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**From:** sbwhoep [redacted]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, September 1, 2010 11:47 AM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** H: fyi. more on mid-term strategy... Sid

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Since you are on this tack: This is a cri de coeur from the guy who wrote "The Political Brain" and was a major Obama supporter, Drew Westen. I'll write you another memo very soon... Sid

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## What Created the Populist Explosion and How Democrats Can Avoid the Shrapnel in November

To say that the American people are angry is an understatement. The only question at this point is how to mitigate the damage when the bomb detonates in November.

September 1, 2010 |

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To say that the American people are angry is an understatement. The political brain of Americans today reflects a volatile mixture of fear and fury, and when you mix those together, you get an explosion. The only question at this point is how to mitigate the damage when the bomb detonates in November.

The bad news is that it's too late for Democrats to do what would have been both good policy and good politics (and what the House actually did do), namely to pass a major jobs bill when it was clear that the private sector couldn't keep Americans employed. The "Obama Doctrine" should have been that Americans who want to work and have the ability to contribute to our productivity as a nation should have the right to work, and that if the private sector can't meet the demand for jobs, we have plenty of roads and bridges to fix, new energy sources to develop and manufacture, and schools to build and renovate so our kids and workers returning for training can compete in the 21st century global economy. From having spent much of the last four years testing messages on a range of issues, from immigration to taxes and deficits, I can say with some certainty that nothing John Boehner or Eric Cantor could say could come within 30 points of generating the enthusiasm -- particularly among swing voters -- of a message that began, "We don't have a shortage of work ethic in this country, we have a shortage of work." That message resonates across the political spectrum. And it isn't even the strongest message we've tested in the last weeks or months that beats back the toughest deficit-cutting language the other side can muster.

But it's too late for that. The administration opted for an alternative doctrine, which Larry Summers enunciated on *This Week* several months ago: that unemployment is going to remain high for the foreseeable future and eventually come down -- as if there's nothing we can do about it -- and that they will push here and there for small symbolic measures whose symbolism tends to escape people who are out of work. It's hard to be excited by symbolism when your children

are hungry or the bank is repossessing your home -- although you didn't do anything to deserve it -- while the people who did are once again making out like bandits.

Although the situation looks bleak for Democrats in November, it ain't over 'til it's over. Republicans are shooting themselves in the foot all over the country, running Tea Party candidates who are so far to the right you can't see Middle America from their porch. And some endangered Democrats will likely see victory in November from theirs if they understand the public mood and speak to it.

What is that public mood? It can be characterized by a single phrase -- populist anger -- and it cuts across partisan lines. On the right, it is alloyed with racial anxiety and prejudice. On the left, it is alloyed with tremendous disappointment at what could have been if we had the kind of bold leadership for which times like these cry out. And among people in the vast political center, populist anger is alloyed with anxiety and uncertainty -- about their jobs, their homes, and their children's future.

### **How to Create a Populist Explosion: A Tragedy in Two Acts**

So how did we get here? The story can be told as a tragedy in two acts.

Act I: The GOP Sets the Country on a Course of Economic Destruction and the President Calls for Truth and Reconciliation without the Truth Part

