

A Big Problem for Democrats in the Midterms: Other Democrats



The op-ed in the New York Times ran under the headline, “American Voters Haven’t Been Afraid Like This in a Long Time.” Right there you knew this wasn’t going to be a day at the beach for Democrats.

But the column wasn’t the work of some right-wing Republican, which meant it could simply have been written off as partisan nonsense by Democrats and their reliable allies in the mainstream media. Its author was a Democrat himself, Mark Penn, who was a pollster and adviser to both President Clinton and Hillary Clinton. He’s currently the chairman of the Harris Poll.

His piece is a somber warning to Democrats as we approach the midterm elections – and beyond to 2024. “In a rare convergence, America’s voters are not merely unhappy with their political leadership, but awash in fears about economic

security, border security, international security and even physical security,” is how the column begins. “Without a U-turn by the Biden administration, this fear will generate a wave election like those in 1994 and 2010, setting off a chain reaction that could flip the House and the Senate to Republican control in November, and ultimately the presidency in 2024.”

But asking Joe Biden to make a U-turn is a lot easier said than done, especially when it’s not at all clear that he’s the guy driving the car. “To combat the drag that fear has on the electorate – what I call a ‘fear index’ – Mark Penn writes, “Mr. Biden will have to move in some big and bold ways.” But that’s not going to be easy, either – and not only because of Republican opposition. Biden has another obstacle he has to navigate around: progressives in his own party.

He could have taken them on early in his presidency, he could have discretely put out the word – either directly or through surrogates – that progressives may mean well but are out of touch with most Democrats. He could have pointed out that that they were mostly urban elites who saw America through a dark lens and were obsessed with race and gender and which pronouns were acceptable. But he didn’t say any of that. He owed them too much. After all, when he beat Bernie Sanders for the nomination, Bernie didn’t take his ball and go home – he summoned his “army” to support Biden, support he desperately needed to beat Donald Trump.

Biden ran as a middle-of-the road Democrat but it didn’t take long before he moved left and was proposing trillion dollar spending bills to “fundamentally change” the economy. That may have been music to progressive ears but the tune sounded off key to a lot of Americans, and not only Republicans.

And so now his party is facing a political tsunami. There’s inflation, the biggest issue on the minds of voters and the one that rightly has Democratic congressional candidates in a

panic. Less federal spending might put a dent in inflation, but progressives want more spending, not less. How does Biden deal with that?

Americans are worried about crime. But how does Joe Biden sound like he's tough on crime – and not just on guns – when it's Democrats who are running most American big cities?

When he ran for president in 2020, Biden said cash-bail was a “modern-day debtors’ prison,” and he promised to eliminate it. But even Democrats know that no-cash bail laws, passed by Democratic legislatures, are a big reason there's a crime surge in America. Progressive district attorneys who seems to have more sympathy for criminals than their victims is another reason it's going to be difficult for Biden to “move in some big and bold ways” to convince voters that it's not only the Republican Party that takes crime seriously.

American voters don't want out of control immigration on our southern border. You hear a lot about the chaos on the border from Republicans and increasingly from Democrats, especially the ones facing tough elections in November. But you don't hear much from progressives, who, you get the impression, would be perfectly happy if we just opened the border and let every one in who wants to come in.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the progressive congresswoman from New York, doesn't even like the word “surge” to describe the influx of illegal immigrants coming here from Mexico and Central America. The word, she has said, invokes a “militaristic frame” rooted in “white supremacy.” Last year, speaking to followers on Instagram, she said, “This is not a ‘surge,’ these are children, they are not insurgents. And we are not being invaded. Which, by the way, is a white supremacist idea—the idea that if ‘an other’ is coming in the population, that this is like an invasion of who we are.”

Invoking “white supremacy” every chance they get is part of

the progressive playbook. But most Americans, I suspect, including most Democrats, have had enough; they're tired of hearing about what a racist country America is.

So this is Joe Biden's dilemma, and that of his party: to find a way (if it isn't already too late) to recapture the middle ground – without alienating progressives who they'll need win elections. Democrats don't need a political strategist to get them out of the mess they created for themselves, they need a magician.

Mark Penn ends his piece with another dire warning for his fellow Democrats. “People are afraid of being walloped financially, being injured or menaced by criminals, being in a country without strong borders or Covid protections for immigrants, and being under threat of nuclear weapons. If Mr. Biden and Democratic leaders cannot effectively address these fears, the wave election will hit them in November, and the president will then face a sobering choice of either passing the baton to another candidate in 2024 or finding the bold leadership necessary to reconcile his drive for more progressive policies with the realities of economics, politics and a more dangerous world.”

Joe Biden isn't the first politician to be seduced by the promise of greatness. But if he didn't decide early on to to be “consequential,” to become FDR and LBJ rolled into one – without anything resembling the mandates they both had – he and his party probably wouldn't be in the hot water they're in today. Their only hope to avoid what looks like the inevitable, is for Republicans do something really stupid between now and November. In the technical jargon of politics they call that “a distinct possibility.”