



THE BLOG 11/06/2008 05:12 am ET Updated May 25, 2011

Let Bygones (Not) Be Bygones



By Marty Kaplan

That's it?

Twelve-hundred-and-eight words, and we're supposed to forget the months of ugly that came before?

Not so fast.

"I urge all Americans who supported me to join me in not just congratulating him, but offering our next president our goodwill and earnest effort to find ways to come together."

A gracious gesture, and - poof! - the "Country First" ticket is off the hook, just like that, for the lying, red-baiting, character assassination, rabble-rousing, and calculated polarization that preceded it?

I don't think so.

A dog that behaved that badly would be sent to obedience school. A child who was that reckless would face consequences up the wazoo. But just because Americans are good people, a campaign's end requires us to willingly come down with a national case of amnesia?

Gimme a break.

What an insult it is to the idea of accountability, this notion that responsibility for the ugly emotions unleashed by demagoguery is wiped away by a concession speech. What an affront to the dignity of democracy, this remorseless draining of meaning from language, this quadrennial rush to retroactively trivialize our public discourse.

The most pernicious aspect of the media-political complex we are saddled with is its addiction to postmodern irony. Educated people are supposed to understand that politics is just theater, a pageant designed to entertain us, a Punch

and Judy show whose audience realizes it's not real. Politics is only a game, you see, a sport — a blood sport, to be sure, but the teams aren't actually warriors, they're performers, and their combat is ritual, not real.

You think these candidates mean what they say? Grow up, says the professional commentariat. Don't you get it? These politicians are winking at you. They know it's just kabuki. Don't take this stuff seriously.

So John McCain — while claiming that not he's not impugning Barack Obama's patriotism — impugns Barack Obama's patriotism, but we're supposed to understand that it doesn't really matter, because that's just what people do in campaigns.

So Sarah Palin says that Obama pals around with terrorists, and she incites her crowds to look for pitchforks, but we're supposed to believe that Pandora can just shoo the evil back into the box come Election Day.

So Rudy Giuliani bares his teeth on national television, but because he laughs with startled delight at the rancor he unleashes in his listeners, we're supposed to construe his snarling as a harmless charade.

So the ads on America's airwaves relentlessly pound into our national psyche the message that "liberal" is akin to traitor, that Obama is dishonorable, that he is opportunistically lying when he claims to dissent from "God damn America" — and the press covers the slurs as merely tactical maneuvers, as though the country could just take a shower once the campaign is over and wash the silly slime off its body, as though no damage had been done to the nation because no one serious takes any of this stuff seriously.

Yes, I know that some of Obama's ads earned the ire of independent fact checkers. I realize that political rhetoric isn't the same thing as sworn testimony. And I recognize that campaigns in America's past have crawled with calumny even worse than this one.

But I also think that our yearning for post-election healing, our hunger for common ground, is risky. There is something wonderfully redemptive in our belief in national reconciliation. But there is also in it something naïve and self-destructive and dangerous.

Have we so quickly forgotten the rank hypocrisy of George W. Bush running as "a uniter, not a divider"? Have we no recollection of the fatuous hollowness of his inaugural promises to reach across the aisle? Is it too dispiriting to recall that his search for common ground turned out to mean "my way or the highway"? Is it just too difficult to remember the eight years during which principled dissent was demonized as being "with the terrorists"?

On Inauguration Day, no doubt Barack Obama will come up with something gracious to say about the worst president in history, just as he was generous in his victory speech to John McCain and Sarah Palin, and open-armed to their supporters.

But it does no good to pretend that the politics of personal destruction is harmless to democracy, to ignore how corrosive campaigns can be, to comfort oneself — as the punditocracy does — with the sophisticated nostrum that it's only politics, so get over it.

Call me churlish, but I think that along with the privilege of living in a democracy comes the obligation to be accountable for your actions. And if you think that words — the currency of campaigns — aren't actions, if you believe that rhetoric doesn't matter, if you treat politics as just another branch of show biz, well then, you're pretty much a sitting duck for the next demagogue to come along.

Forgive and forget? Not just yet.