



THE BLOG 10/26/2015 02:55 pm ET | Updated Oct 26, 2016

The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Candidate



By Marty Kaplan



MARK WILSON VIA GETTY IMAGES

“End this notion that the enemy is the other party. End this notion that it is naïve to think we can speak well of the other party. What is naïve is to think it is remotely possible to govern this country unless we can.”

The speaker was Joe Biden. Along with other Carter administration alumni, I was listening to him at a Washington gala, the finale of a day-long tribute last week to former vice president Walter Mondale (I was Mondale’s chief speechwriter).

Biden was being exceptionally generous with his time. He kicked off the morning at George Washington University (GWU) in conversation with Mondale about the vice presidency. At the end of the afternoon, he and Dr. Jill Biden hosted us at the vice president’s residence, where many of us had not been since Mondale left office. Jimmy Carter traveled from Plains, Ga., for the dinner, looking amazingly well for a 91-year-old in treatment for cancer.

Though none of us knew it, the next morning Biden would announce that he wouldn’t run for president. But that night, I bet few of us doubted that his paean to speaking well of the other party was a zinger aimed at Hillary Clinton.

The week before, at the debate in Las Vegas, she was asked which enemies she was proudest of making. “Well,” she said, “in addition to the NRA, the health insurance companies, the drug companies, the Iranians ... probably the Republicans.” Biden’s reproof: “I don’t think my chief enemy is the Republican Party. This is a matter of making things work.” He later said on *60 Minutes* that he was talking about all of Washington, not singling out Clinton. You decide.

As Biden appealed for bipartisanship, I thought about the journey taken by his boss, President Barack Obama. He came to national attention summoning us to transcend the red/blue divide. He built on Republican policies — Romneycare and cap-and-trade — to frame his own health care and climate change proposals. He gave Republicans leading roles in his cabinet and at his White House summit on health care, and he traveled to Baltimore to be grilled by the GOP House Issues Conference. He

negotiated a grand bargain on entitlement cuts with John Boehner. And in return for extending an open hand across the partisan divide, he was played, betrayed, rolled, stiffed, stymied and stung.

At best, he was seen as a bad poker player; at worst, he was revealed as a political naïf singing Kumbaya to a nest of vipers. It is arguable that after the Democrats' stunning loss of the House in 2010, it was Obama's late realization that Republicans really were his enemy, and that anything he wanted to do would need to be done without them, that has accounted for virtually all his subsequent accomplishments.

If Hillary Clinton is elected president, there is a very slim chance that Democrats will win the Senate, but it would require a miracle to also take back the House. Don't get me wrong: I dream of a wave election, a national revulsion at what the Republican Party has become, a tide so decisive that it sweeps to majorities on both sides of the Hill. But gerrymandering, voter suppression, *Citizens United* and a supine media make it far more likely that the members of Congress with whom she will be urged to "work together" and "arrive at consensus" for the sake of the country, as Biden put it in the Rose Garden the day before she spent 11 hours being prosecuted by them during a hearing about what happened in Benghazi in 2012, will include Benghazi committee members Trey Gowdy, Susan Brooks, Jim Jordan, Mike Pompeo, Martha Roby, Peter Roskam and Lynn Westmoreland, not to mention the Freedom Caucus that Jordan chairs. They're not going away.

Nor are the currents that sent them there. The middle ground is all but gone, according to a Pew Research Center poll last year. Ninety-two percent of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94 percent of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican. Highly negative views of the opposing party have more than doubled since 1994, when the House and Senate were wrested from Bill Clinton's party.

Two-thirds of consistently Republican Americans, and half of consistently Democratic Americans, think that the other party's policies "are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being." Though half the country believes that elected Republicans and Democrats should compromise in the middle, that half is "off the edges of the playing field, distant and disengaged."

Active citizens — primary voters, letter writers, volunteers, donors — are the people least willing to see the parties meet halfway. More than half of consistent conservatives think Republican leaders should get two-thirds of what they want when they negotiate with Democrats, and nearly a quarter of them think Republicans should get 90 percent or more. Almost two-thirds of consistent liberals say Obama should get two-thirds of what he wants, and 16 percent of them think he should get 90 percent or more.

That's the message that will be ringing in the ears of the new Speaker of the House, and it will also be the message that the next president, of either party, will hear most loudly. I'm not sure that's so wrong.

Unlike half the country, I don't think there's any particular virtue in 50/50 compromises. What's the middle ground with Donald Trump on immigration — deporting half of the nation's 12 million undocumented immigrants? Building half a wall? What's 50/50 with Ben Carson on banning abortion in all circumstances — applying the rape and incest exceptions on alternate days?

I can see Biden's point about solving the nation's problems: If you're working toward solutions, why call an advocate of a policy you oppose your "enemy," when "my good friend across the aisle" will do? My reservation is that speaking well of the other party can drain genuinely moral disputes of authentic moral authority.

At that GWU conversation about the vice presidency last week, my jaw dropped, as did Mondale's, when Biden said this about his predecessor to illustrate his point about comity: "I actually like Dick Cheney, for real. I think he's a decent man."

"Decent men," as *Esquire* political blogger Charlie Pierce wrote in reply, "do not torture, nor do they encourage others to do so, nor do they defend the practice by lying about what it really is. Decent men do not oversee the outing of covert CIA agents. Decent men do not help deceive their country into a war and then walk away with the profits. Decent men do not shoot their friends in the face and go for the Scotch bottle before they go for the cops."

I say this with great respect and admiration for our vice president: Dick Cheney is indeed my enemy. And the enemy of my enemy is, I hope, my next president.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan

Do you have information you want to share with HuffPost? Here's how.



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director