

**THE BLOG**

How To Bring America Together (Or, The Idiocy of National Unity)

By Marty Kaplan

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Dear Presidential Candidates:

The men and women of the media are not your friends.

They work for a big business, whose oxygen is attention. They live or die on grabbing and holding audiences. To stay in business, they need combat, conflict, heat, meat, flip-flops, gotchas, losers, boozers, hairpin turns, heroes with feet of clay, Rockys, Quixotes, cliffhangers, firewalkers, comebacks, kickbacks, zingers, 'wingers.

And yet at the same time the media root for and egg on mudwrestling and foodfighting, what they *say* they want is a cathedral — bipartisanship, consensus, a Serious Debate on The Issues, Bringing America Together.

Boy, is that a sucker punch. The truth is, they think that stuff is really b-o-r-i-n-g. No combat = no attention. If you want a case study of the media's ennui with unity, look at how they've covered Bush for the past four years. The country has never been more united in opposing him and his policies; words like "idiot" and "incompetent" are what come to mind first when 70-plus percent of the country think of him, which is as close to a landslide as America ever gets. Yet from the coverage Bush and the Republicans receive, you'd think that his opposition resides in a wild-eyed fringe.

Hey, Hillary Clinton: Junk the juggernaut thing. The media need a narrative that won't stop, and your foregone-conclusion thing ain't it. Your national polls will mean bupkis in Iowa and New Hampshire. In 1984, Walter Mondale went into Iowa with all the trappings of frontrunner invincibility. In an eight-man field, plus uncommitted, he won 48.9%. That's right: with nine choices in the caucuses, he nearly got an absolute majority. Yet it was Gary Hart, whose second-place showing at 16.5% was basically in the toilet, whom the press anointed not-Mondale. Hart became a phenom; his distant Iowa loss was the match that lit a national media firestorm. Game on! said the press. It's a horserace! Pay attention! In the week between Iowa and New Hampshire, Mondale dropped 8 points in New Hampshire, while Hart surged 13 points, won, and nearly knocked Mondale out of the race. I know, I know: some people think that would have been a good thing. But my point isn't to rerun that campaign; it's to remind the frontrunner that for the press, juggernaut = boring = just shoot me.

Hey, Barack Obama: Your turn-the-page, bring-America-together message was a terrific curtain-raiser. It got the press's attention: Something different! But you need a second act. And you're not going to find it in the audacity of hope, for one big reason:

The voters are not your friend. That is, what voters tell pollsters about what they want from politics is useless to you.

Sure, Americans say they want leaders who get things done, work across the aisle, put partisanship aside for the common good, blah blah blah. They also say they eat vegetables. The reality is that there is no voting majority in postpartisanship, and for good reason.

The majority of Democrats — hell, the majority of Americans — are boiling with outrage at Bush and the Republicans. You know what? They're right. They don't want a new president who'll make nice with Mitch McConnell and James Dobson; they want someone who'll smash them to smithereens. This is no time for Jerry Ford's "our long national nightmare is over," his "healing" pardon of Nixon; this is a time to bring lawbreakers to the bar of justice, to make Constitutional criminals accountable. This is no moment for "the issue is competence, not ideology," Dukakis's losing message; this is a moment to break the stranglehold of religious extremists on government, and to call a liar a liar. This is no season for third-party or fusion-folly Perots or Bloombergs; this a season for reclaiming politics from billionaires, for making Party mean something, not nothing.

Hey, John Edwards: You've got the Two Americas thing down, and no one's going to call you Republican lite. But the only message the media is letting the voters hear from you is Inauthentic. The trial lawyers money turns your hose-out-Washington message to mud. To the press, the big house and the four-Benjamins coif expose your populism as politics-as-usual. The storytellers and gatekeepers in the circus that politics has become are never going to pronounce you not-Hillary (and not-Bush) until you first become not-Haircut. Confession, rehab, renewal: that's what your story needs now. You can't skip a chapter in your narrative; the media will only let you get from today's phony firebrand to tomorrow's populist president if you first walk through the valley of the shadow of Oprah.

Hey, Al Gore. That's all I have for you. Just "hey." Dunno what else to say.

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