

**THE BLOG**

# Two Fourths Equals One Half, Not One Whole

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By Marty Kaplan

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Capture the Flag is an old game. In the late '60s, the American flag became a symbol of Nixon support; displaying it on cars was a way to say, Screw the long-haired pinko hippies. In the wake of 9/11, it was a way for everyone to say, Screw Bin Laden. At the 2004 Democratic Convention, the profusion of flags was a declaration to Republicans: You can't out-patriotism us. Today, pinned to lapels of broadcasters and politicians, it's often intended as an unimpeachable signal of Bush love.

On this Fourth, flags will be waved by both Red Americans and Blue Americans. Some will intend the flag to demonstrate their support for the views expressed by Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh et al. Others will fly it to say: Don't you dare demonize me for honoring the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, and the "decent respect for the opinion of mankind" enshrined in the Declaration; It's my country, too.

So two Americas will simultaneously celebrate two Fourths. What's lost, of course, in this battle for symbol-meaning, is the ideal of "e pluribus unum": out of many, one.

We were one after 9/11. It's not hard to imagine an alternate history that might have followed that awful day — one that united us behind energy independence and shared sacrifice, that united the world to fight global warming, that didn't squander American unity on a stupefyingly misconceived and divisive war, that didn't calculatedly enflame every hateful polarizing wedge issue in the culture wars.

But that didn't happen; Bush did.

It's conceivable that the future holds a leader who will help all Americans discover common ground again; who will use "uniter, not divider" not as Orwellian camouflage for doing the opposite of what it says; who will call us all, Red and Blue, to heed the better angels of our red, white and blue nature.

I don't doubt that such a message is a governing philosophy that can achieve greatness. But I'm not sure it's a campaign message that can win. Bitter, negative, divisive contests are not won by candidates who practice unilateral political disarmament; in the heat of combat, the constituency for a take-no-prisoners candidate who meets a low blow with a gutsy counterpunch is almost always going to be larger than the constituency for an American Gandhi.

The question is whether there is out there, among the crop of candidates, anyone both tough enough to kick an opponent's ass, and tough-love enough, after winning, to kick our country's ass — to coax all of us to truly be the “one people” that Jefferson, in Philadelphia, said we really were.

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