

PURIM 2005

Looking back on 2004, I see the face of a woman. She's sitting in a coffee shop in Friendship Heights -- or is it Brooklyn Heights, or perhaps Shaker Heights? She has a grimace on her face, a look of disgust. She's thinking about her country and its electorate. They make her feel alienated, superior, and above all else, perplexed. Most of them are so much poorer than she is, but they support a party whose policies advance only the interests of the wealthiest few.

“There's no end in sight,” she tells herself. “These voters are now mobilized, they've shown up in record numbers to do the bidding of the Geppetos who pull their strings. We can't outsmart those Geppetos. We never could. They're relentless and unscrupulous. They'll stop at nothing to brainwash the masses. And we liberals are too ethical for that. We're always tying a hand behind our back. That's why we're condemned to live in the minority, forever hoping for the next political genius, the next William Jefferson Clinton, to come along and hold the fort for eight years before another onslaught of reactionary policies rushes over us like a tsunami.

“Crap. It's time to pick up my daughter from her guitar lesson. At least she's showing some progress as a musician. I should think more about her and less about this stupid country.”

The coffee house grimace is the face of inaction, of resignation. When you think about it, it's also the face of lunacy. Why give up? Social landscapes change. So do values and voting patterns. The only questions are: When and how? Residents of Friendship Heights can have as much to say about the answers as residents of Fort Wayne or Frankfort.

Tonight, I'm going to address my comments primarily to my fellow Blue Americans. But in a deeper sense, my intended audience is anyone who believes in the value of having two viable political parties, and not just one.

We liberals should see our predicament for what it is: our best chance in decades to define our collective identities. That's right – having hit rock bottom, we ourselves can freely decide how to climb back to the top. We don't have to pander any more on wars, social issues, or our choice of leaders – we've tried that, we've tried cavorting around Iowa, New Hampshire and the rest of purple America like hookers on jubilee day, and we still couldn't give it away. So we might as well just be ourselves.

Of course, we first better figure out what that means. And we really ought to figure that out together. To that end, I suggest that rather than vilifying our vanquishers, we learn from them instead. Red America can offer important lessons as to how a minority of Americans can take over every branch of our government. One GOP politician was especially effective in tapping into the chord of the hinterland and converting purple states and even blue states into red ones. Let's begin by considering his legacy.

Like all self-respecting liberals, I've never liked this man. When he was President, the number of families living in poverty increased by a third, reflecting cuts in Medicaid, Food Stamps, AFDC and the school lunch programs. The national debt tripled. Workplace safety standards were rolled back. So were protections for federal lands. Over 130 officials under his

command resigned under an ethical cloud or were indicted. Fascistic dictators were coddled, including Saddam Hussein. And the AIDS epidemic was ignored for years at the cost of countless lives. The man himself offered his own explanation for that epidemic: “Maybe the Lord brought down this plague because illicit sex is against the Ten Commandments.”

Maybe. Then again, maybe the Lord isn't a total schmuck. In any event, in probably the worst indictment of my society I can muster, this neanderthal has of necessity become one of my greatest political role models.

With Ronald Reagan, this country knew exactly what it was getting. Say what you want about President Reagan, the environmental butcher, but Candidate Reagan told us flat out in 1980 where his presidency was headed when he blamed trees for nitrogen oxide pollution. In the area of foreign policy, Reagan held himself out as an unabashed Cold Warrior, and sure enough, that's how he governed – for better as well as worse. As for his economic policies, Reagan made no secret of his supply side ideas: he would throw money at the wealthy, and they would be responsible for finding jobs for the poor. His opponent in the primaries, George H.W. Bush, referred to his economic plan as voodoo economics and, sure enough, under Reagan's watch, the rich got richer and the poor poorer. But at least Reagan told us to expect a reverse Robin Hood. We couldn't accuse the man of bait and switch. He gave us a clear, meaningful choice and told us precisely where he stood. This, folks, is the way democracy is supposed to work.

