

## Editorials/Op-Ed

**The New York Times**

[NYTimes.com](http://NYTimes.com)

[Go to a Section](#)

Welcome, [ctzcrank](#) - [Member Center](#) - [Log Out](#) - [Help](#)

Site Search:

[Editorials/Op-Ed Home](#) [Editorials](#) [Columnists](#) [Contributors](#) [Letters](#) [New York/Region Opinions](#)

[Op-Ed Columnist](#)

# Calling Democrats' Bluff

[E-Mail This](#)

• [Printer-Friendly](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS  
SPONSORED BY

**millions**  
NOW PLAYING IN THEATERS

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)

Published: May 8, 2005

Don't take people at their word. Don't listen to them when they tell you how to be virtuous.

They're faking it. They don't care about virtue, or you or the common good. They're just taking opportunistic potshots under the guise of sermonizing. They're just a bunch of hypocrites.

This little bit of moral philosophy is drawn from the political events of the past few years.

Over this time, Democrats have been hectoring President Bush in the manner of an overripe Fourth of July orator. The president should be summoning us to make shared sacrifices for the common good. The president should care for the poor, and stop favoring the rich. He should make the hard choices and impose a little fiscal discipline on government.

Sometimes you had to walk through Democratic precincts in a gas mask, the lofty rhetoric was so thick. But now we have definitive proof that they didn't mean it. It was all hokum.

Over the past few weeks, the president has called their bluff. By embracing the progressive indexing of Social Security benefits, the president has asked us to make a shared sacrifice for the common good. He's asking middle- and upper-class folks to accept benefit cuts so there will be money for the people who are really facing poverty.

He has asked us to redistribute money down the income scale. Why should programs for children and families be strangled so Donald Trump can get bigger benefit checks?

He has made the hard choices. By facing up to the fact that there are going to be benefit cuts, he's offended Newt Gingrich, Jack Kemp, the supply siders and other important Republican constituencies.

So how has the St. Francis of Assisi wing of the Democratic Party responded to Bush's challenge? Does it applaud him for doing what it has spent the past years telling him he should do? Of course not.

The Democratic leadership has dropped all that shared sacrifice talk and started making demagogic appeals to people's narrow self-interest. Nancy Pelosi cries out that Bush's progressive indexing idea means "cutting the benefits of middle-class seniors." Representative Sander Levin protests it "would result in the biggest benefit cut in the history of Social Security."

What about the sober chin-pullers - the fiscally prudent worriers and deficit-fearing editorialists? Have they come out and applauded Bush for his courage? Are they mobilizing to take advantage of this moment? No, their silence is deafening.

And what about those moderate Democrats? For two decades they've been courageously saying we need to means-test Social Security, so we can focus our resources on those who need it. Now Bush has embraced their view. Are they saying that since Bush has moved so far in a redistributionist direction that perhaps the Democrats should budge slightly, too? Of course not. They're inventing lame reasons to explain why they shouldn't be for the policy they have been for over the past 20 years. Bush could tell them he loved their mothers and they'd invent reasons to be against him. Politics trumps policy.

George Bush has been willing to address a long-term, politically thorny problem. He's pursued it doggedly while most members of his party wish he would just drop it. But his Democratic counterparts are behaving like alienated junior professors. No productive ideas. No sense of leadership. Just half-truths from the peanut gallery.

This is the difference between the party with a governing mentality and the party with the opposition mentality. The governing party leads. It takes the arrows. It casts about for productive ideas and slowly absorbs the other party's good ones. Bush has now absorbed progressive indexing of retirement benefits.

The opposition party opposes. It doesn't feel any responsibility to come up with positive alternatives. Its main psychological need is to be against its nemesis at all costs. If the governing party steals one of its ideas, it will

oppose that idea.

In this way the opposition party is pushed further and further to the edge. It loses control of its identity - it's simply a negative reactive force to whatever the governing party happens to be doing at the moment. It finds itself in a cycle of opposition, negativity and irrelevance.

This is what's infected the Tories in Britain, and it's infected the Democrats here. When a Republican president embraces progressive indexing, something big is happening. When the Democrats oppose it, you know their party has betrayed an animating ideal.

E-mail: [dabrooks@nytimes.com](mailto:dabrooks@nytimes.com)

## Related Articles

- [U.S. Warns A.F.L.-C.I.O. on Protests About Social Security](#) (May 5, 2005)
- [Seeking Support, Bush Offers Assurances on Retirement Cuts](#) (May 4, 2005)
- [Social Security: Help for the Poor or Help for All?](#) (May 1, 2005)
- [PRESIDENT BUSH'S NEWS CONFERENCE: THE OVERVIEW; BUSH CITES PLAN THAT WOULD CUT SOCIAL SECURITY](#) (April 29, 2005) \$

## Related Topics

- [Bush, George W](#)
- [Social Security \(US\)](#)
- [Democratic Party](#)
- [Republican Party](#)

## Inside NYTimes.com



## [The \(Mis\)Directions of Emir Kusturica](#)



## The Economy's Choppy Waters



## Mothers Lost and Found



## Weddings & Celebrations



## Chopping Off the Weakest Branch

 **Most E-Mailed Articles** *The New York Times*

[Past 24 Hours](#) | [Past 7 Days](#)

1. [Vatican Is Said to Force Jesuit Off Magazine](#)
2. [Maureen Dowd: What Rough Beasts?](#)

3. [Op-Ed Contributor: The Gravest Generation](#)
  4. [Thomas L. Friedman: Tuning in to Jon Stewart, and Britney Schmidt](#)
  5. [The Supersizing of the School Play](#)
- 
1. [Ugly Children May Get Parental Short Shrift](#)
  2. [Thomas L. Friedman: Tuning in to Jon Stewart, and Britney Schmidt](#)
  3. [Republican Chairman Exerts Pressure on PBS, Alleging Biases](#)
  4. [On Education: SAT Essay Test Rewards Length and Ignores Errors](#)
  5. [Bob Herbert: From 'Gook' to 'Raghead'](#)

[Go to Complete List](#)

[Copyright 2005](#) [The New York Times Company](#) [Home](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Search](#) [Corrections](#) [RSS](#) [Help](#) [Contact Us](#)

[Back to Top](#)