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Post-Palin Depression



By Marty Kaplan

A therapist I know — OK, since you dragged it out of me, *my* therapist — told me that I'd be astonished if I knew how many emergency calls she got the night that Sarah Palin gave her convention speech.

Actually, I wasn't that surprised. Judging from the number of unnerved post-Palin phone calls and e-mails that I got, I wonder why I didn't think of calling her myself.

Why was it such a psychic downer? Movement conservatives might gloat that it was because Palin kicked liberal butt, made unanswerable arguments, strutted her Super Woman stuff, and — worst of all — signaled the Democrats' inevitable defeat come November.

Now I don't doubt that some people experience a presidential campaign as one long audition for the show that will be playing on their television sets these next four years. But I'm hoping that the 5 to 10 percent of undecideds in the 18 battleground states who will swing the Electoral College more resemble the savvy mass audiences of "Seinfeld" and "The Simpsons" than voters for the next "American Idol" or the mob in "Coriolanus." Why should a single performance by the governor of Alaska, or even several of them, bedazzle millions of otherwise skeptical Americans into throwing away their bull—t detectors? The historic disapproval ratings of the incumbent president are continuing evidence that the American mainstream has soured on the culture wars' politics of group against group and the rest of the resentment at the heart of Palin's message.

So what accounts for the panic Palin provoked?

Part of it, I think, is that we catastrophize. By "we," I don't mean liberals. I mean the many functioning neurotics among us who think that a doctor's every "hmmm" during a physical is a portent of tragic doom; who mentally extrapolate from routine family conflicts to irreparable ruptures; and whose pessimism is relentlessly fed by cable news, which — in order to hang on to our attention — portrays every freeway car chase as a potential shootout; depicts every global brushfire as the start of World War III; and shouts,

“Breaking news!” so frequently that the scary music that accompanies it is itself enough to spike the nation’s blood pressure. The fearmongering of politicians, of course, plays right into this.

This is not to say that putting Sarah Palin one melanoma from the presidency would mean good times. It would be more like James Dobson with nuclear weapons. But while her Rovian apparatchiks are stoking the worst among us with passionate intensity, it’s not inevitable that the best will lose all conviction in the voting booth.

When a political candidate convinces half a country to hope again, it’s a double-edged sword. The endorphins and neurotransmitters that wash our brains when we welcome the future instead of dreading it are as powerful as any drug. It’s like love. Unless you let your guard down, unless you permit vulnerability to trump cynicism, you rarely can get what you want. That’s why Howard Dean or John Edwards or Hillary Clinton were, for many people, so thrilling to support. That’s why hardened political operatives call that kind of enthusiasm “drinking the Kool-Aid.” That’s why, when the fall comes, it’s so painful.

But my therapist, if I understand her, has another take on this. She thinks that people identify too much with candidates. Their ups have become our ups; their downs, ours as well. And by identifying with them so closely, we inevitably make ourselves vulnerable to outside factors, to forces we can’t control. And the more political media we consume — on cable, online, on e-mail, on radio, in print — the more we cultivate the illusion that we ourselves are actual political players, that our advice is urgently needed, that everything depends on our counsel.

I’m totally guilty on this charge. “Grow a pair!” I yell to Obama and Biden when I see them on my screen. “Put McCain on the defensive! Go after his strength! Make the POW thing irrelevant to the presidency! Destroy the ‘maverick’ charade! Call their lies lies!” But my tirades, instead of making me feel better, only underline my powerlessness to second guess the campaign’s strategy or reshape its tone and message.

I don’t mean to diminish the importance of every single citizen in a democracy. Registering to vote, giving money, going door-to-door, working phone banks, expressing our opinions: there is plenty that each of us can do, and the collective action that comes from that commitment can move mountains and make history.

But there is a difference between pitching in and hitching our psyches to the day-to-day vicissitudes of campaignland or to the news media’s breathless “narrative” of the horse race. One is about us, and it is within our power to control what we ourselves do. The other is about them, and it is a kind of annihilation to cede our identity and our well-being to people outside ourselves, whether those people be candidates and commentators — or audiences, critics, velvet-rope guardians, fashionistas, studio executives, admissions committees or that hottie over there at the bar.

As for me, I’m trying to unplug. I’m still reading the papers, but I’ve gone cold turkey — well, room-temperature turkey — on cable (except for C-SPAN and “The Daily Show”), blogs (except for a few), radio (except for NPR) and every other source of political news that I thought I was obligated to mainline in real time 24/7. If I fall off the wagon, maybe there’s some 12-step group for media addicts I can join, or a 1-800-