in the 1920s the Democratic party entered a new era of leadership under FDR and Harry Truman, and then again, during the rising civil rights crisis, under JFK and LBJ. A fresh and exciting presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter, won in 1976, but his administration appeared to end up on dead center. Then it was the GOP's turn. Under Ronald Reagan's Hollywood-style but committed conservative leadership, the Republicans broke the "Goldwater jinx," won power on a boldly rightwing platform, and—for a time, at least—governed as conservatives, until they bogged down in their own Washington quagmire. Bush won as a conservative in 1988.

Looking back on this historical record, one takes it for granted. Of course progressives like Jefferson and Jackson, Wilson and FDR, Kennedy and Johnson, would win by holding to the left. But that outcome was not so obvious at the time. None of these leaders took the stands they did without powerful opposition from within the Democratic party. FDR, for example, faced an open rebellion by Al Smith and a host of outspoken conservatives in 1936. He "won big" that year—and, more important, established the New Deal so solidly in national programs and policy that the core of the New Deal would never again be in jeopardy, even under Republicans. The leaders, at every level from the grassroots up, made a choice, took progressive action, and achieved practical and lasting results.

PATTERNS OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE

History does not always repeat itself. Progressive Democrats do not always win; George McGovern lost against Nixon in 1972, at a time when Watergate crimes were still proving helpful to the Nixon Republicans before turning into their downfall. But the pattern of Democratic party history is clear. Progressives—by whatever name—usually won, and when they won, they won a government, they won at least the moral right to act. Moderate Democrats like Buchanan and Cleveland won office but had relatively little impact on public policy.

Recent experience in this century followed that pattern. After World War II, for example, it was Harry Truman's turn toward a strongly progressive stance during his 1948 campaign that, most historians agree, helped him win his "miracle victory" over Thomas E. Dewey. Adlai Stevenson ran two moderate campaigns against Eisenhower, in the "flaccid '50s," and lost

twice. Kennedy conducted a cautiously progressive campaign in 1960, moved toward progressivism during his three years in office, would almost certainly have run as a progressive in 1964 had he lived, and doubtless would have defeated Goldwater as soundly as Lyndon Johnson did. LBJ "won big" in 1964 as an outspoken progressive. Hubert Humphrey ran a moderate-liberal campaign against Nixon in 1968, especially on the Vietnam issue; Walter Mondale ran the same kind of campaign against Reagan in 1984, as did Michael Dukakis against George Bush in 1988. All three of these fine, attractive candidates lost.

In view of the historical record, both long run and recent, why are some Democrats and their supporters in the media telling us that we can win only with a moderate, centrist Democrat in 1992 and thereafter? Because it's different now, some say. The question is, what are people thinking; how will they vote, *today*? So let us look at that record, too.

According to Harris polls published in July 1991 (polls conducted during the post-Gulf War height of Bush's popularity), almost three-quarters of voters saw the Republican party as no longer frugal in government spending. By a more than 2 to 1 ratio they perceived the GOP as racking up the biggest deficits in American history. By almost 3 to 1 they viewed the Republicans as working too much to "protect the interests of the rich and big business." They blamed the GOP far more than the Democrats for the S&L scandal. On abortion rights they saw the GOP as "too closely tied to those who would deny women the right to choose in the case of abortion," and by a wide margin they felt that the Democrats would handle abortion rights better. And on another sensitive issue—affirmative action—whites by a large margin believed that Democrats were "fairer."

A 56 to 38 majority, as Louis Harris summed it up, viewed the Democrats as correct on such issues as "abortion, environment, education, health, children, the elderly, and even taxes and spending." So—again—why is the party being told to go "centrist"?

WHAT DO WE WIN WHEN WE WIN?

Perhaps, in some sports, winning is "everything." Not so in politics. Through elections politicians win *positions*. But do they win *power*—to carry out their campaign pledges, to do all the good things they promised, to really, actually, help people, to offer them real opportunity, to bring about tangible improvements in their lives? In short, does winning mean not just taking over offices but gaining a *government*?

Toward this end, progressive Democrats must do more than preen themselves on their fine policies and benevolent plans. They must face some major political problems confronting the party.

One is the failure to reach the voters in recent elections. Sixty percent of the voters, Louis Harris reported, criticized Democrats for not being able to "come up with real solutions to today's problems." Seventy-five percent believed that the party has chosen "poor candidates for president" for a long time. For progressives who believe that they do have solutions, such voters' attitudes are lethal.

Obviously progressives must learn to communicate better with the electorate. Professors Betty Glad and Lois Lovelace Duke offer valuable advice on the specifics of this issue in later pages. But the question transcends tactics. The voters want to feel a sense of commitment, of follow-through, of tenacity on the part of leaders. And the question of whether progressive leaders can actually deliver on their promises may turn on two other questions.

