

The Domestic Abuse Cycle: A Framework for Our Politics and a Path Forward

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Part One

I was watching a clip of Bill Maher and Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff (whom I like very much) discussing Donald Trump's firing of former F.B.I. Director James Comey and Schiff lamented he was "too nice". That's when it hit me: the dynamic between the GOP and the Democratic Party fits perfectly into the frame of domestic abuse. The GOP leadership is the battering husband. The Democratic leadership is the battered wife. And American citizens are the battered children.

Per *The 4 Stages of Battered Woman's Syndrome*, (<http://marriage.laws.com/domestic-violence/battered-person-syndrome/stages-of-battered-womens-syndrome/stages-of-battered-womans-syndrome>) battering situations follow a 4-step pattern:

1. Denial
2. Guilt
3. Enlightenment
4. Responsibility

To summarize: initially the victim can't believe what's happening (*denial*). She doesn't want to admit her partner is abusing her. She makes excuses, she rationalizes — he won't do it again. But he does. Then she moves on to *guilt*. Guilt is a co-process: the batterer says he beats her because of things she's done or not done and she accepts his rationale. He employs various manipulations to keep her submissive, with low self-esteem. She internalizes the notion his behavior is her fault and accepts blame for her lot. But eventually

something helps her recognize the batterer's behavior is abnormal — nothing she does warrants such treatment. She realizes the behavior is abusive (*enlightenment*). Finally she realizes the batterer is responsible for his battering; taking responsibility for his behavior is a form of enabling. She accepts she cannot stop the batterer — only he can choose to stop (*responsibility*). With this realization she may finally take steps to escape.

How does this relate to American politics?

Over the last 40-plus years, a constellation of conservative organizations have arisen: FOX News; radio, print and online media outlets; think tanks and pacs; and rightwing websites. I refer to them collectively as the rightwing-media-machine. Separately there are the elected leaders, operatives, donors, etc., who “run” the Republican Party (GOP for short). The GOP and the rightwing-media-machine once traveled on parallel tracks, but now the machine is an acknowledged arm of the Republican Party. For more than forty years people in this gestalt have been circulating propaganda extolling conservative positions, denigrating liberals, and perfecting tactics against Democrats that mirror the behaviors and outcomes of domestic abusers.

Republican abuse is more than the sum of its parts; *it is the construction of a warped environment.*

In domestic violence situations the abuser, through the use of multiple tactics, **conditions** the victim to accept the situation she's experiencing as “normal”. One of the definitions of acceptance is “willingness to tolerate a difficult or unpleasant situation”. Another definition is: “the action or process of being received as adequate or suitable”.

This is what Republicans have achieved. Republicans have conditioned us to accept a world in which they are held responsible for nothing while Democrats are held responsible for everything, including malicious acts performed against them.

It's as if the two parties are playing a football game in which Republicans start at the Democrats' five yard line, Republicans have an unlimited number of downs, the referees are Republican, and Republicans are allowed to zap Democrats with tasers. Everyone wonders why the Republicans so often win, *but no one questions the rules.* That has to change.

Abusive Behaviors by Republicans, a Sampling

Over time members working within the GOP/media-machine have developed a full toolbox of abuse tactics, but the foundation is *dishonesty*.

Dishonesty is at the core of modern conservatism and is the lynchpin of most GOP abuse. This cannot be overstated. Republicans lie. Some more than others. Some more blatantly than others. They lie routinely, publicly and shamelessly. They cover for each others' lies. Serial, documented conservative liars pay little to no professional price or are actively rewarded, mostly within the conservative universe, but not entirely. Corey Lewandowski and Sean Spicer were both just awarded Visiting Fellows slots at Harvard.

Why does the GOP need to be dishonest? What problem does it solve?

Simple: Conservative policies, when presented honestly and accurately, are unpopular with majorities of Americans.

So you either change your policies, which conservatives have been unwilling to do, OR, you misrepresent those policies; distract attention from their implementation and create scapegoats to be blamed for unpopular policy outcomes.

Thus, over time more and more Republicans have embraced the use of misinformation and disinformation: Hillary Clinton murdered Vince Foster. Birtherism. Death Panels. Obama wants your guns. Pizzagate. George Soros pays people to (fill in the blank). Much of the junk is peddled — initially — by the hard-right but such slurs are often used, and virtually never condemned, by the GOP leadership.

Republicans make demonstrably false claims about their policies and legislation. They've lied repeatedly about how the ACA works and how it was developed. They've lied repeatedly about their Repeal and Replace efforts. They suppress factual data that exposes their falsehoods; they suppress studies, they shut down or defund departments performing research or work that counters their policy preferences; they attack the CBO. They invent rules like presidents-don't-seat-Supreme-Court-judges-during-an-election-year to justify their extreme obstruction.

On the religious right, anti-choice activists lie about everything related to abortion. They open deceptive clinics aimed at fooling women. They vigorously promote lies about Planned Parenthood. They suppress information about birth control and promote laws premised on falsehoods.