- A strong economic downturn devolves into a Great Recession, as the stock market crashes and major banks fail. By October 2008, upper middle class moderate Republicans in the suburbs are so frightened by what's happening to their assets that they're willing to give Democrats a chance.
- A Republican administration that believes in neither government nor regulation creates a 700 billion bank bailout with no accountability. Unlike Republicans, who would say "no" in a situation like this and let a Great Recession turn into a Great Depression, Democrats do the right thing, but they don't make it clear from the start that these are Bush Bailouts and remind Americans, over and over, that the cause of all the bankruptcies is the bankruptcy of Republican ideology.
- A charismatic young president raises people's hopes and expectations, as he uniquely can. Americans are frightened, but they are willing and waiting to hear an alternative narrative to "government is the problem, not the solution" and a path back to economic recovery and security.
- The White House refuses to tell the American people three stories they desperately need to hear.
- The first is why the economy has gone into the ditch, and who did it. The president is steadfast in his position that we should "look forward, not backward," even as the GOP is blocking his every initiative to clean up its mess. As conservative attacks on him and Democrats increase, he refuses to indict the Republicans in Congress or President Bush for having destroyed our economy and putting one in eight Americans out of work and one in five either behind on their mortgage or in the process of having their homes foreclosed by the same bankers who gambled them away. Why did he need to tell the American people who was responsible for their misery -- and to repeat it again and again? Because otherwise, if the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression didn't subside within a year and half, voters would start to associate it with him and his party. This is Neuroscience 101 - it's how mental associations are formed. But the president never even uttered George W. Bush's name in his first year in office, and the first time he did mention Bush was to appoint him, along with former President Clinton, to co-lead American relief efforts in Haiti. The president doesn't like putting antagonists in any of his stories, but if forced to, he would cite unnamed "naysayers," "Washington politics as usual," or "Congress," which was counterproductive given that Congress was held by his party. The guiding belief at the White House implicit in this messaging strategy was that Americans have a good grasp on economics and good memories.
- The second story the American people needed to hear from the president was why deficit spending is essential when the economy is spiraling downward. It's not a hard story to tell, even in a sound bite. But one of the best educators to occupy the Oval Office in decades chose not to educate -- he actually did it once, with prodding, but never repeated what was a superb explanation --- nor did he remind voters every time his opponents attacked him for deficit spending that they had left him with a 1.2 trillion dollar deficit on the day he walked into office because of their unpaid-for tax cuts to millionaires and unpaid-for war on Iraq that called on no one to sacrifice except our soldiers and their families (and our kids and grandkids, who will be paying off this war for generations). A year later, with Democrats on the ropes, the president started to tell that story. It was the right move, but appeared defensive because it hadn't been part of his guiding narrative from the start.
- The third story the president needed to offer was an alternative narrative on government. The president and his party were about to offer effective government as a solution to multiple problems after 30 years of solid branding by conservatives since Ronald Reagan about how government is the problem. But the narrative never came.
- The White House and Democratic Congress pass what virtually all economists outside the Goldman Sachs-to-Washington pipeline consider a half-stimulus that they predict will likely produce half-results. It fulfilled its promise. But the equally predictable political result was a discrediting of the concept of government intervention to stimulate the economy in the eyes of the public -- enough to scare off Democratic lawmakers from doing what they learned about Keynesian economics in intro economics for the indefinite future. Instead of blasting the Republicans for having hurled the country toward an abyss that would now take drastic measures to avert and warning the American people that this could easily be the first of two or three trillion-dollar packages that might be

needed to get Americans back to work and to get the gears of the economy grinding again before we could start returning to the kinds of surpluses Bill Clinton had left the last time a Democrat was in the White House, the president chose to compromise with a party that was so unpopular when he took office that only 20 percent of voters at that point would even admit to a pollster that they considered themselves Republicans -- the lowest point for the GOP since the rise of public opinion polling 50 years earlier.

- The economy continues its free-fall, shedding 700,000 jobs a month. Meanwhile, Democrats don't take the kind of dramatic steps necessary to stop the bleeding. Americans are becoming desperate, but they remain hopeful that this new president will turn things around, and that perhaps the jobs provisions of the new "stimulus" act will do cauterize the wound. Meanwhile, the stimulus is being portrayed by Republicans as a mixture of pork and fat, and no one is effectively answering the charges, creating increasingly negative associations to an act that was never adequately crafted or sold.
- The logical follow-up to a bill designed to pull the economy out of a ditch is to make such a bill unnecessary in the future, by attacking Wall Street for having thrown us into crisis and passing strong legislation to rein in the excesses that created the economic meltdown. This would have sealed the American people's loyalty to the new president and Congress. (Heading into November, this is, in fact, the most popular piece of legislation the Democrats have passed, but it took them nearly a year and a half to get there, and by then, neither the president nor the Democratic Congress enjoyed the good will of the average American.) Instead, the same banks that received bailouts are foreclosing in record rates on the homeowners whose payroll taxes funded the bailouts but don't seem to get the same kind of attention to their needs from the federal government. Adding insult to injury, the banks double and triple credit card interest rates to as high as 30 percent, including on people's existing credit card debt -- while continuing to receive no-interest loans from the federal government.
- Despite talk of accountability, no one is fired (except one auto executive), virtually no one is prosecuted or even investigated as far as anyone knows, and banks that received bailouts flaunt record bonuses.

