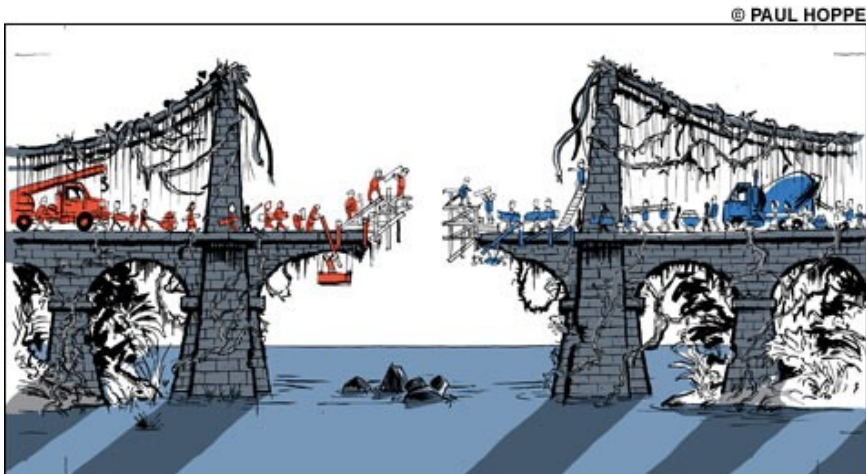


THE BOSTON PHOENIX



In North Carolina, a man electrified his John McCain campaign sign so it delivered a nasty shock to the nine-year-old neighbor trying to steal it. In California, a man hung a Saran Palin effigy — stylish black pumps swaying softly in

the breeze. In Pennsylvania, at a Palin rally, a corpulent man gleefully toted a stuffed monkey, a Barack Obama sticker wrapped around its head like a turban.

So, now that we're getting a new president, what happens?

That a number of rightward-leaning folks — Colin Powell, Christopher Buckley and Hitchens — endorsed Obama was encouraging. They believed something legions of rabid rightists do not: that the only way forward for this country is to elect a man of decency and competence with an inclusive vision for the country. Still, no one's naive enough to suggest that the entire nation will dissolve into a big melty goop of purple bipartisanship the second Obama takes office.

But 10 days on from that momentous election, with the map seemingly redrawn (even vermillion *Indiana* turned blue) it's worth asking whether or not we might expect some changes in our national character.

McCain, in the gloaming of his candidacy, presided over one of the most disgracefully divisive campaigns in US history. The language and insinuation employed by his ticket and its supporters should be abhorrent to anyone who cares about the promises of liberal democracy: "the real America" . . . "traitor" . . . "the other folks."

Meanwhile, Obama — worldly, biracial, un beholden to baby-boomer hang-ups, born in a blue state but with red-state roots — showed throughout the campaign that he means to offer something better. A cease-fire (or at least an abatement) in the culture wars. A sense of unity and common purpose. A general appeal to our better natures.

But what can we realistically hope for? Can "the first truly 21st-century figure in American politics," to borrow *Washington Post* op-ed writer E.J. Dionne's words,

actually bridge these deep national divisions? Will the end of the Bush years signal the simultaneous end of interstate rifts? Or will the antipathies between the government and its malcontent only calcify further?

Short answers, in order: we'll see; no; and potentially, but hopefully not.

The idea of arugula-eaters and gun-clingers suddenly casting aside their differences and joining hands across America is, to repurpose Bill Clinton's famous putdown, a "fairy tale." About half the populace right now is nursing some pretty bruised feelings. But that doesn't mean we couldn't try for common ground.

Obama put out the call within minutes of his victory: "Young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled, and not disabled," this nation has "never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states. We are, and always will be, the United States of America."

Now it's up to us to prove it. And make no mistake: the heavy lifting will have to be done by us, not him.

Met halfway

On October 23, Joe Biden sat down for a satellite interview with Orlando's ABC affiliate WFTV. His reaction, in so many words: WTF?

The station's health reporter, Barbara West, grilled Biden with questions that seemed culled directly from right-wing talking points. "You may recognize this famous quote," she intoned. "'From each according to his abilities to each according to his needs.' That's from Karl Marx. How is Senator Obama not being a Marxist if he intends to 'spread the wealth around?'"

Biden's nonplussed reply: "Are you joking? Is this a joke?"

