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The Long Strategy

By **DAVID BROOKS**

I was a liberal Democrat when I was young. I used to wear a green Army jacket with political buttons on it — for Hubert Humphrey, Birch Bayh, John F. Kennedy and Franklin Roosevelt. I even wore that jacket in my high school yearbook photo.

It's a magic green jacket. I can put it on today and, suddenly, my mind shifts back to the left. I start thinking like a Democrat, feeling a strange accompanying hunger for brown rice.

When I put on that magic jacket today, I feel beleaguered but kind of satisfied. I feel beleaguered because the political winds are blowing so ferociously against "my" party. But I feel satisfied because the Democrats have overseen a bunch of programs that, while unappreciated now, are probably going to do a lot of good in the long run.

For example, everybody now hates the bank bailouts and the stress tests. But, the fact is, these are some of the most successful programs in recent memory. They stabilized the financial system without costing much money. The auto bailout was criticized at the time, but it's looking pretty good now that General Motors is recovering.

But the magic jacket-wearing me is nervous about the next few years. I'm afraid my party is going to get stuck in the same old debates that we always lose. First, we're going to have the same old tax debate. We're going to not extend the Bush tax cuts on the rich. The Republicans will blast us for killing growth and raising taxes as they did in 2000 and 2004.

Then we'll get stuck in the same old spending debate. We'll point to high unemployment and propose spending programs too small to make much difference. The Republicans will blast us for bankrupting the country with ineffective programs, and the voters are so distrustful of government these days that they'll side with the Republicans on that one, too.

So I sit there in my magic green jacket and I wonder: What can my party do to avoid the big government tag that always leads to catastrophe? Then I remember President Obama's vow to move us beyond the stale old debates. Maybe he couldn't really do that in the first phase

of his presidency when he was busy responding to the economic crisis, but perhaps he can do it now in the second phase.

It occurs to me that the Obama administration has done a number of (widely neglected) things that scramble the conventional categories and that are good policy besides. The administration has championed some potentially revolutionary education reforms. It has significantly increased investments in basic research. It has promoted energy innovation and helped entrepreneurs find new battery technologies. It has invested in infrastructure — not only roads and bridges, but also information-age infrastructure like the broadband spectrum.

These accomplishments aren't big government versus small government; they're using government to help set a context for private sector risk-taking and community initiative. They cut through the culture war that is now brewing between the Obama administration and the business community. They also address the core anxiety now afflicting the public. It's not only short-term unemployment that bothers people. What really scares people is the sense that we're frittering away our wealth. Americans fear we're a nation in decline.

So I sit there in my green jacket, happily chewing on a Twizzler that I probably left in a pocket in 1979, and I think: What would happen if Obama sidestepped the fruitless and short-term stimulus debate and instead focused on the long term? He could explain that we're facing deep fundamental problems: an aging population, overleveraged consumers, exploding government debt, state and local bankruptcies, declining human capital, widening inequality, a pattern of jobless recoveries, deteriorating trade imbalances and so on.

These long-term problems, Obama could say, won't be solved either with centralized government or free market laissez-faire. Just as government laid railroads and built land grant colleges in the 19th century to foster deep growth, the government today should be doing the modern equivalents.

Not much is going to get passed in the next two years anyway, but the president could lay the groundwork for a whopping second-term agenda: tax simplification, entitlement reform, a new wave of regional innovation clusters, a new wave of marriage-friendly tax policies. If the president is looking for a long-term growth agenda, he could read "Path to Prosperity," co-edited by Jason Furman and Jason Bordoff, or "The Pro-Growth Progressive" written by Gene Sperling. Some of these guys already are on his staff.

Eventually, I see a party breaking out of old stereotypes, appealing to entrepreneurs and suburbanites again, and I start feeling good about the future. Then I take off the magic green jacket and return to my old center-right self. A chill sweeps over me: Gosh, what if the Democrats really did change in that way?