

Hofstra Presidential Conference Abstract

Demystifying the DLC: The Democratic Leadership Council and its Unnamed Founder, Alexander Hamilton

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Critics often assail the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) for having no ideological foundation. Many claim that the only belief that holds “New Democrats” together is a belief in constructing a winning electoral strategy. They say that the DLC’s “Third Way” approach originates from poll-tested policies that merge Republican and Democratic philosophy into something, which stands for nothing.

The Democratic Leadership Council counters these attacks by explaining that they believe in three core values: “opportunity, responsibility, and community.” They describe to party leaders, activists, and the media the myriad ways in which these three principles guide and inform their policy agenda. They argue that they are reviving the progressivism of the Democratic Party, which they believe has been lost to special interests and group politics over the past few decades. Yet, traditional Democrats find these claims to be outrageous, and tension has increased noticeably between the two wings of the party since President Clinton has left office.

Interestingly, neither the Democratic Leadership Council’s opponents nor proponents seem to recognize the underlying ideology—Federalism—present in the organization’s core values or its links to American history. First articulated by one of America’s founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton, Federalism envisions the national government to be a positive, active, yet limited force in domestic politics and foreign affairs. Federalism also happens to be the ideology, which has helped this country survive its most trying political times, as well as provide the most opportunity to the most Americans (Lind, 1997).

This paper describes Federalism and its central ideological precepts, then it tackles the reasons the linkages with the DLC having gone unnoticed, or perhaps, more appropriate, unclaimed. It suggests that part of the intentional obfuscation by the Democratic Leadership Council on this issue has been because of (a) Alexander Hamilton’s long-time association with Republicanism, and (b) President William J. Clinton and the Democratic Party’s desire to follow the tradition set by Franklin Roosevelt, who glorified Thomas Jefferson (Hamilton’s philosophical rival). It concludes by asserting that President William J. Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council helped to bring back a governing philosophy, Federalism, which had nearly been forgotten, but had enlivened our political dialogue for the first one hundred and fifty years of our nation’s history. This resurrection of Hamiltonian philosophy is a significant contribution and one that should be understood as a part of Clinton’s legacy.