## **Act II: An Anemic Economy Meets an Anemic Health Care Plan**

- The public has been clamoring for health care reform. Over 40 million people don't have health insurance at all, and the 85 percent of voters who do have health care have seen their costs double during the Bush years at the same time as real income has declined. Effective narratives on health care are widely available that win by a 2:1 margin against the toughest Harry-and-Louise anti-reform language from the other side. The opposition knows it, as evident in a leaked memo by Republican wordsmith Frank Luntz, who warns that this will be an uphill climb for opponents of reform, who would do well to accept some major elements of it.
- But instead of using any of the well-tested narratives that were highly effective during the campaign or devising any new ones of its own, the administration decides to try to "sell" health care without a narrative. (I wrote about this in detail a year ago and will not repeat that history here, except in telegraphic form.) The president refuses to state where he stands on any of the substantive debates about health reform for a year, such as whether we should have a "public option" (a term so ill-conceived it's hard to believe the public supported it anyway; imagine the support it might have received if it had been called instead "the one health care plan the health insurance companies don't get to control"). Instead, the White House uses phrases such as "bending the cost curve" while conservatives flood the airwaves with evocative phrases such as "government takeover," "a bureaucrat between you and your doctor," and "death panels."
- Instead of using Big Pharma and the health insurance industry as the villains of the health care story, which would explain why we need an overhaul rather than a Band-Aid, the White House once again offers a story without protagonists or antagonists, and cuts secret deals with both industries that become public.
- Over interminable months of trying to get the votes of the same Republicans who fought against Medicare for seniors for 30 years until the program was just too popular to keep attacking it and who are still trying to gut Social Security despite its popularity, the public then watches what George Will describes as the "serial bribery" of Republican and Democratic Senators alike, as each gets to take his or her turn as the 60th vote.
- At the 11th hour, as a compromise plan is finally going to pass, the president nixes the idea of a Medicare-like alternative Americans can choose over a health-insurance industry plan if they so desire, despite 60 percent of even swing voters wanting it included in the bill.
- Instead of being the signature bill that demonstrates both that Democrats can govern effectively and that government can be a force for good for working and middle class Americans (who have just been told that the better plans they've negotiated or been offered for years by their employers are "Cadillacs" that are going to be taxed out of existence), the entire process proves to the average American that government can't do anything right and scares moderate Democrats away from voting for any other bill that would ever put them on the record supporting government or spending.
- "Government" hits an all-time low in the polls, matching the popularity of big corporations, CEOs, and bailouts.
- Populist anger emerges as the primary emotion across the political spectrum, and the president's job approval with swing voters drops into the high thirties.

- Following the conventional wisdom, Democrats return to their all-too-familiar defensive crouch, and conclude that when in trouble, tack right. On health care, the president and his Cabinet fan out all over television to "reassure" the public on health care that abortion won't be covered (thanks for the reassurance, but most of us didn't find that reassuring), that domestic partners won't be covered, and that immigrants won't be covered. None of these issues needed to be conceded. (I know this because I tested messages on them, and well-messaged progressive positions on them would have boosted the popularity of the bill with swing voters.)
- The White House starts adopting failed conservative policies and talking points that leave the public utterly confused about where the president, and by extension, his party, stands on the central issues of the day. The president talks about cutting deficits and increasing spending in the same breath, using the metaphor of families tightening their belt in tough times, which only strengthens resolve against stimulating a faltering economy; pledges support for massively expanding offshore drilling and "clean coal" (which doesn't exist, by the way) in a speech on climate change; and sends in 1200 additional National Guards to Arizona as an apparent reward for passing "No Latino Left Behind," while publicly objecting to the legislation.
- The underlying psychological assumption of these moves is that if you mix policies from the right and left in equal parts, you win the center. In fact, no one has ever won the center that way. It appears weak, opportunistic, and incoherent to the average swing voter, which is particularly problematic at a time when people in the center desperately want to know that their leaders have a vision and a coherent plan for what to do (which is why both FDR and Ronald Reagan were so effective in moving voters in the center). It doesn't win any votes on the right. But it does have one predictable effect: It sucks the motivation out of your base, who feel demoralized and betrayed (if they're part of the "professional left") or less likely to vote (if they're average voters who don't follow politics carefully but just don't feel very enthusiastic anymore, even if they don't really know why).
- Capping it all off, the BP disaster occurs two weeks after the president has adopted the "drill here, drill now," "all of the above" position of the Republican Party and the oil companies. This could have been the perfect opportunity to go on the offensive, contrast what Democrats stand for (common sense, protection of our safety, the land we leave our children, and key American industries and jobs, and sticking up for ordinary Americans against big businesses and their lobbyists) with what Republicans stand for, and connect the dots between what happened on Wall Street (with regulators owned and operated by the companies they were supposed to regulate) and what happened in the Gulf (where precisely the same thing happened). Instead, the administration finds itself on the defensive, increasingly sounding like a subsidiary of BP, allowing BP to call the shots and control information for weeks, defending increasingly hard-to-believe statistics, and issuing press releases that appear indistinguishable from those issued by BP but are inconsistent with assessments of independent scientists.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

So that is where we find ourselves today: a Democratic Party and Democratic base that is demoralized and unlikely to vote in high numbers in November; a Republican Party that is selling replanted Bushes with tremendous enthusiasm; and a vast political center filled with voters who are utterly confused and unsure who to turn to but certain that things aren't going well.

In January 2009 no one could have predicted that Democrats would be in this predicament today. Perhaps Democrats might lose a few seats lost in an off-year election, but certainly no more than that. We had just seen -- and the American public knew we had just seen -- the most disastrous performance by a president and party in living history, and the American people had elected a tremendously charismatic young president with enormous Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. They had given the president and Congress a strong mandate for whatever kind of change was necessary to get us out of economic free-fall and to put Americans back to work.