Republicans have been lying with impunity for so long now it often appears they literally don't know they're doing it. Some have lost the ability to separate fact from fiction. Some lie out of ignorance. Some lie out of malice. Some lie because it works. Some don't lie publicly, they just take advantage of the lies of others. **Republicans lie to obfuscate the outcomes of GOP preferred policies and to damage Democrats because Democrats point out the outcomes of GOP policies.**

In my next segment I will describe how Republicans use the following tactics:

- Demonization
- Disrespect/Dehumanization
- Gaslighting
- Investigations
- Voter Suppression
- Opposition Suppression
- Intimidation and Violence

But today I'll conclude with this point: Republican abuse is more than the sum of its parts; *it is the construction of a warped environment.*

The Domestic Abuse Cycle: A Framework for Our Politics and a Path Forward

Part Two

In Part One I set up the premise that the GOP uses tactics against Democrats that mirror the behaviors and outcomes of domestic abusers, conditioning us to accept a world in which they are held responsible for

nothing while Democrats are held responsible for everything, including malicious acts performed against them. I discussed dishonesty, the foundational tactic Republicans use to overcome their primary problem which is that their preferred policies, when described honestly and accurately, are unpopular with majorities of Americans. Today I'll run through the rest of their basic toolbox. Please note: the examples I offer barely scratch the surface as the material is, sadly, so plentiful.

Demonization: Members of the GOP/rightwing-machine continuously vilify, malign, denigrate and slur Democrats and anyone considered part of the left. They don't speak in terms of policy disagreements or philosophical differences, they aggressively assert people on the left hate America, are libtards, coddle terrorists, are lazy moochers, are unemployed losers, are violent and criminally inclined, etc. Such speech has profoundly negative consequences, especially when used consistently and publicly over long periods. This is how "liberal" became a dirty word. **Republicans demonize Democrats to weaken democratic appeal to the public and keep Democrats on the defensive.**

Disrespect and Dehumanization: Elizabeth Warren is interrupted and silenced when speaking on the floor of the Senate. Kamala Harris is interrupted and silenced when questioning witnesses at committee hearings. Throughout the Republican universe dehumanizing racist, sexist, anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ invective and behavior is tolerated and even encouraged. Much of the Republican platform is geared toward limiting the rights of women, people of color, non-Christian, and non-straight Americans. Republican's automatically respect only white, male Christians — all others are offered provisional respect at best, and often none at all. Donald Trump's support of overt white supremacists helped publicize the more covert support of many GOP leaders and functionaries. **Republicans disrespect and dehumanize Democrats to make policies that harm Democratic constituencies more palatable to other Republicans.**

Gaslighting: Gaslighting is a collection of manipulative tricks used to enable one person to define the reality of another while contradicting the other's own feelings and experiences. Gaslighters attack and then deny attacking; they assign absurd and malicious motivations for harmless or well-intended actions. Gaslighters tell you what you're feeling but their assessments are deliberately false. Similarly, Republicans continually accuse Democrats of supporting positions and activities for offensive and ridiculous reasons. According to Republicans, Democrats support Planned Parenthood because they enjoy dismembering live babies (remember the doctored anti-PP video.) Democrats clamber over homeless veterans to help Syrian refugees. Democrats want to ban Christianity because they hate God. **Republicans gaslight to keep Democrats on the defensive and prevent honest political debate.**

Investigations: Republicans love to convene investigations. First they make an accusation, then they begin investigating it. This means their quarry, Democrats, will have to lawyer-up and spend time and money defending themselves. It is a form of harassment they use because they can. Ken Starr spent millions investigating the Clintons and his result? Monica Lewinsky. (Remember [ACORN?](#) Fast-forward to the Benghazi investigations — all of them, all concluding the same thing: no criminal or professional misconduct, no intent to mislead. Even now, while Republicans excuse Donald Trump's possible crimes, some threaten to reopen investigations featuring President Obama or Hillary Clinton. Why? Because such investigations distract from harm being done by Republicans in real time. Because accusations tarnish the accused, even when the accused is found innocent. **Republicans use investigations to harass and defame Democrats.**

Voter Suppression: In states, redistricting, gerrymandering and voter suppression tactics keep Republicans in office in the face of voter dissatisfaction. Federally, the GOP wants to defund the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Currently Jeff Sessions' Department of Justice is backing voter purges in states.

Simultaneously Kris Kobach has been invited, through the thoroughly dishonest Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, to take his Kansas-based voter suppression efforts nationwide.

Republicans use their positional-powers to forcibly maintain control.

Opposition Suppression: Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker and the Republican controlled legislature overturned laws and rules that limited their powers. North Carolina Republican legislators have made several attempts to disempower Democratic Governor Roy Cooper. Republicans have passed laws limiting protest activity. Congressional Republicans bar Democrats from their Town Halls. **Republicans use positional-powers to quell legitimate opposition.**

Intimidation and Violence: Republican leaders and media figures have uttered threats against Democrats and Democratic constituents. They consort with groups who threaten and attack Democrats. Hate crimes have shot up since Trump's election. Newly minted Congressman Gianforte attacked a reporter. Democrats involved in resistance actions are threatened online. In Iowa, a Democratic challenger to Rep. Steve King dropped out due to death threats. In Syracuse NY a Democratic Mayoral candidate dropped out after being threatened and stalked. Donald Trump encourages violence against protesters and reporters and refused to condemn Nazis and white supremacists after Charlottesville. While a handful of Republicans were moved to respond publicly to Charlottesville, most went underground. **Republicans use threats, intimidation and violence to subdue opposition.**

Domestic abuse situations typically morph gradually from a romantic to an abusive dynamic. Usually battering commences after a build-up characterized by escalating verbal abuse and controlling behavior which conditions the victim to endure rather than escape. Similarly, I think the Republican Abuse Playbook has grown, gradually and organically, evolving as different tactics were tried by different individuals and groups and found to be effective. But the result is plain: years of unchecked Republican abuse has generated a set of norms granting Republicans broad license to use tactics against Democrats that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago.

In Part Three I will discuss Democratic responses to Republican abuse.

