



THE BLOG 01/20/2009 05:12 am ET Updated May 25, 2011

The Science of 44



By Marty Kaplan

“We will restore science to its rightful place.” That’s the line I didn’t see coming.

Anyone watching the backgrounders leading up to the inaugural knew that the incoming President would call for “a new era of responsibility.” His call to service, to find meaning in something greater than ourselves, was telegraphed by the day of voluntarism he declared in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; and foreshadowed by two years of reminding crowds that government can only do so much; and made inevitable on the day that his predecessor, instead of asking for sacrifice in the wake of September 11th, told the nation to go shopping.

We rightly suspected, too, that he would declare “that the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long no longer apply,” that he would “proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics.” We might not have known that he would use First Corinthians to drive the point home - “the time has come to set aside childish things” - but to hear the political-media industry nailed as infantilizing was to situate the bloviators and bullies right in the middle-school playground where they belong.

We also knew, going in, that he would acknowledge the real and serious and many crises facing the nation, the “gathering clouds and raging storms” temporarily masked by the sunshine and celebration on the Mall. And though we couldn’t guess the words he would use, we knew that, like FDR and Lincoln before him, he would say about those challenges, “Know this, America: they will be met.”

Less easy to predict was how he would handle the human rights disgrace his predecessor bequeathed him. As it turned out, he did not mince his words, nor did the cameras hesitate to focus tightly on George W. Bush’s face, when the new President said, “We reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals.... Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience’s sake.” True, he did not use the word “torture,” but no one listening - at the Capitol, across the country, and around the world - could miss the rebuke.

But the job that really took me by surprise was the repudiation of eight years of know-nothingism. The politicization of science at the behest of corporate despoilers of our land, air and water, and in the service of religious fundamentalism, constitutes a shameful legacy of greed and anti-intellectualism. On issues from stem cell research to climate change, from abstinence education to mercury pollution, the Republican war on science, as author Chris Mooney aptly names it, has spun the facts to fit the agenda.

It was bad enough that George W. Bush, as part of his effort to leave no child behind, wanted schools to teach the phony controversy between evolution and creationism. It was worse that the scientific method itself - an epistemology that puts evidence above ideology - was under assault. Worst of all is the cost to society of precious time lost, of medical discoveries not made, of scarce natural resources not conserved, of reproductive rights not protected, of planetary damage not contained.

There was another, related line in the inaugural address, that came after the promise to restore science to its rightful place, which I found, in a quiet way, breathtaking. "Our patchwork heritage is a strength," it began, and what I expected would follow was a list of faiths. But the line's punch did not come from the inclusion of Islam. It came from how it ended: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus - and non-believers."

Non-believers! For eight years, the now-departed Administration's media enablers on cable and talk radio have spat out the phrase "secular humanists" as if it denoted a species worse than communists, a traitorous fifth column of un-American doubters determined to destroy our Republic. And now, finally, we have a President unafraid to declare that skepticism and rationalism have just as legitimate a claim on the public sphere, and just as privileged a place in private hearts, as any other approach to the mysteries of the cosmos.

I would like to think, though I am sure I am entirely imagining it, that the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court feared that something like this was coming when he flubbed the oath of office. "I, Barack Hussein Obama": he got that part right, and when he said it, and the new President repeated it, an electrifying message of change was delivered to billions around the globe.

But Chief Justice Roberts, when his big moment came, just couldn't get right the words prescribed in Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution. "I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States," the document says, but that word "faithfully" gave him a whole heap o' trouble. He tacked it on at the end, and you could see on his face that he knew he was messing up, and you could see on President Obama's face, too, that he knew full well that "faithfully" was not where it belonged, but he graciously followed the Chief Justice along and repeated the error.

George W. Bush did not faithfully execute the office of President of the United States. He spurned the checks and balances of the Constitution; he sanctioned torture; he criminalized dissent. My saying so is, I know, not an entirely forward-looking post-partisan sentiment. But there will be something deficient in this new era of responsibility if it abandons that old value, accountability. This is not about score-settling; it is about distinguishing true from false. It is comforting to know that in the years to come, the difference between right and wrong will not be based entirely on faith.

(This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.)

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan