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Dreaming of a Wave Election



By Marty Kaplan

What just happened in American politics is not just that Charlotte mopped the floor with Tampa. It's that Democrats connected with the country beyond their wildest dreams.

Here's my fantasy: Coming out of their convention, Democrats will realize that their message sings.

It will dawn on them that eking out 270 electoral votes by winning 50.1 percent of the five percent of swing voters in eight battleground states is not what the days between now and November 6 are about. Instead, they will see Charlotte as a sign that a tidal wave can be coaxed to come in - a cleansing national wave of revulsion at the birthers, the Bachmanns, the Adelsons, the Roves, the Akins, the Limbaughs, the Trumps, the death panels, the marriage cops, the neocons, the science deniers, the debt-ceiling pyromaniacs, the arrogance of the bailed-out bankers, the cynicism of the post-truth liars, the thieves of the right to vote.

In these days after Charlotte, Democrats may discover that the rapt attention that met Bill Clinton's explanation of Republican plans for Medicaid was way more than some wonky fluke in the convention hall. That patient thoughtfulness was present in millions of homes as well, in red counties as well as blue ones. It is evidence that Americans are fed up with being underestimated and condescended to. And in my fantasy, that experience goes on to empower the public to demand and receive a discourse that does not insult its intelligence.

Instead of running away from their record, instead of fearing their opponents' fear mongering, imagine if Democrats - in Deval Patrick's words - grew a backbone. Instead of being intimidated by focus-grouped catcalls like "class warfare" and "the blame game," instead of being passive enablers of slanders like "the failed stimulus" and the "government takeover of health care," imagine if Democrats persist in contesting and refuting Republican mythology and successfully reframe the terms of debate.

In my fantasy, Democrats repeat the story they finally told in Charlotte: In the Senate, from the outset of the administration, Mitch McConnell had no higher goal for the nation than making Obama a one-term president, and he wielded the filibuster more relentlessly and destructively than ever before in our history. In the House, beginning on the evening of Obama's inauguration, Paul Ryan and his caucus committed themselves to obstructionism, to redefining bipartisanship as treason and compromise as capitulation, to defeating anything that could redound to Democrats' credit, even laws that they themselves once championed, even at the cost of harming their country.

Today, Congressional Republicans openly acknowledge that they would be as obstructionist in a second Obama term as they've been in his first. There is no evidence that the reelection of the president would make the ideologues who've held the country hostage these past four years any less determined to put party above country. In order to prevent the future from being a noxious rerun, why shouldn't the Democrats invite Americans to do the one thing that would truly be a game-changer? In my fantasy, Democrats ask for, campaign for and win majorities in the House and Senate, and on the first day of the new Congress they use their Senate majority to lower the number of votes needed to cut off a filibuster.

Charlotte can be a bounce, or it can be a tipping point. What Sister Simone Campbell said about the meaning of being pro-life; what John Kerry said about the moral source of American strength; what Sandra Fluke demonstrated about dignity; what Julian Castro said about holding a microphone instead of a mop; what Michelle Obama said about values worth more than money; when Elizabeth Warren said the system was rigged against us; when Joe Biden explained "the Bain way"; when Kal Penn said his buddy Kevin's boyfriend is his inspiration; when Barack Obama nailed Grover Norquist with "Feel a cold coming on? Take two tax cuts, roll back some regulations and call us in the morning": In my fantasy, in the weeks ahead, these become more than memorable moments. They become a tsunami.

Yes, I know that smart analysts like Nate Silver have been saying that control of the Senate looks like a tossup, and that betting markets have been giving Democrats 4-to-1 odds against winning back the House. But that was before Charlotte, before "arithmetic" and climate change were rediscovered. Sure, billions of ad dollars will be spent to broadcast millions of minutes of brainwashing, but nothing requires Americans to prove the futility of resisting it.

The most beautiful word spoken in Charlotte was "citizenship." It was thrilling to watch our president reanimate it. Imagine an America where citizenship is not defined by Citizens United. A fantasy? Maybe. But that won't stop me from dreaming of a wave.

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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