The Domestic Abuse Cycle: A Framework for Our Politics and a Path Forward

Part Three

In Part One I introduced my premise: The GOP uses tactics against Democrats that mirror the behaviors and outcomes of domestic abusers and described the foundational tactic: dishonesty. In Part Two I discussed the rest of the Republican abuse toolbox:

- Demonization
- Disrespect/Dehumanization
- Gaslighting
- Investigations
- Voter Suppression
- Opposition Suppression
- Intimidation and Violence

Today's topic:

Democratic Response to Republican Abuse

Attorney Joy Wagner represents battered women seeking divorce. I spoke to her about the abuse dynamic and she said: “These women become constrained by their coping mechanisms.”

Constrained by their coping mechanisms.

If a woman definitively rejects an abuser at the first manifestation of abuse, the cycle can't start; but once she chooses to cope, the cycle begins.

The GOP gradually established a pattern of abusive behaviors.

Rather than forcefully rejecting abuse Democratic leaders opted to cope.

Why? I can't know what's in the hearts and minds of Democratic leaders, past or present. And there are undoubtedly a mixture of beliefs, rationales and calculations at work. But I think the crux has been disbelief. We just can't process the idea that GOP elected leaders knowingly, consciously, do harm.

For years most Democrats (at all levels) have personified the battering phases of denial and guilt. We've resisted admitting Republicans act deliberately when they lie, deploy disinformation, bully, cheat, and terrorize. We rationalize bad behaviors — all of us know “nice Republicans”. Our leaders work with people who vote for abuses but aren't themselves abusive, and Democrats/Liberals are predisposed to give others the benefit of the doubt.

We care about people, including Republicans who would hurt us. Similarly, when Republicans level spurious charges at Democrats we wait for evidence to clear the accused because we believe in the rule of law (and if wrong-doing has occurred we want to know). But by the time innocence is confirmed the damage has already been done.

Republicans successfully turned our greatest strengths: caring for others and respect for the law, against us, and we unknowingly enabled them — ignoring, downplaying, excusing, rationalizing and accepting responsibility for their actions.

How many times have you thought: “If only I could explain this better, they (the Republicans) would agree / change their mind / vote for us?”

How many hours have you wasted arguing with Republicans, only to be gaslighted with conspiracy theories, lies, goal-post-moving and ad hominem attacks? How many hours have you wasted fruitlessly refuting false arguments with facts?

How many times have you said or heard: “yeah but if we do that, what will conservatives do/say? What will they say on FOX?”

As Emailgate went on and on, how many of us said: “yes, but if she hadn't used that server...”

Yes, but...

The abuser's creed is: “I wouldn't have hit you if you hadn't made me mad.” How many variations of that reasoning have Democrats accepted from Republicans?

Bill and Hillary Clinton (and associates and friends) endured a relentless and unprecedented assault throughout the Clinton presidency. If you didn't live through that era you can read about it in the book [*The Hunting of the President*](#) by Joe Conason.

That was when Republicans refined their fake-scandal-manufacturing-and-investigating tactics. This era was also notable for the emergence of cable news and conservative radio (the Fairness Doctrine was abolished in 1987). These new media ventures perfectly complemented the efforts of anti-Clintonites, ensuring people everywhere heard about every single-eventually-disproven-allegation. (Except for Monica Lewinsky.) Democrats failed to appreciate the ramifications of this burgeoning alliance on the right. Hillary Clinton accurately identified the “vast right-wing conspiracy” but was mocked and dismissed.

Republicans (backed by the rightwing-media-machine) learned they could get away with abusive behaviors because the media stood down and Democratic leaders didn't mount an effective response. Republicans engineered the placement of GW Bush as President through an infamous 5-4 Supreme Court decision. Democratic leaders acquiesced. Then GW Bush conducted a presidency considered (until Donald Trump) the worst in modern history. Throughout the Bush years Democratic leaders offered deference to institutional norms and traditions while Bush, Cheney and GOP leaders broke rules, laws and precedents. And throughout this time the GOP/media-machine continued its work to demonize, gaslight, suppress, control and intimidate Democrats.

By the time Barack Obama was elected, the battering syndrome was firmly entrenched. Democrats, Republicans (and most of the media and public) had fully internalized the dynamic that Republicans were free to behave ever more badly and Democrats were expected to be “the grownups”, ever reasonable, always trying to cajole and convince the GOP, the media and the public that Republican behavior was irrelevant, and what really mattered was policy differences.

Barack Obama spent his first term reaching out to Republicans, only to be blatantly rebuffed and mistreated. By his second term his behavior changed; he concentrated on using his Executive powers to advance his goals, having presumably concluded Congress was a lost cause.

He was right. While congressional and senatorial Republicans elevated obstruction to an art form: blocking actions by Obama which they'd previously supported; refusing to approve judges and nominees; sitting at State of the Union addresses, stone-faced and disrespectful (with Joe Wilson screaming “You Lie!”); conducting redundant Benghazi investigations, Democratic leaders remained reasoned, occasionally impassioned, and largely ineffectual.

Their responses were always specific, aimed at individual affronts. It never (seemingly) occurred to anyone to develop a strategy to deal with the underlying pattern of abuse – I think this is because Democrats weren't aware there WAS a pattern of abuse.

