

# GUEST OBSERVER

By Thomas Bates and Jason Carter

## Audacity of Scope: An Expanded Mission for DNC

In the 1980s, Mike McCurry, then a Democratic National Committee spokesman, went to his colleagues with the idea of turning the Democratic Party into a year-round volunteer bank for local nonprofits. Democratic volunteers could help at neighborhood cleanups or car washes for churches when they weren't busy stuffing envelopes and making calls.

According to Bill Greider's account of McCurry's efforts in the 1992 book "Who Will Tell the People," the response was incredulous: What do bake sales with Girl Scouts have to do with winning elections?

We read Greider's book in the mid-1990s and had a very different reaction. Why not make politics less about fundraising and attack ads and more about what candidates and supporters actually do for our communities? In 2006, a decade after the initial inspiration and still believing this idea was too good to keep on the shelf, we began building a new service-based approach to politics. We launched Democrats Work to help connect Democratic volunteers with service projects in their neighborhoods.

In just two years, we mobilized thousands of volunteers to work at food banks, to plant trees and to help with disaster recovery at more than 140 events in a dozen states. These volunteers work proudly and visibly as Democrats, just as church members or employees of the local bank do under the banner of their organizations. Along with groups like Blue Tiger Democrats and Obama Works and candidates like Tom Perriello in Virginia and Charlie Brown in California, we have tried in our own plucky and underfunded ways to make community service a cornerstone of political activism.

The time to take these efforts to scale is now. The place to do it is within the DNC.

A lot has changed at the DNC in recent years, and more will change this January when Chairman

Howard Dean steps down. Our party embarked on a 50-state strategy that put organizers in newly competitive territory for Democrats. This year, we benefited from the greatest mobilization of volunteers in electoral history. Now, President-elect Barack Obama and the Democrats have the opportunity — and unrivaled capacity — to create an unprecedented "off-season" campaign of community action.

We believe the Democratic Party could be the largest source of volunteers in the country. Call it the audacity of scope. With more than 10 million people engaged by the Obama campaign and DNC and millions more activated by local campaigns and organizations, Democrats can support community organizations of all stripes — nonprofit, municipal, religious — with an unprecedented volunteer army. This is not about politicizing service but about elevating politics and changing the way the party relates to our communities.

Online tools provided by the DNC and the Obama campaign — through the Party Builder platform and my.barackobama.com — have empowered the grass roots to organize service events. To harness and sustain that energy, the DNC needs a new Office of Community Service and dedicated staff to coordinate a truly national effort, working with state and local parties and training on-the-ground organizers to strengthen our communities year-round. Moreover, the party should provide scholarships to students who are organizing on campus and fellowships to uber-volunteers who have become the precinct captains of the 21st century. The party also should marshal its resources and volunteers to assist relief organizations that continue to rebuild places like New Orleans and are ready for the next emergency.

These efforts would transform our communities: food banks filled with donations and volunteers, after-school programs packed with tutors, neglected streets cleaned up. We would "keep the band together" year-round, ending the boom-and-bust cycle of political volunteer mobilization and management. And we would continue to grow the ranks of committed



volunteers. More than half of the volunteers mobilized for community service by Democrats Work had never done any traditional "political" volunteering but embraced the opportunity to engage in electoral activities this fall.

As it turns out, bake sales actually may have something to do with winning elections. Since September 2007, Democrats Work has been active in Arapahoe County, Colo., a hotly contested battleground. We sent postcards and

made phone calls to tell voters in targeted precincts about Democrats Work-sponsored service projects in the community. We mobilized volunteers for these events, and each time we told voters what their Democratic neighbors had accomplished. At the program's end in August, we polled voters in the targeted precincts and in identical control precincts about their attitudes toward Democrats. The survey showed promising results: Young, independent voters in the

targeted precincts were more likely to believe that Democrats share their values, have positive feelings toward the party and, ultimately, vote for Democrats.

Our community organizer president-elect has already called for a new spirit of service. Let's hope that call is answered by the party he leads.

Thomas Bates is the co-founder and executive director of Democrats Work. Jason Carter is a co-founder of Democrats Work and grandson of President Jimmy Carter.

## QUOTABLE

*'We must especially beware of that small group of selfish men who would clip the wings of the American eagle in order to feather their own nests.'*

**President Franklin D. Roosevelt**

(1882-1945)

Message to Congress, 1941

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