The patent absurdity of the charge is overshadowed by West's myopia. (After all: red was Marx's favorite color!) She might not be aware that Marxist thought can be manifested in the darnedest of places — like, say, a deep-South military base.

"A military base is like the most successful flowering of socialism in the world," says Kathy Roth-Douquet, co-author, with Frank Schaeffer, of, *How Free People Move Mountains: A Male Christian Conservative and a Female Jewish Liberal on a Quest for Common Purpose and Meaning* (Collins). "It's where the incomes are the most even. Day care is 'from each, to each,' and could cost as little as \$5. Housing is free. Health care is free. It's actually kind of nice."

Roth-Douquet was an Obama campaign advisor, held a job in the Clinton White House, and has been a long-time Democratic foot soldier. Schaeffer campaigned for McCain in

2000, and his father, Francis Schaeffer, was an evangelical theologian, credited by many with influencing the political rise of the religious right.

How People Move Mountains is written in a quasi-epistolary style — as an exchange of alternating liberal and conservative views as the authors evolve their diverging (and, often, converging) opinions on big subjects such as patriotism, religious belief, and consumerism. "We wanted to sort of make the process the product," says Roth-Douquet. "Because the book really is a lot about process." A valuable one, too, in a country where too many of us "think our opinions are ourselves."

Survival skill

Eight years ago, Schaeffer went on radio shows such as Oliver North's to stump for John McCain. Two years ago, McCain penned a fulsome blurb for *AWOL*. But this year, Schaeffer found his mind changing about the man he once supported.

And on October 10, Schaeffer wrote an open letter to McCain in the *Baltimore Sun*, which began: "If your campaign does not stop equating Senator Barack Obama with terrorism, questioning his patriotism, and portraying Mr. Obama as 'not one of us,' I accuse you of deliberately feeding the most unhinged elements of our society the red meat of hate, and therefore of potentially instigating violence."

Powerful words. Like so many of us, Schaeffer had decided that McCain's suddenly and shockingly divisive words weren't just debasing the discourse, but actually creating a toxic and — God forbid — lethal rhetorical environment.

In contrast, Schaeffer was drawn to Obama's vision of unity and inclusivity. And he found it fit nicely with what he and Roth-Douquet had been writing about. "Our book was reaching for what the Barack Obama platform was about," he says. "Moving past red and blue states to find a commonality that all Americans can claim together. In a way, our book is sort of a preamble to some of the programs Obama has been talking about."

The good guy won. But Roth-Douquet warns now that "The ball's in our court. There's only so much a leader can do. It doesn't end the day he gets elected."

So how *is* it to be accomplished, this attempt to bridge the chasm between Fox News and MSNBC, the Drudge Report and the Huffington Post? Step one, argues Roth-Douquet, is to revive a sense of community, cooperation, and common purpose. And that can happen only, she writes, if everyone "actually becomes convinced that our survival truly depends on each other."

Because, she explains, it does. The economy is in shambles. The environment is in grave peril. Millions of Americans go without food and health care. "You do need crises to move people. Well, here's a crisis."

Close encounters

That still doesn't quite blueprint the mechanics of how an ostensibly 50/50 nation can shelve its differences — at times, outright hostility — and get anything done.

The key is "make right-wingers and left-wingers work together," contends Schaeffer. "We *can* get there from here. But we gotta find places where we're *forced* to meet."

Service, he says, "is one of them." Roth-Douquet knows for a fact that Obama has read *AWOL*, which argues for an American military staffed by a more representative sampling — economically, ethnically, geographically — of the American people. But the military isn't everything, obviously.

Obama's ambitious service plan, which he hopes will simultaneously bolster both the educational system and the nonprofit sector, offers fairly comprehensive set of ideas: more than tripling the size of AmeriCorps, actively engaging retirees, doubling the membership of the Peace Corps.

It's the right idea, says Schaeffer. Because, be it the Army or Habitat for Humanity or Teach for America, "building a house in New Orleans or getting shot at in Afghanistan" alongside people who aren't like you will "change the way you see your country" and make it harder "to live in these hermetically sealed enclaves."

The fact, as Roth-Douquet believes, that Obama is "genuinely not a very partisan person" means he may be just the guy to help make this happen. "He never really had to be a 'party person' to win," she says. "He never built a whole entourage of friends he's beholden to. He has more of a citizen mentality."