An aside about Tolerance

As people I know have been interacting with Trump supporters and struggling with how to respond, the topic of tolerance comes up a lot. Tolerance IS a core democratic value. BUT! - and this is a big BUT! - tolerance requires reciprocity. If you and your neighbor agree to disagree about something, and treat each other civilly despite your differences, that is tolerance in action. But if you are civil and your neighbor is abusive, tolerance is a non-starter. If you are afraid of your neighbor it's simply easier to be civil and limit your interactions. But you'd likely not confuse your fear with tolerance. Similarly, if you are exchanging thoughts with a Republican, and they begin using GOP abuse tactics, continued “niceness” on your part isn't tolerance, it is masochistic and enabling.

You enable by protecting a person from the consequences of his or her negative or destructive actions. It

may be that Democrats expected media figures and the public to lodge sufficient objections to Republican stunts, relieving Democratic leaders of the burden. But as a citizen I remember wanting my leaders to much more forcefully push back against various republican acts. For instance, during the Bush/Gore recount drama I remember when a group of republicans went to Florida and physically forced citizens who were recounting votes, to stop. I was aghast and furious. These were the infamous butterfly ballots and at tables you had a Democrat and a Republican looking at ballots one at a time and coming to agreement about who the person had selected. To me, there's nothing was more fundamentally democratic than letting citizens count votes. But they were stopped, by an aggressive group of Republican men. As we say so often these days, can you imagine what Republicans and their media surrogates would do if the position was reversed? But Democrats did NOT object, at least, with any force. They didn't defend the process, or confront Republican bullying.

Enabling prolongs bad behavior and increases the risk others will be harmed. Joe Paterno and others enabled Jerry Sandusky to continue molesting boys.

Similarly Democrats' enabling had the inevitable result: Republicans have been emboldened to escalate their abuse. In domestic situations, as abuse continues the victim sinks into a state of resignation; living in fear becomes normal — the abuser's behavior has become accepted. That is where Democrats have lived for years. Democrats have turned themselves inside-out, trying to figure out what combination of messaging and targeting will bring electoral success. But they have steadfastly ignored and underestimated the harm done to them and the country by Republican tactics. And now we're here. We have Nazis marching in our streets, daily episodes of harassment around the country. We have a serial liar, sexual predator and criminal in the white house, surrounded by grifters, criminals, loons and incompetents. Republican office-holders are either AWOL or complicit in one horrible act after another.

Fortunately many Americans began resisting almost immediately after the election, but especially after the Women's March the day after the inauguration. Democratic leaders, who initially seemed rudderless and inclined to be conciliatory, drew strength from their constituents and formed a united front. They are playing defense as well as they can, but to really turn this mess around they have to go on the offensive.

Next up: The Media's role and the need for Democratic Enlightenment.

The Domestic Abuse Cycle: A Framework for Our Politics and a Path Forward

Part Four

Part One I introduced my premise: GOP uses tactics against Democrats that mirror the behaviors and outcomes of domestic abusers, creating a warped environment. In Part Two I described and gave examples of these tactics and in Part Three I described the ineffective response by Democrats, who, like domestic abuse victims, have been choosing to cope with, rather than reject, GOP abuse. Today I'll address **The Media's Role and Democratic Enlightenment**.

Let me start with this caveat: there are a number of reasons for media failures – they've been analyzed at length, by many and are, largely, outside the scope of this essay. I will summarize the primary drivers as:

1. Repeal of the Fairness Doctrine
2. Purchase of media outlets by for-profit companies and the accompanying shift from “News as Public Service” to “News as Profit-Center”.

3. Media Consolidation
4. Media's reaction to the successful conservative effort to tar journalists as liberal and therefore automatically biased.

Point 4 is especially relevant to my larger theme, so, to resume:

In researching domestic abuse, I learned: [“Sexual Abuse is the least frequently reported form of child abuse and is believed to be the most under-reported type of child maltreatment because of the secrecy or conspiracy of silence that so often characterizes these cases.”](#)

The “conspiracy of silence” refers to adults who look the other way or disbelieve a child who reports abuse. (The movie *Spotlight* dramatizes the exposure of a conspiracy of silence. The saga of Joe Paterno, Penn State and Jerry Sandusky is another.)

In an analogous form, the bulk of the mainstream media participates in conspiracy-of-silence-like behaviors.

When covering politics reporters/editors adopt a position of “neutrality”, normalizing Republican abuse through uncritical amplification.

Again: When covering politics reporters/editors adopt a position of “neutrality”, normalizing Republican abuse through uncritical amplification.

Republicans accuse Hillary Clinton of some absurdity, for instance, and instead of questioning the absurdity, media figures dutifully report the accusations, thereby lending them legitimacy. The refusal to evaluate the accusations or the track-records of the accusers is a noisy form of “silence” — major media has been silent on the question of *validity*. Neutrality also led to the widespread use of “false equivalency” in reporting, whereby reporters (or their editors) feel compelled to include some variation of “both sides do it” in stories that would otherwise reflect badly on the GOP. False equivalency obscures and dilutes understanding of the reach and depth of Republican abuse by redirecting the discussions to Democrats' committing “similar” acts. Donald Trump's numerous misdeeds were consistently partnered with references to Hillary Clinton's single “misdeed”: using a private email server.

Donald Trump's election both confounded the media and reminded members they have a responsibility to the public beyond ratings and ad sales. Trump's cries of “Fake News” inspired an upsurge in serious investigative reporting and a renewed emphasis on accuracy and honesty. Democrats can make good use of this development assuming they reach the *enlightenment and responsibility* phases of the abuse pattern.

Democrats: Meet Enlightenment

“It's hard for people to really see what's going on when they're in the midst of it,” said Attorney Joy Wagner. “The denial is unbelievable. The victims' views of reality become really skewed.”

