

**THE BLOG****Rockwell Redux**

By Marty Kaplan

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Norman Rockwell got it wrong – America doesn't look like the faces around the table he painted – but the Pilgrims had ninety Indians at their first harvest feast, and it's hard to imagine a more striking image of common ground than that one. The Pilgrims fled England in search of religious tolerance, and despite the subsequent intolerance they exhibited, let alone the mayhem their descendants inflicted on Native Americans, the idea of shared values has always been part of our civic religion. The signers of the Mayflower Compact pledged to “covenant and combine ourselves together ...for the General good.” Pluralism, diversity, *e pluribus unum*: this is the yearning that persists, despite our heartbreaking failure to achieve it.

It was this core American aspiration that George W. Bush campaigned on. “I'm a uniter, not a divider,” he told the nation. “I refuse to play the politics of putting people into groups and pitting one group against another.” It's no surprise that so many welcomed that message, along with the promise of reaching across the political aisle. There may be some Americans who insist on winning at all costs – religious zealots, football coaches, Hollywood agents – but most people would gladly exchange the paradigm of perennial conflict for the dream of common values.

Of course the reality of the Bush Administration was a textbook exercise in wedge politics. Karl Rove is a master at igniting divisive passions, even when those passions require the subordination of one's own economic interests. Abortion, gay marriage, stem cells, end-of-life issues, immigration, affirmative action, tax cuts, Vietnam, “intelligent design,” Social Security, the “liberal media”: every issue has for the Republicans been an opportunity not to find common ground, but to create culture war battlegrounds.

For five years now, Bush, Cheney, Frist, DeLay and their *faux*-journalist surrogates have relentlessly attempted to divide red from blue, neighbor from neighbor, generation from generation, race from race, class from class. The Republican Congress even went so far as to prevent votes on bills that would require bipartisan support to pass; the only victories worth having were strict party-line votes which could be used to attack Democrats come election time.

At first, the politics of polarization worked well for them. But by the time of his second inaugural, a CNN poll showed the country evenly split between those who thought Bush a uniter, and those who believed him to be a divider. Today, of course, the joke is that he has finally succeeded in uniting the country, and the world, against him. Majorities now believe that he can't be trusted, lied us into war, isn't competent, doesn't care about people like us, has steered the

country onto the wrong track... and once the wave of corruption indictments gets going on the Hill, the country will also likely be united in the belief that Republicans have a lock on the sleaze factor.

The challenge now for Democrats is how to maintain the sharp edge of opposition while at the same time affirming people's yearning for common ground. Fights are fine, as long as their goal is unity; wasn't that what the Civil War was about? There will be much nonsense urged in the name of winning the support of swing voters, centrists, moderates, independents. It will be nonsense because it will seek clever, focus-grouped, poll-tested solutions that triangulate differences instead of mediating them, that reframe issues via rhetoric instead of recommitting to them via policies.

The alternative is authenticity, telling the truth, taking risks, doing the hard work of finding the highest common denominator. A coalition built on pabulum ("Together, America can do better" is the one going around now) is hardly worth the victory, and won't yield a mandate. Instead of pursuing disengaged, fence-sitting voters who can't make up their mind until just before the election, why don't we go after passionate people, both within our base, and beyond it? There may be a rock bottom of thirty percent of the country that will never desert Bush, but that still leaves plenty of engaged, committed citizens who might join with us – not because we lure them with Republican Lite, but because we are far better trustees of the values they voted for when they voted for Bush, who spat in their face, and called that America.

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