



Can The Left Get It Right?

LISA J. HUBER

“The era of small thinking is over,” writes Michael Shellenberger. “Today we have in our hands the power to reverse global warming, create millions of new jobs in the clean-energy economy, create a ‘race to the top’ in social and environmental performance by corporations and governments, create poison-free products made from materials that can be continuously recycled, reduce crime, and increase the quality of life for people living in cities.”

Dream on, you’re probably thinking.

Shellenberger may be a dreamer, but his dream has commanded the attention — and support — of labor unions, prominent philanthropists, environmentalists, and national politicians. At the age of thirty-three, Shellenberger describes himself as “merely a mouthpiece” for his distinguished associates, who include linguist George Lakoff, author and political strategist Joel Rogers, and former Sierra Club president Adam Werbach, but his accomplishments belie that humble self-assessment.

Born in the meatpacking town of Greeley, Colorado, Shellenberger organized a chapter of Amnesty International at the age of fifteen and two years later went to Central America to pick coffee in Nicaragua, learn Spanish, and generally acquaint himself with the culture and politics of the region. While in college he worked briefly with the San Francisco-based activist group Global Exchange and got some experience in public relations. In graduate school at the University of California, Santa Cruz, he put his PR skills to work for a group of students who were protesting the elimination of affirmative action by the university regents. Sensing a political and business opportunity, Shellenberger and a close friend cofounded Communication Works, a political-strategy communications agency. “We were twenty-four and didn’t really know what we were getting into,” he says, “but we had the basic sense that progressive organizations had something to say and weren’t very good at saying it.”

Their first big client was Global Exchange. Communication Works coordinated the public relations for the group’s highly successful and well-publicized campaign against Nike sweatshops. Over the next five years, Communication Works’ staff grew to

fifteen, and its clients read like a who’s who of the major U.S. environmental and civil-rights organizations: the Sierra Club, the Urban League, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Natural Resources Defense Council. By 2000, Communication Works was California’s largest public-interest communications firm.

In 2001, Shellenberger and his partner merged Communication Works with a larger progressive firm in Washington, D.C. Six months later Shellenberger left the company to “question our most basic assumptions about what it will take for progressives to start winning again.”

He came to the conclusion that “complaint-based activism” was ultimately ineffective, and that single-issue progressive organizations and social movements had, in many cases, become special interests. Some of Shellenberger’s own prior victories now appeared hollow to him. “Nike made some commendable reforms in those factories,” he says. “They fired abusive managers. They replaced carcinogenic glues with water-soluble ones. They even allowed some of their plants to unionize. But we’d been pushing for something much bigger — that Nike more than triple the wages of its workers, worldwide — and we didn’t get close to delivering that. All we had was a set of complaints and demands. We didn’t have a positive vision for the future of the industry that would help Nike become a force for good in the world. The Nike campaign taught me the limits of protest politics.”

At about this time, Shellenberger started associating with linguist George Lakoff, whose lifetime study of language and “strategic frame analysis” (elucidated in his influential books *Moral Politics* and *Don’t Think of an Elephant*) gave Shellenberger a new understanding of effective activism. Peter Teague, director of the environment program at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, introduced Shellenberger to other prominent progressives. In the discussions that ensued, the question came up: “What if we started looking at the car companies and the United Auto Workers not as opponents, but as potential allies? What would it be like if we made an alliance among businesses, unions, and environmentalists for a grand plan to end our dependence on oil and create millions of new jobs?”

Michael Shellenberger On Why Liberals Need To Abandon Complaint-Based Activism

MARC POLONSKY

I think voters feel that if they were to have dinner with Kerry, Kerry would judge them on how smart they are, whereas if they were to have dinner with Bush, he would judge them on their values.



MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER

Shellenberger brought in pollster Ted Nordhaus, whom he had met when they worked together to save California's last unprotected redwoods, the Headwaters Forest. "If you look at the polling," Nordhaus observes, "the quandary with issues like global warming is that a strong majority agrees we should take action, but if you ask an open-ended question about which issues people care about most, very few will mention global warming or even the environment. So we looked at that and asked, 'How do we make this an issue that figures strongly into the way people think about their future?'"

The two allied themselves with other progressive intellectuals who were thinking along similar lines to develop an ambitious vision for rebuilding America. They named it the New Apollo Project, and it calls for a major federal investment in clean energy and energy efficiency with the long-term goal of achieving freedom from oil dependence and creating three million good new jobs. In less than two years, the Apollo Alliance has garnered endorsements from labor unions representing more than ten million workers. Apollo also has the support of most major environmental organizations in the U.S., including the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The Apollo Alliance (www.theapolloalliance.org) has mushroomed from the brainchild of a few visionaries into a forceful political platform and an expansive network of proponents with headquarters in more than twenty cities. As a cofounder, Shellenberger remains one of Apollo's principal advocates, but he sees it as just the beginning. Through his nonprofit Breakthrough Institute (www.thebreakthrough.org), Shellenberger is working with pollster Nordhaus and a Canadian corporate-marketing firm to practice sophisticated social-values research for progressive political ends. They are creating a "strategic-values science" that they believe will ultimately replace the old complaint-based activism. What the public will ultimately see, Shellenberger says, is a series of initiatives aimed at providing "big, positive, visionary solutions that solve multiple problems simultaneously while strengthening progressive and American values."