Statistically battered women average 6 attempts before they finally sever relations with abusive partners. Their ultimate success depends, she says, on “how accurate their perception of reality is or becomes.”

The reality Democrats must perceive is the *holistic nature* of Republican abuse — it is a strategy with many interlocking components which keep Democrats entangled in defensive maneuvers, constantly fighting a perpetual stream of individual fires. And, as in domestic situations, longstanding abuse skews people's perceptions about what is normal and tolerable. Democrats are accustomed to living in this abusive environment. *Everyone* is accustomed to living in this abusive environment; collectively we operate as

though Republicans-behaving-badly-and-getting-away-with-it is some sort of natural law, like gravity. The abuse is so ingrained we (including the media) don't question it. We may remark / report on specific instances of abuse but in the same way we lament a coming hurricane — there will be unavoidable damage but we can't stop the hurricane from coming. But GOP abuse can and should be stopped.

Democrats: Meet Responsibility

Victims of abuse are empowered to change their situations once they place the responsibility for the abuse on the abuser. Republicans are fully responsible for their abuses and the consequences thereof. We can't control Republicans but we can control ourselves and we must stop enabling by excusing, ignoring, down-playing or tolerating abusive tactics.

The Way Forward

We begin by getting a firm grip on the essential problem: the Republican Party's abuse tactics work synergistically to envelope Democrats in an endless loop of outrages, keeping us on the defensive, interfering with our ability to make our aspirations clear and known, and diverting our energy from more constructive activities. Republican abuse confuses and discourages the apolitical and low-information citizen; brainwashes the rightwing base, and enrages, frightens and demoralizes Democrats and/or left-leaning Independents.

The GOP/media-machine presents a formidable challenge. The machine provides continuous cover for GOP abuses. Literally within minutes after some questionable GOP action is reported you will hear, see and read the same explanation / justification / deflection from all corners of the Republican media universe. (Notice how suddenly every third "conservative" you know on Facebook was suddenly *very concerned about the loss of history* in the wake of confederate statue removal? That wasn't accidental.) Similarly, when a Republican attacks a Democrat, the machine ensures the attack is circulated widely and defended uniformly. Through their consistency Republican's perpetuate their frames — the media follows their leads about what is important and what can be ignored.

Democrats must recognize the insidiously skewed nature of our political environment and judge it unacceptable. They must learn to spot Republican abuse tactics in action and refuse to retreat to enabling responses.

Next up: Moving from defense to offense.

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Part Five

In Part One I introduced my premise: GOP uses tactics against Democrats that mirror the behaviors of domestic abusers, creating a warped environment. In Part Two I gave examples of these tactics and in Part Three I described the ineffective response by Democrats. In Part Four is talked about how the media amplifies rather than evaluates GOP abuses, and how democrats need to recognize this dynamic. Today I will begin discussing how Democrats can move from a defensive to an offensive position.

Let's start with:

The Donald Trump Factor

Republican abuse culminated in the appalling presidency of Donald Trump. Trump and his fanatical base is the monster the GOP created but can't control. The Trump-machine took the Republican abuse playbook, ratcheted it up to 11, and now alternates between turning it on Democrats and on the "Republican Establishment". Republicans didn't budget for that and the GOP/media-machine is sputtering.

During the Obama administration, having clear targets (President Obama, Harry Reid, Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton) kept the GOP leadership focused. But problems were festering outside the beltway. Republican obstruction pleased the base but didn't solve problems affecting their lives, and media outlets like Breitbart News began attracting hard right Republicans. Other fissures, between evangelicals, libertarians, and "moderate" Republicans kept the party from finding a clear frontrunner during the Republican primaries. Trump squeaked through and the GOP leadership chose to back him (however reluctantly), with the hopes they could both manage him and enjoy a legislative windfall.

But Trump's antics have exacerbated the preexisting cracks in the GOP monolith. Republican leaders are confronted daily by behaviors even they can't support, and Trump keeps mangling Republican legislation as well as moves made by his own appointees. Republican leaders don't know, from day to day, what they're supposed to be for or against, and their justifications for Trump's exploits are increasingly untenable. Trump's campaign to delegitimize the media has created its own backlash and media disgust with Republican weaseling is at an all-time high.

Meanwhile Trump's administration motivated Democrats nationwide to resist, and citizen resistance stiffened the spines of Democratic leaders. It is the perfect time for a reboot.

Democrats as Champions

If Democrats can understand the abuse environment we're enmeshed in and reject enabling response patterns, we can transition from beleaguered defenders to champions for Americans.

We've always had Democratic fighters and Democratic victories but problems within the party weren't recognized. Crucially, on the economic front Democrats absorbed the beliefs conservatives spent years pumping into the body politic. Democrats had no competing think tanks, no ALEC writing legislation for state representatives nationwide. Economic policy offerings from both parties were filtered through conservative frames. The most fundamental conservative frame is monetary gains must be pushed upward versus shared. The result has been severe income inequality, widespread wage stagnation, and increasing financial insecurity for most Americans.

Republicans succeeded because they had a few simple ideas (trickle-down economics, deficits are bad, etc.) and they've pushed them, consistently, for decades. Democrats didn't promote any ideas consistently, didn't coordinate messaging, didn't create institutions to perform liberal-idea-research-and-development. Democrats mistakenly assumed Americans understood what Democrats stand for, understood the value of the New Deal, understood how democracies work. But all the while Republicans were actively undermining those assumptions.

We've done better on social issues, in part because activists drove and Democratic leaders followed. So while we've won many battles we've been losing the war. The combination of Republican single-mindedness and Republican abusiveness has been hugely successful in terms of offices won and legislation passed. If you measure success by positive effects on the country, however, the GOP victories are pyrrhic.