Candidate Reagan was unabashedly pro life at a time when most Americans were pro choice. Candidate Reagan was a loud proponent of the trickle down theory at a time when only a fringe group of economists took it seriously. Candidate Reagan espoused the idea of America actually *winning* the Cold War when it appeared to be the quintessential example of the lose-lose stalemate. Candidate Reagan took on Big Government in one area after another, even in contexts where the Government was popular. And yet, somehow, Candidate Reagan won the 1980 election. That's right – a B-movie actor, without a stellar academic record, without any particular claim to superior intelligence, and who disagreed with mainstream America on many, if not most political issues somehow convinced America to send him to Washington. By 1984, when he'd had a chance to govern for four years, this same “fringe right winger” had somehow convinced the people of Taxachusetts to vote for him. Nevertheless, Blue America refuses to learn from his example. We'd rather cry in our cappuccinos.

Ideology and partisan politics aside, three things immediately come to mind about Candidate Reagan: (1) the manner in which he communicated to us, (2) the relative emphasis that he placed on vision and values versus competence, and (3) the extent to which he appeared to have the courage of his convictions.

They called Reagan the “Great Communicator.” But why? His style was as simple as his arguments. His phrases lacked literary merit. His command of the language was nothing special. What he understood was his audience and the need to speak comfortably to them as one of their own. Reagan never condescended to us. He didn't speak formally, as if he were competing for debating points. And he didn't sound like a performer on a stage. He spoke as if he were engaged in a fireside chat. He knew that his role was to play the regular guy. That's the

only kind we can trust. He knew that if he could come across to average Americans as a friend, they would forgive *so* many trespasses. They would even forgive odd beliefs or failed policies.

By contrast, the Democrats have given us robots masquerading as men. One of them was Mike Dukakis, he of the Massachusetts Miracle. Remember what dude looked like in the tank? He was the second coming of the Great Gazoo from the Flintstones. Dukakis famously suggested that he deserved our vote because the election was “about competence, not ideology.” Candidate Reagan knew better. Elections aren't about competence. As we've seen, *re-elections* aren't even about competence. Elections are about communication styles and about visions grounded in strong moral values.

Blue politicians love to talk about their five-part plans. Reagan loved to talk about a few simple, value-laden ideas and dreams. He dreamt of a day when the USSR no longer controlled the lives of half of Europe with a totalitarian grip, or when the American Government no longer strangled the competitive juices of the American economy. He expressed those dreams in simple terms. He told us what he loved. And he told us what he couldn't stand. We instinctively saw that there was a man who would be a decisive and inspired leader.

Last, but not least, Reagan came across as a politician of courage. We saw that with every position he adopted that strayed from the political center. Lately, Democratic politicians have loved to talk about how much they agree with America “on the issues.” And I mean *every* issue. Remember how Kerry and Edwards both supported the Iraq War when our army was lighting up that country like a pinball machine? Did they *really* support the war, or were they just pandering? Then there's the debate over gay marriage. Kerry and Edwards both said they were against it, but America never believed them. Did you? It's strange how most Democrats on the street have views that aren't necessarily popular, but our political leaders feel compelled to side with the Gallop Poll on virtually every national debate. Perhaps that's just a coincidence. Or perhaps, these men are full of crap. There's always that tiny possibility, isn't there? Say what you want about Reagan's lack of wisdom or IQ, but he seemed to say what he believed and Americans trusted him for it. If they don't trust you, they won't vote for you. It's that simple.

Let's fast forward to 2004. Candidate Bush didn't have the freedom Reagan did in 1980 to create a platform out of whole cloth. He was forced to play the role of the world's most powerful man who was partially responsible for the sorry state of the union and, indeed, the world. He presided over a lackluster economy. And he led his nation into a war based on weapons that turned out to be non-existent. In fact, not only had that war resulted in more than a thousand dead Americans, but it eroded international respect for his nation. With the Democrats understandably united in the goal of wresting him from office, Bush had a tough sales job ahead of him.

So what did he do? He appealed to values and vision. He robed himself in the Jeffersonian dream, only he purported to dream it for much of the world, not simply for this country. Bush proclaimed that he would usher in freedom and democracy in places that would surely destroy America unless their people were liberated from tyranny. Domestically, he would rescue Americans from the threat of moral relativism – exemplified by fetus killing as a form of

birth control or the willingness to destroy the institution of marriage simply to appease the gay lobby. Most importantly, in a time of turbulence, he would govern the country with the decisiveness of the best generals and the faith of the best ministers.

