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## **Fly High Above the Battlefield**

**By STANLEY B. GREENBERG**

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While John Kerry was vanquishing his Democratic opponents and rising in the national polls, the Republican Party was arming for battle. The president's campaign broadcast its first television advertisements last week, and they depicted George Bush as a steady leader. Mr. Kerry and the Democrats, meanwhile, will be deciding in the next few weeks which issues to embrace in the coming campaign.

Republicans have already begun fighting a culture war; Democrats have begun fighting a class war. One party is talking about gay marriage, the other about corporate greed. But Mr. Kerry should not settle for a campaign waged on such narrow terms.

In 2004, Americans are eager to be engaged in matters of greater significance both to the nation and to their everyday lives. This election will be decided by those voters who care about more than just this debate — those who do not like either Rosie O'Donnell or Kenneth Lay. To break the current political impasse and appeal to these voters, Mr. Kerry should portray this election as a choice between different visions of America. His campaign will surely reflect Democrats' middle-class sensibilities, and be aligned with them, but Mr. Kerry should also take up the public's yearning for opportunity, community, loyalty and patriotism.

But he must act soon. The contours of the Bush campaign are already beginning to take shape, and they are depressingly familiar. The president saw fit to mention the twin scourges of gay marriage and steroid abuse in his State of the Union address, and the Republican-controlled Congress last week scheduled a high-profile vote on gun laws in an effort to portray Mr. Kerry as outside the cultural mainstream.

It is not an unwise strategy. Attacks on Mr. Kerry for his stands on gay marriage, crime and welfare raise "serious doubts" for almost 60 percent of voters, according to a recent national poll. The Republicans' goal is straightforward: to energize and unite their white evangelical and blue-collar male supporters and raise worries about moral decline and an intrusive government.

Yet for all their cultural bravado, Republicans are watching with increasing nervousness the response of voters to job losses and corporate excesses. Mr. Kerry expressed his disdain for corporate special interests and John Edwards bemoaned the "two Americas" to real effect: 56 percent of voters now want to go in a "significantly different direction" on the economy; 64 percent say Mr. Bush is "more for big business than the average person." The doubts about Mr. Bush are especially pronounced in the industrial and rural states, now the electoral battleground.

Thus America is heading toward an election where voters will be asked to choose between protecting jobs or protecting the family. We have seen this movie before — most recently in 2000, when Al Gore declared the election was about the "people versus the powerful" while George Bush pledged to "restore dignity and honor to the White House."

Perhaps the ending this time would be happier for the Democrats, as anxieties about the economy and unemployment are rising. This month 29 percent of voters cited the economy and jobs as their top concern, whereas in October 2000 only 7 percent of voters cited the economy.

But this is a dangerous gamble. Though Mr. Kerry is a Vietnam veteran and decorated war hero, he remains essentially undefined for the public. It's hard to know what coal miners in West Virginia or auto workers in Michigan will think of Mr. Kerry's values after eight months of Republican attacks.

For now, however, only 40 percent of voters think the country is headed in the right direction. According to nearly all public polls, Mr. Kerry is the preferred choice for president, and that prospect may well keep Mr. Kerry from focusing on the larger choice before America. That would be a shame, because voters would respond to such a challenge.

The choice is between an America inspired by John F. Kennedy and one shaped by Ronald Reagan. When the alternatives are framed this way, Americans choose the Kennedy vision by a striking 53 percent to 41 percent. It brings increased support for Democrats among voters from across the political spectrum — in small towns and rural areas, in older blue-collar communities, among low-wage and unmarried women as well as young voters and women with a college degree.

Rather than simply criticizing specific policies of the Bush administration, Mr. Kerry should emphasize the worldview it represents. Mr. Bush favors tax cuts for business and the wealthy as the best way to bring about prosperity. He heralds individualism as the key to a healthy community. In his tenure America has retreated at home before our shared problems, but advanced alone abroad. If Mr. Kerry challenges this worldview, Mr. Bush will be forced to defend it.

And the public, far from yearning for a return to Reaganism, is looking for a return to community and country, to a time when every citizen mattered. This is not just John Edwards's vision of an America without class barriers, but a desire for a return to a time of rising opportunity, when people learned responsibility and a commitment to community and nation.

After two decades of growing income inequality, people are desperate for policies that raise the middle class. After this period of corporate excess, people are yearning for loyalty and commitment to country. After 9/11, Americans were eager to work for the common good. President Bush squandered his opportunity to tap into this impulse. But it still exists.

John F. Kennedy represents an apt legacy for these times. He believed that one task of government was to ensure that all shared in America's bounty. Yet he also reminded Americans that they had an obligation to serve their country and their community. John Kerry should reclaim this tradition.

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