The problem has been Democrats' misreading of the terrain. While Democrats fought countless separate skirmishes the Republicans marched in lockstep across the land contaminating the political environment. Metaphorically, Democrats upheld the Geneva Conventions while Republicans discarded them. It is time to demand decent standards of political behavior.

Set Standards

Democrats must recapture the idea that we have a right to hold and act on our political beliefs without being demonized, threatened or coerced. We also have a right to vote, with the expectation our voting system(s) will be secure, fair, and protected from interference. We have a right to expect honesty and transparency from our elected and appointed leaders. We have a right to a fair playing field, where the rules are known and obeyed by everyone. We have a right to a seat at the table when policies that will affect us are being considered.

All citizens have these rights. In a healthy political environment people can present their positions without fear; debates can be passionate without being hostile, and leaders can work together to find optimal solutions to problems, blending the best elements of multiple viewpoints.

Republican abuses directly conflict with these rights, and that is the context through which they should be countered.

Next up: some specific messaging and tactical suggestions for Democratic office-holders and seekers, and activists, pundits, etc.

The Domestic Abuse Cycle: A Framework for Our Politics and a Path Forward

Part Six

Part One I introduced my premise: GOP uses tactics against Democrats that mirror the behaviors of domestic abusers, creating a warped environment. In Part Two I gave examples of these tactics and in Part Three I described the ineffective response by Democrats. In Part Four I talked about how the media amplifies rather than evaluates GOP abuses, and how Democrats need to recognize this dynamic. In Part Five I covered how Democrats can move from a defensive to an offensive position by reintroducing to the public what decent standards of political behavior should be. Today I will propose additional tactics Democrats can use to that end.

Democrats can:

Unite around a core set of Meta-Messages

We need to communicate a set of clear points with a positive conclusion. For example:

1. Republicans practice Abusive Politics, harming our country
2. Democrats will no longer participate in Abusive Politics
3. Democrats believe in Democracy
4. Republicans cling to past failures; Democrats look to future successes
5. Republicans seek Win/Lose solutions
6. Democrats seek Win/Win solutions

Democrats should point out Republican tactics:

- Demonization and Dehumanization
- Disrespect
- Dishonesty
- Gaslighting
- Harassment by Investigation
- Suppression
- Intimidation and Violence

We can describe Republican initiatives through the lens of political abuse and then offer a contrasting vision using the characteristics of a healthy, functioning democracy:

- Respect for all citizens and celebration of diversity
- Honesty
- Transparency
- Responsible governing; responsible exercise of official powers
- Representative government versus autocracy/theocracy
- Separation of Church and State
- Zero tolerance for political intimidation and violence.

Demand Respect

When notable Republicans show disrespect to Democratic leaders or constituencies, Democratic leaders should condemn the behavior widely. When a female senator or congresswoman is harassed by a Republican during committee hearings or debates, the next male Democrat should yield his time to her. Democratic leaders should creatively emphasize they won't tolerate disrespect to themselves or other Democrats.

Call Lies "Lies"

When Republicans lie, say so. Democrats must stress Republicans routinely lie to obfuscate their motives, actions and outcomes.

No More Benefit of the Doubt

Republicans have lost the right to a presumption of good faith.

While many Republicans avoid participating directly (or publicly) in the worst excesses of GOP abuse, they benefit from the abuse enacted by others. They vote for abusive policies (such as Voter Repression measures), and they don't condemn the abusive tactics used by other Republicans. The apparent "decency" of quietly complicit Republicans plays into the Democratic tendency to "give people the benefit of the doubt" and that has to stop. Democrats must understand the "nice" Republican lawmakers and pundits provide cover for their flame-throwing associates. They also act as a bridge – Democrats reaching out to "nice Republicans" legitimizes Republican positions which are generally not nice at all. The role of the "Nice" Republican is to soften the appearance, versus the reality, of Republican policy objectives.

Democrats can be cordial to their GOP counterparts while comprehending apparently nice people can do atrocious things. Whether operating out of greed, malice or ignorance, when Republicans announce they support something terrible, Democrats should take them literally and react accordingly.

Don't Make Deals with Liars

Deals made with liars has betrayal baked in. Democrats should make no deals contingent on promises of future actions by Republicans.

Democrats shouldn't support a bad nominee out of fear the next will be worse; they should demand appropriate standards be met. Cooperation with bad options creates the impression of "bipartisanship" which lets Republicans off the hook. Make Republicans own the bad things they do.

Expose the Machine

The Republican machine works often works covertly. Money flows from billionaires like the Koch Brothers and Mercers to innocent-sounding orgs and pacs and think tanks, who develop ideas and arguments that will be used by Rightwing media figures. Sinclair Broadcasting buys up radio and television stations around the country and promotes Christianist politics through local media outlets. Along the way internet bots are unleashed on Facebook and Twitter, promoting conservative ideas and fomenting conflicts on the left. ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council, backed by the Kochs and others, and funded by large corporations) writes extreme "business-friendly-anti-regulation" legislation and hands it off to Republican state representatives.

A few days ago (as of this writing in late September) we learned The Republican Governors Association created a false-front "News" site to circulate conservative propaganda. From the [Chicago Tribune article](#): "The Free Telegraph blares headlines about the virtues of GOP governors, while framing Democrats negatively. It asks readers to sign up for breaking news alerts. It launched in the summer bearing no acknowledgement that it was a product of an official party committee whose sole purpose is to get more Republicans elected."