But there were red flags already by the end of Obama's first week in office that led me to offer the following advice to the new administration: Tell the story of how we got in this mess or you'll own it. Tell a coherent story about deficit spending. Re-brand government because there's only one story out there now (Reagan's), and it's not one that supports a progressive agenda. Never let attacks go unanswered, because doing so only emboldens your opposition and leads the public to believe that you have no answers to them. And if you throw a bipartisan party and no one comes, don't throw another one. All of what followed has been as predictable as it has been unfortunate. A year and a half later, the White House hasn't consistently done any of these things, although the President is now intermittently doing some of them, and when he does, he does them well.

The question today is whether Democrats can channel the populist anger we are seeing around the country this late in the game. The answer is that we'd better try. Having recently tested messages on economics and jobs, including how to talk about deficits and taxes -- widely assumed to be Democrats' Achilles Heel, particularly now -- there is little question that if Democrats and progressives from center to left simply say what they believe in ways that are evocative, values-driven, and speak to people's worries and anger, many stand a good chance of surviving November, particularly when their opponents have nothing to say other than warmed-over rhetoric about cutting taxes to millionaires and multinationals and fiscal restraint except where it cuts into profits of their campaign contributors. Even the most evocative boilerplate conservative messages fall flat against honest messages that speak to the need to get Americans working again. And on issue after issue, no message is more resonant right now than one that sides with working and middle class Americans and small business owners against special interests, big business, and their lobbyists.

But actions speak louder than words, and Americans want to see action. It may be too late for the kind of jobs bill we should have seen a year and a half ago, but it isn't too late for Democrats to go on the offensive against the Republicans - - virtually all of them -- who opposed extending unemployment insurance to millions of Americans who were thrown out of work by the Republicans' corporate sponsors. It isn't too late for Democrats to contrast their support for the highly popular aid to state and local governments that just saved the jobs of hundreds of thousands of teachers, firefighters, and police all over the country with Republicans' desire to throw them out onto the street. It isn't too late to make a voting issue out of the bill the Republicans are stalling that would give small businesses a fighting chance in an economy stacked against them, and to make clear that one party stands for small businesses, which create 75 percent of the new jobs in this country, and the other party stands for big businesses that outsource American jobs and offshore their profits to avoid paying their fair share of American taxes. It's not too late to pass a bill that would limit credit card interest rates to a reasonable percent above the rate at which credit is made available to credit card companies. It's not too late to pass the first badly need "fix" to the health care reform act to demonstrate to Americans that Democrats mean it when they say this was just the first step, namely a law that stops insurance companies from increasing their premiums by 40 percent while cutting the size of their networks by 50-75 percent, which violates the principles of affordability and choice that were so essential to efforts to sell health care reform to the public. It's not too late to vow to change the rules of the Senate to prevent the use of the filibuster to give every special interest veto power over every important piece of legislation. It's not too late to introduce legislation that's been on hold in both the House and Senate to guarantee fair elections, so that the voice of everyday Americans is heard over the voice of the special interests that finance political campaigns. On every one of these issues, a strong populist message trounces anything the other side can say. But Democrats need to play offense. They need to take up-or-down votes on bill after bill, including those they expect the other side to block, knowing that every one of those votes has the leverage of a campaign ad behind it. They need to change the narrative from what sounds to the average American like a whiny and impotent one -- "the Republicans won't let us do it" -- to a narrative of strength in numbers shared with their constituents. And they need to make every election a choice between two well-articulated approaches to governance -- and to offer their articulation of both sides' positions and values. That leads to a final point. What Democrats have needed to offer the American people is a clear narrative about what and who led our country to the mess in which we find ourselves today and a clear vision of what and who will lead us out. That narrative would have laid a roadmap for our elected officials and voters alike, rather than making each legislative issue a seemingly discrete turn onto a dirt road. That narrative might have included -- and should include today -- some key elements: that if the economy is tumbling, it's the role of leadership and government to stop the free-fall; that if Wall Street is gambling with our financial security, our homes, and our jobs, true leaders do not sit back helplessly and wax eloquent about the free market, they take away the dice; that if the private sector can't create jobs for people who want to work, then we'll put Americans back to work rebuilding our roads, bridges, and schools; that if Big Oil is preventing us from competing with China's wind and solar energy programs, then we'll eliminate the tax breaks that lead to dysfunctional investments in 19th century fuels and have a public-private partnership with companies that will create the clean, safe fuels of the 21st century and the millions of good American jobs that will follow. That's what Democrats stand for. It's time they said it.

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