Bush came across as a man of God and a man of the people. And what was the result of his message and presentation? More Americans voted for George W. Bush than any other Presidential candidate *ever*.

In the end, Candidate Bush pulled it off by tapping into the power of myth. It's the same power that underlies the appeal of any successful organized religion. In fact, the Bush myth is one that resonates with our nation's culture on both political *and* religious terms. That, my friends, is a devastating combination. If we're to compete with this myth, we on the left must come up with a compelling political/religious myth of our own.

How did Candidate Bush create such a potent selling tool? He didn't. It has been in the GOP's back pocket ever since 1980. Much to the dismay of Jimmy Carter and all but one of his successor Democratic nominees, Reagan handed his nation and his party the image of a mythic hero who has become for the American presidency what James Bond became for the British secret service. Bush merely took the suit off the rack and put it on.

The Reagan myth was so conventionally American that it could easily have been manufactured in Universal Studios. Reagan was America's every man – devout, optimistic and willing to call out evil whenever he spotted it. He sought out Washington not because he liked the Establishment but in spite of it. He would work for freedom and to make this nation prosperous for God-fearing, law-abiding Americans. If that meant fighting the elites who ran Washington, so be it. He relished the fight.

That myth started a revolution in our political culture. Liberals have come to be seen as a fringe group that somehow mysteriously controls the media and the government. Northeasterners have come to appear less “American” than midwesterners or southerners. Taxes are viewed primarily as intrusions on liberty. And what used to be called “tolerant” is perceived as an abdication of ethics and the very antithesis of a commitment to religious values.

Since Reagan, many a GOP politician has been able to step up to the plate and invoke the same myth, whereas would-be Democratic myth makers have typically failed even to get to the on-deck circle. In fact, the playing field is easier now for GOP politicians than for Reagan, as the audience is so much more receptive. Evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews are growing in number. How could they not, given their divine calling to be fruitful and multiply, which appears to mean multiply geometrically, not arithmetically. At their side, in defense of the new theocracy, is the power of traditional Catholicism. As recently as the 1980s, the Catholic bishops flexed their muscle in support of economic justice. They wished to call attention to the plight of the poor. More recently, however, a dozen or more bishops were issuing missives against a certain Senator Kerry because he dared to support a woman's right to choose an abortion. It appears that no matter how much more the Democrats fight for the poor than the GOP, until they are willing to speak for the unborn, they can't possibly demonstrate their sincerity as people of

faith – at least not according to a growing number of Catholics. Bush was re-elected largely on the basis of a Catholic majority, which he couldn't win against Gore.

Week after week, conservative Americans head to their churches where they encounter like minded individuals and consider society's fundamental moral questions. As labor unions become less and less of a factor in American political life, is there any doubt that religious institutions have filled the void? According to one study, Americans are now 3 ½ times as likely to develop civic skills in houses of worship than in union halls. And by civic skills – which include public speaking, letter writing, organizing activities, and chairing meetings – we're talking about the basic components of political activism. In their churches, political conservatives develop a sense of the sacred and the profane. Social topics like gay marriages and abortion rights take center stage because they deal with basic issues of morality and the teachings of scripture, the very hub of organized religion.

“It's the economy, stupid,” said the managers of the last successful Democratic campaign. But is that really a winning slogan these days? At the houses of worship where values are discussed on a weekly basis, economics is barely worthy of mention. Why sermonize about something as complex as fiscal or monetary policy when you can talk instead about homosexuals and Hollywood? Let's face it – most Americans live pretty well, especially most American voters. Our daily bread doesn't depend on which political party is elected. Church goers can afford to vote instead based on the values that the candidates invoke. They can afford to select a politician whose moral compass appears to be closest to their own, even if they disagree with the politician about whether the highest tax rate should be 25%, 33% or 40%. Figures, like facts, aren't the stuff that mythology is made of.

So what do we tell the despondent woman at the coffee shop? That all her party has to do is find a politician who gets it? Someone willing to invoke quasi-religious mythical themes, who comes across as sincere, and who's able to relate to the average American? It's not that simple. We Blue Staters have a problem that goes well beyond our leaders. The bigger culprit is ourselves. That's right. We actually have a role to play – other than to vote, donate money and kvetch. And here's the scary part: to play this role, we've got to put in “quantity” time. And I don't just mean during election years; I mean *now*!