Democrats need to unmask covert activities and groups sponsored by and/or serving Republicans. When appearing in public opposite conservative mouthpieces they should go armed with the credentials of these people, including their employers and the groups and individuals who fund them and when appropriate, provide that information.

Democrats should start publicly identifying ALEC-sponsored legislation and beat the drum that Republican representatives are promoting bills written by a corporate-backed legislation factory. Democrats need to point out ALEC-sponsored talking points. They need to start seriously opposing media consolidation and shining a light on Sinclair-Broadcasting-type-tactics. They should talk about the pernicious danger of media consolidation and develop legislation to combat it.

Most Americans have no idea where political ideas come from. They've never heard of ALEC, but they've heard of voter-fraud because the rightwing-machine, through multiple channels, has told them voter-fraud exists, and consequently their State Senator is sponsoring legislation to require photo-ids. Democrats have gamely countered the meme that voter-fraud is rampant, but they don't explain where the meme started, by whom, and why.

The machine thrives in the shadows. Democrats need to shine light on the machine, expose its parts, its

funding, its tactics and its goals.

Next up: Some communication strategies.

The Domestic Abuse Cycle: A Framework for Our Politics and a Path Forward

Part Seven

In Part One I introduced my premise: GOP uses tactics against Democrats that mirror the behaviors of domestic abusers, creating a warped environment. I gave examples of these tactics in Part Two and in Part Three I described the ineffective response by Democrats. In Part Four I talked about how the media amplifies rather than evaluates GOP abuses, and how Democrats need to recognize this dynamic. In Part Five I covered how Democrats can move from a defensive to an offensive position by reintroducing to the public what decent standards of political behavior should be. In Part Six I proposed additional tactics Democrats can use to counter GOP abuse and today will offer more.

Democrats Should Coordinate and Train

There will always be internal disagreements about Democratic policy specifics but there can be solid agreement about broad objectives: equal opportunity (gender, race, religion, sexual orientation), financial security (living wages, jobs, affordable healthcare, education), environmental protection, freedom of and from religion, equal application of the law, etc. Issues can be subsumed under a handful of umbrella categories. Get everyone on board re: the primary objectives and communicate them widely and consistently.

Democratic candidates shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel with respect to overall messaging — it wastes effort and money. They should pool resources where possible and spend money on educating office-holders and candidates about meta-messages and umbrella issues.

Democrats need to learn how to spot GOP abuse tactics in action, describe them succinctly and offer a Democratic alternative. Here are sample statements:

On the topic of Voter Suppression: “Donald Trump's *Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity* is a disguised attempt to suppress votes. Genuine cases of voter fraud amount to a handful, while Republican efforts to suppress Democratic votes has been a relentless, ongoing campaign. **Voter suppression is a form of abusive politics:** Republicans use voter suppression to forcibly retain power in the face of voter dissatisfaction. Democrats believe in the right to vote, and want real protections for our systems and citizens, not underhanded efforts to suppress votes.”

When a Republican moots the idea of reopening investigations against Hillary Clinton: “Congressional Republican's are threatening a new investigation of Hillary Clinton. **Harassment-by-investigation is an abuse tactic Republicans use to deflect attention from their own failures.** They conduct sham investigations not to learn anything but to smear their targets. They want to harass Hillary Clinton, who is out of office, while they block investigations of Republicans who are in office and behaving badly. Democrats believe in using official powers responsibly and fairly, not as weapons to tarnish opponents.”

When a Republican lies about the ACA: “Claiming the ACA was developed quickly and secretly is

simply untrue. The ACA took several months, there were numerous public hearings, multiple committees were involved, over 130 amendments were considered, there were 79 roll-call votes and 25 days of Senate debate.* Republicans making this claim are lying. **Lying is an abuse tactic Republicans use to keep Americans from learning how devastating their replacement bills would be.** Democrats understood the importance of healthcare in people's lives and sincerely worked to write legislation that would actually help all Americans and do the job it was intended to do.”

[*From the New York Times.](#)

When Republicans claim Democrats are persecuting Christians: “Accusing us of persecuting Christians is a form of **gaslighting, an abuse tactic Republicans use to completely misrepresent our actions and intent.** Democrats firmly support the separation of church and state, a bedrock of our system of government. Just as we, more than 150 years after the Civil War, are still dealing with consequences of that war, our Founding Fathers were influenced by Europe's then-recent history of Christian-on-Christian religious persecution — the real kind where people were tortured and executed for being the wrong flavor of Christian. Democrats believe all Americans must be free to practice the religion of their choice, or no religion at all. There must be freedom of religion and freedom from religion and we adamantly oppose infringements on that principle.”

Understand the GOP will fight back

Democrats often seem to think if they just find the right message, all will be well. **The problem is the GOP/media-machine will vandalize any message Democrats offer.**

Again: **the GOP/media-machine will vandalize any message Democrats offer.**

That's what Republicans do. No Democratic messaging strategy will be effective without linked measures to address inevitable GOP distortions. There is no magic message that will, however meritorious, be immune to GOP vandalism. Instead of fruitlessly chasing that holy grail, Democrats need to accept this reality and plan accordingly. That does NOT mean avoiding messages or policy proposals that seem especially likely to inspire Republican vandalism because Republicans can, and will, distort anything. Instead Democrats should offer messages and proposals and positions fearlessly and defend them vigorously.

Enabling has failed — our only choice is to go on the offensive and, when appropriate, confront and expose abuse tactics. Then expect *more* abuse and confront them again. Democrats need to do some conditioning of their own — they need to teach Republicans abuse tactics will no longer go unchallenged and they need to be aggressive in their pushback.

