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## The fear myth

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### Actually, George Bush's victory had more to do with hope and growth

IN THE past fortnight, the Democrats have come up with lots of comfort-food explanations of George Bush's victory—from the idea that the rascal stole the election for a second time (there were a mere 3.3m votes in it, after all) to the notion that he rode into Washington, DC, at the head of an army of hooded fundamentalists. But perhaps the most dangerous of all these myths is the idea that Mr Bush terrified the voters into re-electing him. He divided the country along “fault lines of fear”, according to Maureen Dowd in the *New York Times*; he relied on “fear of and hatred for modernity”, added Garry Wills, polymath and devout Catholic. Sooner or later every Democrat starts saying that the president used terrorism to partisan advantage.

This explanation is dangerous because it contains a measure of truth. The election certainly took place against a background of fear (Islamic fanatics are, after all, bent on killing as many Americans as they can). And the Republicans certainly played the fear card with gusto (as indeed did the Democrats: remember all the talk about reintroducing conscription). But if they are going to extract any useful lessons from their humiliation, the Democrats need to realise that the Republicans didn't just beat them on fear. They clobbered them on hope.

For the moment, the American right is better at talking about the future than the left. It is better at exuding optimism. And it is better at addressing the aspirations of an aspirational people.

Arguably the only optimistic thing about the Kerry campaign was its slogan: “Help is on the way”. In general, the Democrats focused on America's intractable problems. By contrast, Mr Bush not only sounded upbeat, but also came up with solutions, of sorts. At home, John Kerry was happy to

cast himself as the blind defender of a 70-year-old Social Security system that is headed for bankruptcy; Mr Bush talked about using privatisation to shore up the "ownership society". Abroad, the president even managed to sound optimistic about terrorism, promising to drain the swamp of terrorism by spreading democracy.

Mr Bush's optimistic message gave him a commanding advantage in pro-growth America. Joel Kotkin, a Los Angeles-based writer who knows as much about the grassroots economy as anyone, points to the close relationship between growth, both demographic and economic, and a propensity to vote Republican. Most of Mr Kerry's base was in stagnant America. Democratic strongholds such as Chicago, Cleveland, San Francisco and Mr Kerry's Boston have been losing people and jobs.

Mr Bush's America, for the most part, is booming. This is not just because the red states that voted for Mr Bush are growing faster than the blue states that voted for Mr Kerry. It is also because Mr Bush did well in the fast-growing suburbs and "exurbs" in both red and blue states. Mr Bush's triumph in greater Phoenix, greater Houston and greater Atlanta was perhaps predictable. But Mr Kotkin points out that he also triumphed in what he calls the "third California": the vast inland region that is producing the bulk of the state's growth at the moment.

How have the Republicans succeeded in turning themselves into the party of the future? One answer is that they have been better at reinventing themselves. Over the past quarter of a century, both parties have made concerted attempts to adjust to a period of radical social change—the Republicans under Ronald Reagan in the 1980s and the Democrats under Bill Clinton in the 1990s. But the Republicans have more or less stuck with the Reaganite revolution. The Democrats, on the other hand, have all but forgotten the lessons of Clintonism.

Back in 2000, Al Gore tried to revive southern populism with his talk of fighting for "the people against the powerful". ("There aren't many Tom Joads in the exurbs," says Marshall Wittmann of the Democratic Leadership Council. "If you're fighting for anything, it's probably a parking space.") Mr Kerry lambasted "Benedict Arnold corporations". Having built a bridge to the 21st century under Mr Clinton, the Democrats have since been busy building another one back to the 19th century.

There are plenty of short-term excuses for this. The Lewinsky affair persuaded Mr Gore that he needed to rebrand his party. The Howard Dean insurgency made Mr Kerry focus on Bush-bashing. But what is worrying for the Democrats is that there may be two bigger forces turning them into a party of the past.

## **The no-need-to-change-things party**

First, the party is increasingly dominated by people who have no yearning for growth: public-sector workers; academics and trustafarians who both live off inherited endowments; environmentalists who want to regulate SUVs and urban sprawl; and billionaires who are too rich to aspire to anything. (One of the best statistics of the campaign is that people worth \$1m-10m supported Mr Bush by a 63-37% margin, whereas those worth more than \$10m favoured Mr Kerry 59-41%.)

Second, the Democratic Party is ceasing to be a mom-and-pop party. Phillip Longman of the New America Foundation points out that the fertility rate in the Kerry states is 12% lower than in the Bush states. Vermont, the home of Howard Dean and perhaps the most left-wing state in the country, produces an annual average of 49 children for every 1,000 women of child-bearing age; in Utah, where 71% of the population voted for Mr Bush, the figure is 91. In deep-blue cities such as San Francisco and Seattle you find more dogs than children.

The Democrats are not beyond redemption. Mr Clinton showed they can triumph in the suburbs by preaching economic growth and social responsibility. But they must abandon all this comforting claptrap about fear being Mr Bush's friend—and start to focus on the much more devastating truth. In America, self-styled progressives look ever more the party of the past, and confessed conservatives are the ones focusing on the future.

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