

**THE BLOG**

Our Years of Magical Thinking

By Marty Kaplan

08/08/2007 10:36 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

What were we thinking?

That our bridges and levees, our power grids and sewage plants, would simply fix themselves? That our schools would get better just because some alarming report or unfunded mandate said they should? That loose nukes and human rights ceased to be problems when we stopped paying attention to them? That a Democratic Congress would possess the political chops and the 'nads needed to protect the Constitution from the Cheney regency? That Barry Bonds would stop short of Hank Aaron's record out of respect for him and shame for himself?

I know, I know: "Who 'we,' white man?" Not everyone drank the tax-cuts-for-the-rich Kool-Aid that has rotted our physical and social infrastructure. Not everyone has been distracted by the hey!-watch-the-birdie circus that drives corporate media profits. Not everyone was newly infuriated or heartbroken that on civil liberties, the Democrats could be spooked and psyched by the least popular, least credible White House in history; after all, the majority's failure to force a course-change in Iraq was already reason enough to fall into a seething funk about the consequences of the 2006 election.

Today, magical thinking is the belief that a Democratic White House and a filibuster-proof Congress is all that stands between the country and meaningful political reform. Is it really credible that elected officials who got to Washington without making campaign finance reform and media reform their signature issues will risk their incumbencies to force the only kind of change that can rescue democracy from the dangers the Founders warned us about, no matter who's in charge?

Today, magical thinking is the belief that, come 2009, "America will finally be ready" — ready for single-payer health insurance, ready for an energy tax to fund energy independence, ready to tackle our prison crisis, ready to scrap our insane drug policy, ready to address the growing gulf between top and bottom, ready to, well, fill in the blank with your favorite festering sore. Ever since Ronald Reagan told us that government was the problem, ever since magic-of-the-marketplace juju replaced rational discourse about the public sector, the chances for genuinely bold collective action, for breathtaking national solutions to intractable national problems, have grown increasingly slim.

Magical thinking is the upbeat other-side-of-the-coin to denial. It's just too painful to deal with the fact that our country has provided hundreds of thousands of weapons to the enemies killing our kids in a war in Iraq which is not the war

on terrorists we need to be fighting. It's simply too horrible to contemplate that the ravages that developed and developing nations have inflicted on our global environment are already beyond the pale of reversal. It's way too depressing to think that the next administration and the next Congress, however much they promise to sweep things clean and shake things up, will instead buy the Wise Men of Washington's bipartisan baby-step baloney, rather than swing for the fences.

But maybe the most pernicious example of magical thinking is the faith we cling to that American democracy will just keep on keepin' on, through thick and through thin, no matter how unresponsive it is to its increasingly enraged citizens. It's not terrorists I fear most; yes, they have done and may well do again unspeakable harm to us, but no level of casualties will ever cause this nation to capitulate to a caliphate. What haunts me is the possibility that Americans will one day decide that there is something so inherently dysfunctional about our political system that rolling the dice on nondemocratic change is the only hope to rescue it. The twentieth century is a graveyard of disastrous experiments like that. And the Bush-Cheney years have turned out to be a chilling right-wing run at such a coup. But if our parties and our leaders on both sides of the aisle keep failing to deliver what we so desperately demand, isn't it conceivable that one day we'll decide we're so friggin' mad that we can't take it any more? It's not irrational to stop doing something — like the moronic kabuki of modern money-and media-driven politics — that has repeatedly and disastrously failed us. But there's no guarantee that what we might be tempted to try instead won't be way, way worse.

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