The angry right

Bipartisanship is the byword all of a sudden. We'll see for how long. But don't kid yourself that everyone is willing and/or able to kick the habit of fractious factionalism. Think a guy like far-right dweeb Jonah Goldberg — who argued in the *Los Angeles Times* that Obama's service plan was tantamount to slavery (and wondered, in all seriousness why a "black presidential candidate" would want to violate the 13th Amendment) — is going to pipe down now?

But when all the insane rumors — Obama will take the oath on the Koran; Obama will raise everyone's taxes and redistribute them as slave reparations — end up not coming true, might some of his most vociferous right-wing opponents actually discover that (*gulp*) he's really sort of a decent president? Is it too much to hope things will be different this time?

Says Schaffer: "Wouldn't it be great if, four years from now, you had people coming back saying, 'I made a mistake, he was a great president, he brought us back from the brink?'"

Dead-end extremes

It would be. In the meantime, the key is making sure the real extremists on both sides — the chanting mobs in those blood-curdling YouTube videos of Palin rallies, the howling radical feminist on the Washington Mall toting a EUTHANIZE CHRISTIANS placard — are ignored as best we can.

"People at those rallies are what we can't be as a nation," says Schaeffer. "That's what will kill us."

"You have to minimize them," echoes Roth-Douquet. "You have to make them the smallest element."

Marty Beckerman, author of the new book *Dumbocracy: Adventures with the Loony Left, the Rabid Right, and Other American Idiots* (Disinformation), has found himself on both sides of the divide in his 25 years. Early on, he writes, he "believed in maximum wage, racial quotas, the inherent evil of money, and censorship of right-wing preachers." Then, in reaction to what he began to feel was a censorious and sanctimonious sense of political correctness on the left, he swung the other way: "reading right-wing books, getting my news from biased conservative media outlets, and only conversing with people who kept the echo chamber buzzing."

Now he's swung back to somewhere in the left-center. In between the batshit extremes, he says, there are "intelligent and decent Americans on both sides of the spectrum," and "both are necessary for a healthy national discourse."

To research the funny and gleefully provocative *Dumbocracy*, Beckerman spent four years embedded with extremist activists confronting some of our most divisive issues: anti-abortionists, radical misandrists, neo-prohibitionists, and worse. It was a scarifying experience that showed him the lunatic lengths to which some people will go to advance and defend their ideas.

Luckily, in the vast middle, he says, "these culture-war issues that get people so pumped up, most of us don't really care about." Sure, there are "still plenty of angry people, and I don't think they're gonna go anywhere. Some people just like to scream. When you look at the Internet, and how that's empowered people to make their voices heard, really what millions of Americans do for fun right now is they log onto the Internet and get in anonymous fights with people they've never met."

But, Beckerman hopes, the national pendulum is swinging back to the center. Why? Because people are thinking about what's important. "When the economy is collapsing, and people are worried that *Mad Max* is going to become a reality, and we're gonna be cannibalizing each other for protein, nobody cares if some transvestites are getting married and aborting their third-trimester fetuses while burning the flag."

Speaking of flags: maybe it's that sort of exclusionary focus on our shared peril that makes for the synapse-snapping cognitive dissonance of scenes like an Indiana front porch with a Confederate flag fluttering above an Obama sign.

The reborn patriot

Yes, life will always be lived differently in urban areas than in rural areas. Race and class issues will always cause us *agita*. And no one's asking or suggesting that Utah must think and act like Massachusetts. There are 303,824,640 sets of opinions constantly at work in this country. Which is great. That's the point of having a big, complex democracy. The idea is to keep them from ghettoizing us into warring ideological factions.

In the middle of a spontaneous eruption of screaming, honking, and high-fiving on Mass Ave in Cambridge last Tuesday night, someone was waving an American flag.

"The flag!" a guy nearby yelled, seemingly surprising himself. "I love the flag again!"

Sad that he should ever have felt differently. Because there's nothing wrong with a "non-hubristic, non-jingoistic patriotism," says Schaeffer. "There's nothing wrong with saying, 'I love my country, let's all work together to make it better.' "

One idea Schaeffer and Roth-Douquet put forth is that the relationship among US citizens needs to change from that of a co-habitation into something more resembling a marriage.

I got married a couple months ago. In the run-up to the wedding, my wife and I got lots of advice. One helpful apothegm was repeated more than once — including by Roth-Douquet, when speaking about the United States: "No opinion you have is more important than your relationship."