



THE BLOG 05/21/2012 01:54 pm ET | Updated Jul 21, 2012

The Audacity of WTF



By Marty Kaplan

We're getting used to what's been going on during this campaign. That's dangerous. We should be reminding ourselves just how strange it is.

Start with this: Billionaires are buying civic mindshare.

That's right. A web of plutocrats, guided by a cadre of Karl Roves, is backing their ideal front man, Mitt Romney. Thanks to Frank Luntz, their class is known as the jobs creators, rather than, say, the Robber Barons, and pointing this out is known as class warfare.

Thanks to the Supreme Court's punting on disclosure, these billionaires are able to hack our elections secretly. Surely there are other Joe Rickettses out there, test-driving messaging at least as reptilian as his Son of Willie Horton strategy; we just don't know their names. It took a fluke — a leak to the New York Times — to let us in on this one, but there are other rocks we won't be lucky enough to see under. Now that the law against anonymous last-minute lying has been lifted, the 30 days before Nov. 6 is going to be all Orwell, all the time.

An unaccountable 0.01 percent is buying America's attention and telling us scary stories about the president. Unfortunately, no matter how fictional those narratives are, a lot of people turn out to believe them - or rather, their brains do. BS detectors require reason, but humans are hardwired to default to emotion.

The news media want our attention, too, and a surefire way for them to get it is to amplify the paid narratives in ads. Fact checking doesn't diminish the irrational power they wield. If Mitt Romney says "character assassination" often enough, then holding him accountable for his Bain record, let alone for his dismal performance as Massachusetts governor, subliminally starts seeming unfair. Like it or not, just as birthers are impervious to evidence, repetition trumps critical thinking.

It's not hard to imagine Mitt Romney winning. The filibuster, plus what has become semi-annual debt-ceiling highchair banging, will ensure that a recovery won't be jumpstarted by Washington, and the global impact of Europe's crisis is beyond our control, so the impact of the economy on the election will be a crapshoot. It's likely that the press and the polls will declare the debates a draw. Until the last week of the campaign, 90 percent of the country will remain evenly divided between people who loathe each other's red or blue guts. Enough of the unpredictable 10 percent living in the battleground states and bombarded by super PAC disinformation could easily swing a few thousand votes in Romney's direction and clinch the Electoral College. New election laws making it harder for Democrats to vote in Republican states could also tip the scale, as may massive Election Day mischief which the Roberts Court is unlikely to undo.

So contemplate a plausible Nov. 7. The corporations — I mean, the people — have spoken. We must bind our wounds and come together as Americans always do, says the square-jawed new leader. Because the Democrats will be bullied into being recklessly non-obstructionist, the 0.01 percent will get everything they want — tax cuts, entitlement cuts, more for defense contractors, austerity for everyone else, unconditional surrender by regulators, fake science, Wall Street unchained, no campaign finance laws, and maybe a couple of new Supreme Court justices to see that it stays that way. And because corporate Republicanism panders to movement conservatives, the whole reactionary social agenda will get a huge head of steam.

In other words, right now we may be on the way to the triumph of money, power and fundamentalism — a development that should seem shocking, yet instead has become the new normal. We have outrage fatigue. Fury has slid into a persistent low-grade fever, a

“what fresh hell is this?” jadedness.

There are exceptions. People like Larry Lessig and groups like United Republic haven't lost their passion for campaign finance reform. FreePress hasn't given up on media reform. Bill Moyers and Frontline haven't let up on Wall Street bandits. Austerity hasn't stopped incensing Paul Krugman. “Occupy” and “inequality” haven't left the lexicon. While fewer small donors, young people and other volunteers may be stirred into action this time around, many will still join the ground game.

But resistance like that isn't nearly as widespread as this infuriating moment in American history warrants. What we need to recapture is our WTF, our astonishment and indignation that our democracy has been hijacked.

The risk of expressing that outrage is that the other side will successfully brand it as shrillness, as Romney derangement syndrome. Those talking points are designed to pathologize and condescend to a perfectly appropriate response to corporate triumphalism. They're given currency by a media industry that depicts this whole wretched insult to self-governance as a blood sport, an entertainment, a source of content that can be monetized, a gusher of airtime that can be sold.

On the other hand, a few days ago Senators John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) filed a friend-of-the-court brief asking the Supreme Court to reconsider the Citizens United decision. The case — American Tradition vs. Bullock — will determine Montana's ability to enforce its century-old ban on corporate campaign contributions. McCain's 2008 disavowal of his own campaign finance reform law was a sad spectacle. If even John McCain can rediscover his inner WTF about plutocrats in politics, maybe there's hope for the rest of us.

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

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