Another Battle for the Soul of the Democratic Party

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Posted: April 22, 2010 02:28 PM

Governor Ed Rendell's comments this week about the Democratic Party were, "I think we have lost our soul. We have been cowed into [sic] stop talking about the things that made us Democrats in the first place; that we believe the government can and should make a difference in people's lives; that we can protect the most vulnerable in our society; that we can, in fact, give opportunities to people who haven't had it," are noteworthy not for their content but because they could have been said at almost any point in at least the last half century. Moreover, they could have been said by almost any prominent Democrat.

The so called battle for the soul of the Democratic Party is an issue that never seems to go away. Progressive primary challengers, grassroots activists and other groups have all sought to win back the soul of the Democratic Party from centrist or conservative Democrats in power. Rendell's comments could have applied in the 1950s due to the Democratic timidity on Civil Rights, in the 1960s because of either timidity on Civil Rights or the Vietnam War (for which President Johnson was a strong advocate), in the 1970s or 1990s because of the centrist presidencies and policies of Presidents Carter and Clinton, and in the 1980s and 2000s because of the failure of Democrats in Congress to stand up to either Presidents Reagan or Bush.

Rendell's decision to make these comments now, at a time when the sitting Democratic president is attacked almost daily as a socialist, might seem strange, but it is not. President Obama, like every Democratic president, has veered to the center and upset the party's progressive base, so in that regard Rendell's comments are not entirely apropos of nothing. Rendell, however, is something of a strange messenger for this sentiment. As a governor and former chair of the DNC, Rendell is, as much as anybody, a Democratic Party insider, not a firebrand outsider trying to shake up the party. If Rendell really believed that the party was losing its soul, he might have said or done something about it at some point in the last several years.

Rendell cannot really be faulted because he is doing what Democratic leaders frequently do. In the past week or so alone Vice President Joseph Biden expressed his concern that the Democratic Party has sold out the middle class, while former President Bill Clinton tried to apologize for turning the soul of the party over to Wall Street while he was president. While it is somewhat disingenuous for people in positions of power to bemoan the course the party has taken -- one is tempted to suggest that Vice President Biden should save his angry speeches and work harder for the middle class -- people like Biden, Rendell and Clinton are also expressing genuine frustration when they make these remarks.

Unlike the Republican Party, which believes in a clear model of small government and corporate socialism, the Democratic Party, particularly on economic issues, is largely rudderless. A general sense of wanting to help the needy buttressed by a concern about upsetting economic elites who are very powerful within the party is not exactly a guiding political principle. It is more of a constant balancing act for Democratic leaders, one which is very frustrating for them. The
narratives about battles for the soul of the Democratic Party are part of the process of balancing and rebalancing.

Similarly, the Democratic Party has no real history as the anti-war party. To the contrary, Democrats have a longer internationalist history than the Republicans do. Vietnam, to pick the most egregious example, was the product of the Cold War liberalism of the Johnson and Kennedy administration, not right wing Republicans. It should also not be overlooked that in the early 1940s, the Democrats were the more hawkish party as well, as much of the Republican Party was committed to a more isolationist foreign policy at that time. In the 1940s, however, the Democrats got it right.

The alleged battle for the soul of the Democratic Party has been around for a long time and may continue for a long time, but it cannot be resolved. Nobody can win the soul of the party because the party has no real soul. There are no real core principles to which the party ascribes either currently or historically. The party has careened from pro-business to populist rhetoric and from hawkish to dovish rhetoric on foreign policy in recent years, and throughout most of its existence. This is the nature of the Democratic Party. It stands for little besides being better than the Republicans. Thus the notion of a Democratic Party soul can only be temporary, depending on who is running the party at any given moment, but it cannot be decisively won or lost or even identified.