If we Democrats want to take this country back over the long haul, we can't expect compelling religious mythology to flow like water from the Governor's mansions in flyover states. We had that hope with Clinton, and all he left us with is cum stains on a blue dress. To compete with the GOP, our mythology must grow organically from the churches and synagogues – or, if you prefer, from the secular humanist town meetings. We, the rank and file, must habituate ourselves to take time off each week from our precious careers and our even more precious and adorable children, and come together in the name of something greater. Only then will we develop the moral claim, let alone the political know-how, to defeat our rivals in Red.

At present, Democrats remind me of Punxsutawney Phil, the ground hog – burying our heads week after week, month after month, until finally we pop up just in time for the big event. We're already symbolized by one unimpressive animal; we don't need to resemble a second.

I understand why so many Democrats are alienated by organized religion. All the nonsense, all the wars fought on her behalf, all the divisiveness, all the condescension – if you consider only that side of the equation, you come up with quite a shop of horrors. But folks, whether we like it or not, we liberals can't regain power unless we embrace some kind of spiritual group. Maybe Judaism. Or Islam. Or Buddhism. Or Humanism. Take your pick. In some way, shape or form, we need to become active participants in a spiritual community. We simply must take the time to assemble on a regular basis in the name of something that transcends five-point plans and lock boxes. We can't continue to bring knives to a gunfight.

What am I talking about? Consider all the political benefits to the Republicans of gathering weekly in religious communities while we watch TV, work on our legal briefs, or shuttle our dear ones to French enrichment. First, our opponents have found a forum to test out their ideas on a regular basis. This helped them learn which ideas resonate with the common person, and which fall flat, except to special interest groups. If they were in our position, you wouldn't see them wasting any political capital on partial birth abortions, for example.

Second, the churches force conservative politicians to pitch ideas that appeal to the heart, not just the mind. Otherwise, the ideas won't go over well in a religious setting. This also enables the conservatives to become more idealistic and less willing to side with the robots who emerge from careers in Washington. Ours is a lovely town, really. But as a breeding ground for inspiring minds, it doesn't even grade out at a Gentleman's D.

Third, as I've alluded, houses of worship are responsible for spreading political activism all over middle America. Conservatives care more about politics, know more about politics and get more involved in politics because of their churches.

Fourth, churches help to keep conservative politicians on the straight and narrow by enunciating a code full of responsibilities, and not merely of rights. Famous people are always at risk of getting into trouble, but those steeped in religion – rather than those who simply pander to it – are probably less likely to risk their futures over a bottle of booze or a gaggle of bimbos.

Fifth, the inspiration that conservatives gain in church and then bring to the airwaves eventually alters fundamental notions in American culture. Thanks to these people, “pro life” doesn't mean anti war, anti capital punishment or pro universal health care. It means pro fetus. The majority of Americans believe in a woman's right to choose, but on this issue, the pro-choice politicians are now on the defensive, and we all have the churches to thank for that.

Last, but far from least, the weekly presence of many millions of conservative Americans at houses of worship lends legitimacy to the candidates they support. To reiterate, while we Democrats are devoting our weekends looking out for self and family, the conservatives are looking up to God and praying for the world. Tell me – who are the selfish and parochial ones, us or them? They're at least *trying* to give a damn about the rest of us, while we're being self-centered. We'd love to pray more, we'd love to read more, we'd love to do more, but we're way too busy. Oi vay, are we swamped!

You can choose to ignore the truth if it's too painful. But the fact is that when these conservative communities of faith rally around a politician who appears to have integrity and courage, and who speaks as one who is *of* these communities, and not above them, it cloaks these politicians with the garb of spirituality. Dukakis, Gore and Kerry may come across as decent, intelligent men, but Bush and Reagan come across in middle America as spiritual men. I ask you which image appeals more to the electorate.

So let's say the woman in the coffee shop buys my argument, leaves Starbucks, hops in her minivan and resolves to join a religious community that can stand toe to toe with the Fundamentalists. If she's Jewish, she might consider joining a Reform congregation. That's certainly a collection of people willing to embrace American political liberalism.

