

A New American Rhetoric, Please

I'm an average American, I think. Not especially well off, nor especially poor. Not a "young" voter or a "senior" (though I admit my *golden years* appear to be nearing at a much faster pace of late). I tear up when I hear our national anthem, and often when I watch the evening news. I care about people and believe together we can accomplish great things, and that we should take good care of each other; I also believe in individual responsibility, and the power of the individual to affect change. I believe in a multi-party system because I believe discourse and disagreement are necessary and productive when aiming for a common good. I vote in every election. I'm proud of my country and I value my freedom. I don't take it for granted, and I appreciate and respect the work of those who protect it. I believe my patriotism is a reflection of these things - both my individual and our collective goals and ideals. I understand patriotism as an expansive concept - beautiful, resonant and powerful in its complexity and depth. It angers me when the idea of patriotism is co-opted and used toward confused and selfish ends, and when our leaders call upon it as though it were a shallow, simple, lapel-pin ideal. This saddens and frightens me, as well. As we struggle to rebuild a broken America, I'm pondering the nature of our public discourse.

As humans struggle to shape an emerging global community, Americans are engaged in a new process of self-reflection, perhaps similar to our early days as a nation. Well-worn paths to security and power now instead weaken us. Old ways of operating in the world no longer serve us, but we seem confused and uncertain of what new direction to take. If we want new answers about how to move confidently into our future, we must ask new questions - maybe deeper questions than we've had to ask before. We've grown up some as a nation, but our public discourse has not. Our public figures can seem short-sighted and hopelessly self-serving at best, and blind to the consequences of their actions at worst. Change is clearly the operative word here, rallied behind by all, but with the machinery of public discussion attempting different self-serving, politically correct spins from every political angle. I want to encourage us to focus not only on changes in our behavior, but also on a change in our essential point of view. I've been asking myself new questions.

What makes America strong? Not the might of our armies - The importance of a strong defense is understood, but history proves time and again that the smaller force often prevails through inventiveness or surprise. Not the magnitude or deadliness of our weapons - People will always be vulnerable in unexpected places, or be caught unaware on one flank while protecting another. Not the size of our national ego, the braggadocio of self-righteous leaders, or our stubbornness when it comes to engaging in true dialogue with others - Who appears stronger, the man who boasts of his great power, or the man who demonstrates his power by listening to the concerns of others and quietly working to help those in need? Pure common sense teaches that the green, supple branch is always stronger than the dry, rigid one. There is a chasm of difference between a supple self-confidence and a rigidity born of fear.

What makes us strong is the depth of our compassion, the sharpness of our intellect, and our ability to put our great good fortune as a nation to work for a common global good. What makes us strong is our common sense and our level heads. It is our responsibility as a mature nation to lead a broad global conversation about the best solutions to the needs of our planet and its peoples. Our attention is not consumed by endemic sectarian violence, government-sanctioned genocide, decades-long drought, mass starvation, or a raging AIDS epidemic so large it leaves an entire culture of orphans in its wake. This is not to say that many Americans are not engaged in a daily effort to help those of our own who suffer - from hunger and poverty, sickness, ignorance and intolerance. And this is not to say that our attention is not diverted by destructive partisan power struggles not entirely *un-tribal* in nature, or that our efforts towards growth and change are not thwarted by an inability to learn cooperative leadership behaviors that do not consistently favor those with the most money. But we have succeeded in building, for the most part, a wealthy and stable nation. Though I often feel our own system is no less a “struggling democracy” than many our leaders label as such, we nonetheless profit from the struggle to a degree largely unmatched around the globe. Our public discourse must reflect our understanding of these facts.

I want a new rhetoric, not just of hope (in some ways just the yin, to the yang of fear), but of calm. I want the people I elect to represent me to be of the sort to think before they speak, to consider the big human picture, to understand the importance of humility. I am sickened by our arrogant insistence on a declaration of “war” on anything we think needs fixing. How is this substantively different from the “jihad” we decry? Rhetorically, the use of the concepts of “war” and “jihad” are ways of talking about harnessing the energy of anger and desire to work for change. But war is *destructive*. Things that are broken need the application of *constructive* force. Tackling poverty requires the construction of systems that distribute resources where they are needed. Addressing drug addiction requires the construction of societies that encourage and allow for the maintenance of the physical and mental health of their people. Inhibiting terrorism requires the construction of lines of communication that allow for differences of opinion, remain adaptable and responsive to changing relationships, and respect the right of others to aspirations that might differ from or conflict with our own, that do not draw inspiration from fear of an enemy, but from a desire to understand what, at heart, motivates the violent behavior of others. Declaring a “war on terror” (or on anything, as the concept has played out over time) seems to me a weak and desperate rhetorical move, a smokescreen for confusion and insecurity - a playground bully’s tactics of intimidation that inspire not respect, but fear and scorn.

I am an idealist, and I am ranting, I know. But I wonder how much more peace and security we would have gained as a global human community if we had spent the equivalent of our unfathomable trillions in military expenditures in Afghanistan and Iraq on humanitarian aid? How many children now living in poverty would choose religious martyrdom in the name of Jihad if their families lived as well and as securely as ours, if they could expect a future as bright as our own, if their grandmothers were safe at home deciding (for instance) which Medicare plan to choose while preparing Sunday dinner? How many “terrorists” would be recruited from villages busy building homes, churches,

or schools, harvesting crops, learning new technologies, building irrigation projects – learning to participate in the global business of clothing and feeding and caring for each other? Isn't that what this whole thing is all about?

I want more idealism. I want more hope. I want more calm. I want to hear Americans and our leaders speak confidently, not diffidently, from a position of *real* strength. I want the level of public discourse raised to reflect our true nature – intelligent, generous, tolerant, adaptive, kind, and as powerful and natural as the winds of change.