To balance his desire for long-term transformation with the need for short-term political impact, Shellenberger also maintains a for-profit political-strategy company, Lumina Strategies, though he limits his clientele to a few carefully selected groups. His most prominent client is Hugo Chavez, the president of Venezuela.

In 2003 Shellenberger cofounded the Business Ethics Network, which is currently helping to organize a nationwide campaign to hold Wal-Mart accountable for its labor and environmental practices. Shellenberger is the author of the white paper "Race to the Top: A Report on Ethical Business Campaigns," and has written for the LA Times, the American Prospect, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and the San Diego Union-Tribune.

In October 2004, Shellenberger and Nordhaus published a monograph titled "The Death of Environmentalism: Global-Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World" that stirred debate within the environmental community. [See excerpts beginning on page 12.] The report faulted environmentalists for being so narrowly focused and negative that they miss any political opportunities not easily classified as "environmental."

Shellenberger is fluent in Spanish and Portuguese and holds a master's degree in anthropology from the University of California, Santa Cruz. I caught up with him at his home office in El Cerrito, California, in late August 2004, before last year's presidential election and the controversy over "The Death of Environmentalism."

Polonsky: The New Apollo Project is pretty ambitious. You're talking about a \$30 billion annual investment from the federal government. What makes Apollo a new concept, as opposed to just a bundle of old progressive proposals?

Shellenberger: What makes Apollo special is that there's coherence in the values it represents, the policies it proposes, and the language it uses. Talking about the millions of jobs that will be created by accelerating our transition to a clean-energy economy moves the environmental movement away from its focus on eco-apocalypse and uninspired technical microfixes, like fluorescent light bulbs and hybrid cars. Environmentalism will never be able to muster the strength it needs to deal with global warming as long as it is seen by the

American people as a special interest. And it will continue to be seen as a special interest as long as it fails to offer Americans an inspiring vision for the future. The strength of any given political proposal turns more on its vision for the future and the values it carries within it than on its technical policy specifications. What's powerful about Apollo is neither its ten-point plan nor even its list of endorsements but rather its generous, inclusive, and hopeful vision.

Apollo's underlying values are about improving the lives of working families *and* the environment *and* national security *and* the economy. Apollo aims to put an end to the "either/or" thinking that has characterized environmental proposals. There may be all sorts of good, progressive policies out there, but they're only Apollo-worthy if they're big and bold, and good for workers, communities, the environment, and business.

Polonsky: Being good for business is the difficult leg to add to the stool.

Shellenberger: None of this is easy. But neither was going to the moon. Look, the federal government has always played an important role in supporting strategic industries. We did it during the New Deal and World War II and created the most productive industrial base the world had ever seen. And keep in mind that America's electronics industry would never have been possible had we not made strategic investments in microchips in the sixties. Intel would not exist had the federal government not guaranteed its market.

Polonsky: When I hear "Apollo Project," I think of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the moon. How do you get people to make the conceptual connection between the first Apollo Project and the New Apollo Project?

Shellenberger: Both are visions of what our country can accomplish. The first Apollo Project put a man on the moon. This new project is a chance to make America energy-independent. Plus, it's a job-creation strategy. Instead of simply being against offshore drilling and against free trade, which gives Americans the impression that progressives are universally negative, we can be *for* what the United States does better than any other country in the world: we invent things. Invention and reinvention are defining aspects of our national identity and our culture of aspiration. We can't compete on lowest wages or cheapest natural resources, but we can invent. We can create whole new industries.

Polonsky: The auto industry, for example?

Shellenberger: You name it. The interstate highway system in the 1950s. The railroads after the Civil War. These are projects that led to the growth of industries. They had some very negative consequences, too; don't get me wrong. But the point is that the private sector couldn't have achieved these things on its own; it needed the federal government to play an important leadership role. Apollo wants to do more than inspire a set of policies — we want to define what it means to be American. Progressives need to help people imagine more ambitiously what we can do together. American liberals today are stuck defending government programs that are, in some cases, more than half a century old. We need to reinvent progressive politics by reinventing a strategic role for

government that unites Americans and transcends interest-group politics.

Polonsky: The Apollo Alliance's ten-point plan mentions, among other things, cultivating deserts for hydrogen. Isn't that a rather far-out idea?

Shellenberger: Compared to what? Invading Iraq? We shouldn't be shy to brainstorm far-out ideas — that's how innovation happens. There are reasonable questions about how practical hydrogen cars would be. That's why Apollo is proposing a diverse portfolio of investments. Hybrids and high-performance cars have to be part of it. Also electric cars and fuel-cell cars. We have to look at improving the technologies to reduce carbon emissions from coal-fired plants. We're probably not going to have an entirely solar-based economy anytime soon, so all of those approaches need to be considered. The point is that the barriers to making Apollo happen are not technological. They're political.

Right now our government is chronically underinvesting in new technologies because of an ideology that says government can do nothing right. Bush just slashed the budget of the National Science Foundation. It's outrageous. To say that the federal government shouldn't play a role in stimulating invention betrays a complete ignorance of American history. Should we not have built the railroads? Should we not have invested in microchips? Should we not have created the Internet? It's ridiculous, but that's what we're fighting against: the notion that we should no longer invest our common assets.

(end of excerpts)

Democrats frame their proposals around issues, when they should be framing them around values. What really determines how people vote is their core beliefs, not what their position is on an issue like the economy or abortion or healthcare.