Some Republicans will co-opt the “abuse” framework; it's a typical rightwing trolling technique. But such trolls never last more than two rounds before they move the goalpost or start name-calling or try to end the debate or flee. They don't have real counter-arguments, but Democrats do. Democrats need to embrace repetition and refuse to be sidetracked.

When a Republican accuses Democrats of abuse s/he should say: “It's sad he's so poor at defending his position he's reduced to mimicking mine. Now, to the actual point being discussed, as I said...”

Republicans fight dirty. They will mischaracterize Democratic statements and claims. They will deflect, redirect and gaslight. **Abuse tactics work when they go unnoticed and unnamed,** so Democrats should notice, name and briefly explain them, then return to the real argument.

Up Next: Final thoughts and conclusion.

The Domestic Abuse Cycle: A Framework for Our Politics and a Path Forward

Part Eight

Part One I introduced my premise: GOP uses tactics against Democrats that mirror the behaviors of domestic abusers, creating a warped environment. I gave examples of these tactics in Part Two and in Part Three I described the ineffective response by Democrats. In Part Four I talked about how the media amplifies rather than evaluates GOP abuses, and how Democrats need to recognize this dynamic. In Part Five I covered how Democrats can move from a defensive to an offensive position by reintroducing to the public what decent standards of political behavior should be. In Parts Six and Seven I proposed additional tactics Democrats can use to counter GOP abuse, including inevitable Republican pushback. As I noted, Republicans will vandalize any message Democrats offer, so Democrats need to focus as much, if not more, on learning how to aggressively respond to the inevitable vandalism, instead of fruitlessly trying to fashion a message that will somehow avoid or preclude the vandalism. Today: my conclusion.

The disastrous Trump presidency can accelerate the destruction of our democracy OR be the wake-up call that finally convinces Democrats to directly confront and conquer GOP abuse.

There's been a good deal of agonizing and analysis about how the party should move forward but most of it comes from *inside* the abuse environment. Battered women are often literally locked inside their homes as their batterer seeks to control their movements and prevent contact with outsiders who might infect her with thoughts of escape. Inside the house, the victim focuses on pleasing the batterer and avoiding words or deeds that might trigger a violent response. Her world gets smaller, her options fewer and her sense of personal agency plummets. That is where Democrats have been driven.

Here's a thought experiment: think about the saga of Merrick Garland and Neil Gorsuch. Look at it from *inside* the abuse environment (in which Republicans can unleash all the abuse tools in their arsenal unopposed), then look at it from *outside* the abuse environment (in which Republican abuse tactics are identified and aggressively countered.)

We need to break the locks, bust the windows and free ourselves or we'll be trapped in endless cycles of defensive coping.

Note: Jimmy Kimmel offers a good example of someone operating outside the abuse environment in one of his monologue about the Graham-Cassidy bill. Basically he said Cassidy had come on his show and lied, and now that Kimmel was calling him out for lying, Cassidy wanted a chance to appear again and make his case and Kimmel said "no". Cassidy had lied the first time, why should he be invited to lie again? Or to try to clean-up his message? No do-overs for sitting Senators who lie to the public on Jimmy Kimmel's show.

Powerful.

I've offered suggestions as a starting point — they are by no means exhaustive or the best we can do. But I would argue the foundation of any strategy must be a comprehensive grasp of, and rejection of, Republican Abuse Politics. It is the only way we can go on the offensive and chart our own course instead of forever reacting, dancing to the GOP's tune.

Stay the Course

Democratic leaders will need time to reorient themselves, and the latitude to make errors as they experiment with tackling longstanding abuse norms. There will be a learning curve. There will be pushback, from Republicans, from the media, and even from some Democrats who themselves will need to make adjustments. And there are always contrarians and pessimists who are wedded to failure — they have nothing to offer except their cynicism. But there are also people nationwide who are ready to applaud and support strong leadership from the Democratic side. Now is the time.

Americans: The Battered Children

So long as the Republican party continues its abuses unchecked, Americans suffer. Indeed, the world suffers.

Republican leaders feel they owe representation only to rich donors and Republican voters (many of whom they are actively harming). They don't represent Democrats or Independents or citizens who don't or can't vote, like children. They exhibit little sense of responsibility towards the rest of the world. They don't seem to care about the health of our republic. They put party before country.

President Obama reportedly learned about Russian interference activities prior to the 2016 election. Mitch McConnell threatened to use the issue as a partisan weapon — if President Obama went public with the information McConnell would accuse him of trying to help Hillary Clinton win. McConnell (indeed, the GOP) seemingly don't care about Russian interference in our elections, past or future.

The Republican Party has become malignant.

Donald Trump's election ushered in a dark period in America. On November 9th, 2016 I awoke feeling all that was good about my country was at risk. Republicans have made many Americans afraid. Afraid. Like the battered children of battered women, we now live in varying degrees of fear. Dread is our constant companion as we wait, braced, for the next outrage.

At present we are focused on sheer survival as a functioning democracy. But it's critical Democrats look beyond the Trump presidency. Trump's departure — however or whenever it occurs — will be such a relief I fear people will rejoice, relax, and fall back into old patterns. Currently we recall the Obama administration with depressed nostalgia. Even the Bush administration has a sheen nowadays, so horrifying is the Trump administration in comparison. But during both administrations GOP abuse was endemic and it brought us to this point of crisis. To recapture and sustain political health in America we have to break the abuse cycle once and for all.