One concerns the capacity of the party itself. Conventional wisdom now has it that both of the two major parties—and especially the Democrats—have become disorganized, underfinanced, largely impotent organizations. Yet we continue to rely on parties to choose candidates, mobilize voters, indoctrinate the citizenry, and provide a kind of "party team" to run the government. In this volume Professor Samuel Patterson reminds us of the stronger leadership structures that have come into being in Congress. But the whole party needs refurbishing, such that at the least it can renew its ancient function of propagandizing and mobilizing the potential Democratic vote. Professor Kay Lawson, a close student of parties abroad as well as at home, directly confronts the crisis of the party system.

The Democrats, however, cannot mobilize the national electorate and control the government if they are unable to govern themselves. In the last half-century the Democrats as a national organization have lost that capacity. Who's to blame? Not only the usual suspects such as television and faulty campaign finance. Even more devastating has been the rise of national and state primaries that have destroyed the main function of parties—recruiting and electing their candidates and empowering and holding them responsible in office. We must restore the national convention, democratically chosen, as the place to make the top party decisions, including the drafting of candidates when feasible and necessary. Restoring the national midterm issues convention—to debate policy, not just politicians, and to strengthen and democratize the national organization of the party—would be a strong step toward effective conventions. Democrats must learn that a participatory party and a strongly led party are not necessarily antithetical—as a number

of state parties have demonstrated. Lawrence D. Longley, himself a party activist at the state and national levels, explores below the severe problems and the great potentials of national party renewal.

Another harsh test for Democrats is the governmental system itself. The worst obstacle for progressives over time has been neither GOP conservatism nor Democratic centrism but, rather, a government so fragmented that the party could not carry out its program. Even FDR, the master politician, was frustrated and defeated by "checks and balances" during his second term. Can a constitutional system devised in the eighteenth century meet the tremendous burdens of the twenty-first? William Kreml deals with this enduring governmental problem in this volume.

In facing all these problems, committed leadership is indispensable. Making the party work, making the government produce, is not the kind of job you put into the hands of middle-of-the-road trimmers, incessant compromisers, behind-the-scenes brokers, consensus-at-any-price deal makers. Governor Mario Cuomo, during the last election year of 1990, mused over precisely these problems in an interview with a prominent historian.

It wasn't the *ideas* that lost in the recent presidential elections, Cuomo observed. "The *philosophy* didn't lose." He personally liked the centrists in the party, he said, "but this Democratic Leadership Council is a joke to me." Why? "The proposition that you must move away from what we're saying because the other side is beating us is wrong. Who's right, them or us? *Winning* is not the measure."³ The governor in effect was calling for moral, principled leadership.

BEING TRUE TO OURSELVES

And moral, principled leadership remains the ultimate, the crucial test for Democrats. Here the enemy is not so much Republicans or conservative Democrats—the "enemy is us." Let's face it: For too long Democrats have been living off the fifty-year-old ideas of the New Deal. Surely it's high time for fresh ideas, new departures, far more bold and innovative policymaking. Even after those fifty years, Democrats have not yet fully realized FDR's dream of freedom from want and freedom from fear. And during those fifty years they have compromised far too much—with Republican presidents, with Southern reactionaries in both parties, with "bipartisan" foreign policies that left us with Vietnam and other disasters. If the Democrats wish to govern, William Crotty insists, they must learn

how to oppose—that is, to offer clear and principled alternatives to GOP-ism.

The harshest moral test facing Democrats is posed in this volume by Professor Mileur—whether we can rid ourselves of our coalition with a Dixie party bloc that over the years has tarnished our image, perverted our policies, and lessened our chances of electoral victory. More recently the Dixie bloc has thwarted congressional Democrats in overriding Reagan and Bush vetoes of desperately needed legislation. Some contributors to this volume might prefer a different approach than Mileur's: They might wish only to jettison the "solid South" while seeking to hold onto at least Texas and Florida, perhaps also trying to mobilize black-white voter coalitions even in the Deep South, at least over the long run. But would these alternatives still mean compromising even with "outer-rim" Southern politicians to a degree that would impair the party's moral standing?

This moral standing presupposes, however, that progressive Democrats are prepared to deal with the intertwined problems of poverty and racism, and that they will do so on the basis of both progressive principles and political reality. Progressives are constantly taken to task for overemphasizing issues of poverty, joblessness, family structure, (black) welfare dependency, homelessness—in short, for repeatedly forcing Democratic "national candidates into the suicidal position of defending minority rights against majority values."⁴ Some of us had thought that protecting minorities was what the Democratic party, as a grand coalition of minorities, was all about. Charles Hamilton's brilliant analysis of the "realistic" compromises of the Democratic party during the last six decades shows that they have not been in fact realistic but rather self-defeating in crucial social areas.

Still, the critics are right when they say that the party needs fresh, innovative policies to win back millions of potential Democratic voters who have deserted the party on "social" issues. Stewart Burns and I have urged enactment of one such policy in our recently published *A People's Charter*—and here we speak of a policy replacing "affirmative action" policies with "real opportunity" programs that would be addressed to the concrete needs and aspirations of individuals, not group categories.⁵ Carrying out real opportunity, as we define it, would be the most revolutionary and effective policy innovation of the late twentieth century. Other progressive Democrats will and must come up with their own new departures and bold innovations, especially in the many potential post-cold war initiatives that James A. Nathan lays out in example after example.