

The Nation.

A 'Top Ten' List of Bold Ideas

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The polls suggest we are nearing the end of the Bush era. But conservative scandal and failure won't lead to a serious progressive resurgence as long as Democrats remain stuck in short-term tactical thinking. Republicans and the tame-dog media tell us, ad nauseam, that Democrats have no new ideas. Enough! Tough, bold, important ideas are plentiful--and it's time to start talking about them, to stake out serious positions and to demand action. No, they can't all be achieved right away. But the sooner progressives start saying what we really want, the sooner the debate will be about our issues, not theirs.

Here's a "top ten" list to get the ball rolling--and to plant the flag for positive, aggressive post-Bush (and post-New Democrat) near- and long-term change:

1. **Real National Security.** The United States is protected by two oceanic moats; the only truly serious security threat we face is the possibility that terrorists will acquire nuclear weapons. We should shift half of the roughly \$500 billion we now spend on a cold war-style defense posture and counterproductive interventionism to a fully funded antiproliferation strategy, to homeland protection and to the elimination of energy dependence on the Middle East. The first priority should be an all-out effort to reduce nuclear arms and nuclear materials. And we should begin a massive campaign to reduce proliferation pressures in Iran and North Korea, including the use of economic incentives, and work to ease the Pakistan-India nuclear rivalry.
2. **Single-Payer Universal Healthcare.** More than 45 million Americans have no health insurance, yet we devote an incredible 15 percent of our GDP to a wasteful system that enriches insurance companies. Meanwhile, health costs are forcing major corporations like GM into bankruptcy. We should demand the obvious: Only a government-organized single-payer system can challenge pharmaceutical profiteering and eliminate the huge administrative costs of insurance companies, which compete to limit treatment of seriously ill patients and nickel-and-dime others. A 2005 Lewin Group study estimates that such a system could save \$344 billion over the next decade in California alone.
3. **Real Social Security.** This is the wealthiest nation in the world. A serious progressive strategy should go far beyond the current debate by demanding a bountiful future for Americans when they retire. A good place to start is with a proposal put forward by former Bush Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill that would produce the equivalent of a

million-dollar annuity for every citizen--enough to guarantee \$50,000 or more a year for everyone in retirement.

4. Universal Daycare. France provides free daycare for all children 3 years old and above, with subsidized care for younger children. Belgium provides free care for those over 2 and a half (subsidized for younger). Finland provides free care for all low-income children, subsidized care for others. It's time to demand the same. This June voters in California will consider a proposal that would tax the top 1 percent of income earners (individuals making more than \$400,000 and couples making more than \$800,000) to provide quality preschool for all 4-year-olds.

5. A Rebuilt Educational System. Let's start at the top: Many nations provide tuition-free college education to all students; we should too (one cost estimate: \$60 billion). And if we really want to leave no child behind, we'll have to reduce K-12 class size, reward the best teachers and make the teaching profession attractive to our most talented young people (a serious start could be made for \$130 billion). Finally, we should upgrade preschool programs like Head Start, which nurture critical skills and emotional development (\$22 billion would cover most eligible children).

6. A Thirty-Hour Week. The American workweek declined from roughly seventy hours in 1850 to sixty hours in 1900 to fifty hours in 1920, but it has been stuck at a little over forty hours since the middle of the twentieth century. Between 1979 and 2000 France and Germany reduced annual work time by about 240 hours, the equivalent of cutting six forty-hour weeks out of the year. Over the next three decades we should steadily reduce work time, using a radically expanded earned-income tax credit to help finance work reduction for those who cannot otherwise afford to cut back their hours and to reduce harm to small businesses.

7. A Fair Tax System. Can we afford such programs in an era of massive budget deficits? The fact is, the top 1 percent of income earners take home more than the bottom 100 million, and the top 1 percent of wealth holders own just under half of all investment capital. We should restore top marginal tax rates to the Nixon-era level of 70 percent, revive taxes on estates worth more than \$3.5 million and institute the wealth taxes that are common in Europe. We should also return to Eisenhower-era corporate tax policies (when corporations accounted for roughly 25 percent of federal revenues, compared with today's roughly 10 percent). Corporate and wealth-tax changes alone could produce up to \$800 billion a year. New Jersey and California have recently shown that taxes on those making, respectively, more than \$500,000 and \$1 million are politically realistic and popular.

8. Worker-Owned (and Community-Owned) Means of Production. This used to be radical rhetoric, but the fact is that 8.8 million workers are already involved in 11,000 companies that are wholly or substantially owned by the employees. There are 4,000-6,000 neighborhood-benefiting corporations at work building housing and creating jobs in cities across the nation. Democratic and Republican mayors now regularly set up municipally owned companies to make money for their communities (and often to solve

environmental problems). Cities and states also invest in job-creating efforts, often using public pension assets. A full-scale, long-term program would step up what is already going on at the state and local level--and then move such policies into high gear as a nationwide program to create what might be called a "New American Commonwealth."

9. Planned New Communities. The US population is expected to grow to at least 400 million by midcentury and, if Census Bureau high projections are realized, more than 1 billion by the end of the century. Is today's suburban sprawl--already unmanageable--simply going to continue unchecked? Part of the answer is to rebuild the economies of central cities and older suburbs. Beyond this, a rational post-sprawl population-dispersion strategy, based on successful European precedents, would use federal loans, loan guarantees, tax incentives and public procurement to develop ecologically sustainable, mass-transit-friendly new communities in rural and small-town locations. The key is intelligent planning as opposed to out-of-control private development.

10. A Twenty-First-Century Regional America. The United States is very large compared with most other advanced industrial nations: Germany, for instance, can be tucked inside the borders of Montana alone; France is smaller than Texas. Numerous thinkers--from historian Frederick Jackson Turner to the late George Kennan--have suggested regional change as a desirable long-term goal. One plausible scenario would begin with California asserting more independent powers of self-determination. Groups of states like New England or the Northwest might demand similar changes. Regional decentralization is fast becoming a fact of life throughout the world. If a future US regionalism is to protect and enhance democracy, self-determination and ecological sustainability without sacrificing federal civil rights protections, progressives will have to take the lead.

It would be easy to add to this list: A public investment strategy is needed to boost the economy into high gear, along with a fair-trade plan to safeguard key industries and jobs. We should transform the minimum wage into a new national "living wage" standard. Investing in conservation and renewable energy (and raising fuel-saving auto and truck CAFE standards) is a practical and moral imperative. So too is making good on the US pledge to help achieve the Millennium Goal of cutting extreme global poverty in half by 2015. Beyond this are new legal safeguards to expand, rather than reduce, civil liberties and civil rights.

The essential point is that progressives must begin demanding what really makes sense now and for the long haul. Even if a bold program cannot be enacted at once, tough demands change the terms of the debate. If Democrats confine themselves to nibbling at the edges of what seems possible in a conservative, GOP-defined system, the result will only be further shabby compromises. As the Bush era fades and New Democrats flounder, we need to ask ourselves what kind of society we really want to live in--and then begin to organize, step by step, around a vision that can once more inspire and re-energize politics.