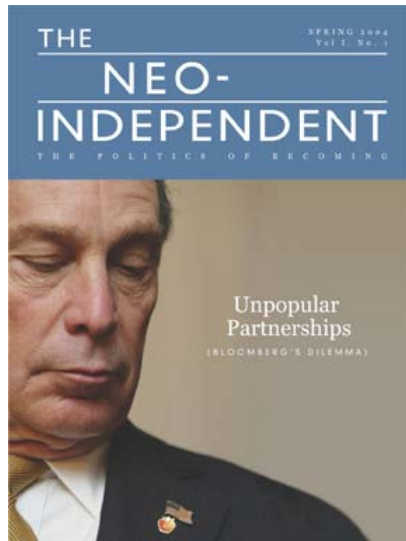


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Media Matters: Independents' day is here for new magazine owner

By David Shaw

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When I turned 50, friends gave me books, CDs, cigars, ties and bottles of wine. When Jacqueline Salit turned 50 in January, friends gave her a magazine.

Not a *copy* of a magazine but ownership of her very own magazine. More than 100 New York friends and colleagues pooled their resources, crowded into a room at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, sang "Happy Birthday" — and gave her pledges for \$50,000 to start the Neo-Independent, the first issue of which hit newsstands last week.

The 48-page magazine, with a modest press run of 5,000 copies, is intended to be the voice of the 35% of the American public that now identifies itself as independent rather than Democrat or Republican. Salit and Co. think it's time for "the independent movement to be part of the political conversation in America."

I agree. The country has become simultaneously polarized and petrified. Republicans are afraid to admit they were wrong to support war in Iraq, and Democrats seem terrified to stake out truly distinctive contrarian ground on any issue apart from the war and their loathing of President Bush, for fear they'll be branded with the dreaded "L" word.

Trying to create a new, independent, non-ideological voice in this climate is an admirable goal. But it's also a difficult one. Political magazines in this country — the Nation, National Review, the New Republic, the Weekly Standard — are not exactly huge moneymakers. In 2002, when the Nation was on the verge of breaking even for the first time, the Washington Post deemed it so newsworthy that it published a story on the no-red-ink prospect on the front page of its business section.

Salit says her friends quickly fulfilled their \$50,000 in pledges, then raised \$50,000 more — enough to cover the budget for the first two issues of what's intended to be a quarterly.

"We have a very, very aggressive subscription plan," she says, "so I think we'll be in good shape financially for a year."

What about advertising? "The first several issues will not have ads," she says, "but at some point ... I think we will go after advertising."

Clearly, a lot more fundraising will be necessary to bring the Neo-Independent beyond the "limited resources" and no full-time staff Salit is starting with.

Tapping into passion

Not even Salit is working on the magazine full time. She's also the political director of the Committee for a Unified Independent Party.

So what makes her think the Neo-Independent can succeed? After all, one would assume — I certainly assume — that independents, by definition, would not be as committed to or as passionate about their cause as voters who call themselves Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or liberals.

That assumption, Salit told me, is dead wrong. "Independents are very passionate about being independent," she says. "Independents aren't just swing voters who can't make up their minds. They've made up their minds about something fairly important, namely that they're disenchanted with what the major parties offer.... They believe that fervently, and they're making a passionate statement about not wanting to be identified with either major party. That's a significant statement to make in a two-party culture, dominated by the Democrat-Republican paradigm."

Further, Salit writes in her "Editor's Note" in the first issue of the Neo-Independent, "that disalignment says something rather profound about how inhibiting and anachronistic traditional partisan politics has become, circa 2004."

Salit has been both a journalist (for ABC News and public television) and a political activist (having worked on more than 100 campaigns, including Mayor Michael Bloomberg's in New York), and she wrote three of the seven major articles in the first issue of the Neo-Independent.

The lead article, "The Emerging Independent Minority," says, "Today 41% of college students identify themselves as independents. So do nearly 40% of African Americans under 30." Independents, she writes, "see the failure of ideology — conservative and liberal — and the need for significant reform and restructuring that break the American political system out of strict party control. They are far more populist than centrist."

So which of the current candidates, if any, does Salit expect the populist, non-ideological independents — and the Neo-Independent itself — to support?

Early on, she says, "the most engaged relationship emerged with Gov. [Howard] Dean." But in her perhaps skewed view, "Democratic Party regulars pulled the rug out from under Dean, and that left many independents disillusioned with the Democrats — and especially [John] Kerry. No one wants to support a Kerry candidacy." Really? I thought Dean essentially pulled the rug out from under himself — with more help from the news media than from Kerry, who simply ran a better campaign than Dean did in Iowa and New Hampshire.

So how about independent support for Bush? "We reached out to Bush but didn't get much response," she says. So that leaves the independents with ... "Ralph Nader."

"We had a conference in New Hampshire," Salit says, "and he came and talked about the issues we care about and he was well responded to. Many independents now support Nader. I don't know yet if the magazine will endorse [him] in the strictest sense, but we want to promote a vigorous dialogue on the 'Anybody but Bush' versus the 'Vote Nader to build an independent movement' argument. I do think the Nader candidacy affords us a chance to build the independent movement *and* to build bridges between it and the progressive movement."

Well, maybe no endorsement, but in her "Emerging Independent Minority" article in the first issue, Salit does say, approvingly, "Nader took a step away from the fringe and toward the mainstream by deciding to run as an independent, not as the candidate of the Green Party."

And: "That the liberal intelligentsia was furious with him for participating in that conference was a sign to many independents that Nader was on the right track."

Perhaps. But I think any magazine that ties itself, however loosely, to Nader's political prospects has about as much chance of making money and attracting a broad readership as Donald Trump has of being chosen Miss America.

Choosing sides

The New Republic long supported Al Gore, and the National Review allied itself with Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, and both magazines have been longtime money-losers, even though all three of those politicians had far deeper public support than Nader will ever enjoy. The magazines also had far deeper pockets — William F. Buckley Jr.'s for the National Review, Martin Peretz's for the New Republic — than any independent on the political horizon.

I agree with Salit that there is a growing disenchantment with ideology — all ideology — and with the Republican and Democratic parties. The independent movement could be a viable alternative — and it could certainly use, help and benefit from having its own voice.

But I think disassociating itself from the Nader candidacy and focusing on the issues that Salit says independents truly care about is the best chance the fledgling magazine has for success in a crowded and increasingly competitive magazine marketplace.