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Sandy Hook, Sandy and the Politics of Learned Helplessness



By Marty Kaplan

“We have got to get Michelle to make this her priority.”

It was my friend Judith, a wise woman, a mother and grandmother, on the phone from across the country, the evening of the day of the Newtown massacre, trying to figure out how to enlist the first lady in a campaign against gun violence.

From the email Judith wrote her: “Unless from the top with unyielding outrage we rein in and destroy the gun lobby — unless we stigmatize the NRA as we stigmatized the Ku Klux Klan — we will be robbed of any claim we have to our children’s and grandchildren’s respect.”

She was calling to get my help to get Michelle Obama’s attention. I was appalled by how effortlessly cynical was the response that came out of my mouth.

This one is different, I said. That’s what everyone is saying, and it’s true. Mowing down first-graders with a Bushmaster (“for us, building rifles and carbines is more than a job — it’s a passion”) turns a new page in hell.

But even if Michelle Obama does take this on; even if her husband, freed from the calculus of re-election, summons us in a soaring second inaugural to curb the culture of gun violence; even if in his State of the Union address to Congress he demands a ban on assault weapons, on high-count magazines and on armor-piercing bullets, and he calls for an end to firearms sales at gun shows, and requests funds for mental health screening and violence prevention — no matter what the first lady or the president or millions of mothers marching on Washington or the rest of us may say or do, neither the House nor the Senate will pass such a law. The NRA is simply too powerful. There are too many cowards in Congress, on both sides of the aisle, who will protect their seats before they protect their fellow citizens.

By the end of the weekend, I realized that “cynical” isn’t the right word to describe my reaction to Judith’s idea to recruit Michelle Obama. Nor is Realpolitik. Here’s what it is: learned helplessness — a 21st century disease of the American soul, born of the dysfunction of our political system. It’s the sinking admission that we are powerless to be the change we’ve been waiting for. It’s the painful evidence that the Washington deck is stacked against the kind of gun regulation that even cops and most of the NRA’s own members favor. It’s the gut-punching recognition that no horror, however unspeakable, will turn that around. This wail is a civic sickness, and I got it bad, and that ain’t good.

And it’s not just about guns.

The devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy was widely characterized as a wake-up call on climate change. It dragged the global environmental crisis into the U.S. presidential campaign at the eleventh hour, after its disgraceful absence from national debate. It was hailed as a shot of courage for timid lawmakers to consider a carbon tax, and to abjure the myth of “clean coal,” and to confront the real risks of exploiting oil shale and tar sands. It was an opportunity to alert the public to the fraudulent claim that scientists differ on climate change, a hoax financed by the fossil fuel industry and modeled on the phony controversy over cigarettes causing cancer that was manufactured by Big Tobacco. At the end of August, in Tampa, Mitt Romney got laughs for saying, “President Obama promised to slow the rise of the oceans and to heal the planet”; only two months later, when Sandy brought misery and death to the eastern seaboard, it became clear that the joke was on us.

Public opinion polls bear that up. The same day as the Sandy Hook slayings, an [Associated Press-Gfk poll](#) was released; it found that 4 out of 5 Americans say global warming will be a serious U.S. problem unless action is taken to reduce it. “Belief and worry about climate change,” said the AP,

“are inching up among Americans in general, but concern is growing faster among people who don’t often trust scientists on the environment. In follow-up interviews, some of those doubters said they believe their own eyes as they’ve watched thermometers rise, New York City subway tunnels flood, polar ice melt and Midwestern farm fields dry up.”

Reporting this poll, *The Hill*, a Capitol Hill newspaper, told its congressional readers that “57 percent of adults believe the U.S. government should do a ‘great deal’ about global warming.” Will it? I can imagine inspiring words about climate change from the president in January. I can believe that grass-roots efforts like Bill McKibben’s 350.org will continue to gain traction on college campuses. I have no doubt that the more stories about climate change that Americans hear and see, the more they will demand action from their representatives.

But as things stand, it is virtually inconceivable to me that our lawmakers will rise to the challenge. The petroleum industry swings as big a bat in Washington as the gun lobby. Even if the president has the second-term courage to propose it, our corrupt campaign finance system won’t make an enlightened exception for a cap-and-trade bill. The fear of losing a race exceeds the fear of losing a planet.

Are special interests invincible? No, and each counter-example is a ray of hope, something we could all use this season. Last August, in the heat of the campaign, President Obama courageously doubled fuel efficiency standards by 2025, which will cut greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light trucks in half. When the assault weapons ban that expired in 2004 was passed in 1994, it was called “a blow to the credibility and power of the nation’s gun lobby,” proof that the “NRA is no longer bullet proof.” Still, I can’t help noting that the CAFE standards were raised by executive action, and didn’t require the assent of the Tea Party Congress. Or that the 1994 assault weapons ban was able to pass the House (by a razor-thin margin of 216 votes) because the NRA suffered 38 Republican defections, led by GOP leader Bob Michel of Illinois, who arguably was able to reverse his previous opposition to the ban because he — like several NRA-friendly Democrats who also voted for it — was about to retire from Congress. That fall, when Newt Gingrich and the Republicans took over the House, the narrative was born, and persists to this day, that bucking the NRA is political suicide.

This time around, I’d love my pessimism to be proven wrong. I’d be thrilled if Michelle Obama were the answer. I’d be grateful to rekindle my confidence in democracy. Learned helplessness is the status quo’s most pernicious enabler, and I welcome any ladder out of this pit. But whether it’s guns or climate change, poverty or plutocracy, war or water: whatever problem most troubles any of us, I’m convinced that the way forward requires a transformational solution to the power of money and fear to determine our national fate.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you’d like.

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