Straight out of the box, she'll see just how steep the barrier is to accomplishing on our side what the conservatives have perfected on theirs. Many Reform Jews don't see the inside of a synagogue unless they've been invited to a Bar Mitzvah. Others come regularly – but that often means regularly twice a year on the High Holidays. A third group attends even more often, but only because they have to drop their kiddies off at religious school, where the dear ones learn the Hebrew culture, history and language. It's a wonderful complement to French enrichment.

Even those who are active in Reform congregations aren't likely to hear much that is very provocative or controversial. The fact is that most of us are successful in material ways and extremely prideful. We might come to synagogue looking for a little spiritual uplift, but we're hardly looking for a rabbi to give hard-hitting sermons about public policy. After all, we're Jews. We're as educated as rabbis about public policy matters. Why do we need them to tell us the answers?

Actually, answering the tough questions isn't a rabbi's job at all. A “rabbi” you see, literally means a “teacher,” not an oracle. The great ones inspire us with warmth, wisdom and guts. They'll turn their love into passion and bare themselves whenever they make a plea. Their job is to make us *care* about the issues of fundamental significance to our collective spirits – which would definitely include public policy issues. Successful rabbis can make the members of their community feel engaged about those issues, just like the Fundamentalists now feel engaged. Liberal congregations had better plead with their rabbis to address these issues directly and provocatively, and worry not about the risk of being wrong. All they need to do is open the dialogue and keep the flame lit. We laypeople will take care of the rest.

From a religious standpoint, communities aren't simply support groups for our happiness. They're empowering vehicles in our efforts to lift up our world. Only when we feel that we're part of communities that can make a difference on those issues can we create the infrastructure necessary to take this culture and this country back from the people currently in charge.

In short, we have to wage a war for America's soul. And we must wage it by tapping into our religious and political traditions and forging a new mythology that can truly compete with the ruling mythology of the day. They say they're pro life – they who hunt for pleasure, cry out

for capital punishment, support wars that they must strain to defend, and tolerate a health care system for the rich only. Fine. Let us show them how much *we* value life and expose their tolerance for needless death and destruction. They say they're pro charity – they who accept cuts in Medicaid and a rise in poverty, and whose leaders drive around in Mercedes Benzes. Fine. Let's prove to them how much *we* value charity and how their view of charity has fallen short. They claim to be anti bigotry and pro marriage, and they make this claim even as they would deny marriage to consenting adults because of those adults' sexual preferences. Fine. Let's prove to them how much *we* value marriage and how terms like “civil union” should leave them cold. They say they love God's creation – they who support politicians who would bulldoze the most beautiful acreage on God's green earth and who would permit permanent climate change? Let us show them how much *we* care about God's creation and how their leaders have been *playing* God, not honoring God.

Others cry about Bush's election as if it has killed off all hope. I say the crying must stop. Successful mythology needs to be based on hope. Hope and love. Those are the two most critical ingredients, but there are others, too. Here's a third – *patience*. If we're overly worried about the next election, if we're freaking out that the loss of one more election will cause the sky to fall, we'll just delay the work that has to be done. Folks, before the last election, a number of us mused that this would be the most important election of our lifetimes. Well, darned if we didn't lose it. But maybe we deserved to lose. And maybe we needed to lose in order to find our true voices for the future.

Now we must dust ourselves off and prepare for a long, hard slog, as that great philosopher, Donald Rumsfeld, would say. The war shouldn't be over the next election. It should be over the meaning of virtue. And the meaning of wisdom. And the meaning of piety.

Are we willing to put in the time – not the time to get together socially and vent, but the time to ground ourselves in spirituality and then identify leaders who can inspire our fellow Americans with their passion and their wisdom? Truly, all of this comes down to our dedication. Are we willing to de-emphasize in our lives our jobs, our chores and our families? If we aren't, we should have the class to shut up and let the conservative churchgoers govern. At least they'll be praying for us while we're in the office or at the soccerplex. Personally, I'd rather they pray for us while we're regularly occupying the White House and controlling the Supreme Court. But first, we must earn that power. What do you say?