



December 16, 2011 - Hal Howland: America, Heal Thyself

A Holiday Message from Hal Howland

We live in sad times. In matters of war, America's traditional method of conflict resolution, Santayana's often-mangled words continue ringing in our ears: *Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.* At home, our country resembles a wounded animal that is losing the will to survive.

It was not long ago that the "naive" Democrats were a bit more conservative and the "sensible" Republicans a bit more liberal. As a result, the two sides were willing and able to work together for the good of the country and all its citizens. The unseemly gridlock that has paralyzed Washington since 2008 is unprecedented in my lifetime, and it must cease if we are to heal our nation. Those who argue that both sides are hopelessly corrupt and dysfunctional are abdicating their civic responsibility.

The nice way to describe our two major political parties is to say that Democrats believe government exists to help people and that Republicans believe government exists to hinder people. Of course Republicans do not mind taking advantage of any number of government programs that do not affect their bottom line. But today's tragic impasse is not philosophical; it is moral. As it stands, our two-party system is not just a choice between two equally valid views; it is the difference between right and wrong. What Republicans and their petulant stepchild the Tea Party want, namely, the unregulated accumulation of personal and corporate wealth at the expense of their employees, women's rights, minorities, the middle class, the poor, the environment and all its inhabitants, the arts, education, science, the separation of church and state—everything that distinguishes the human animal from your one-celled Wall Street day trader—is *immoral*. Republicans label as political correctness what those of us with an actual conscience recognize as simple decency. It is as if millions of our citizens did not have parents or guardians to teach them how to behave in a civilized society.

The business community has proven time and again that it cannot be trusted to regulate itself. The current banking crisis is the obvious example. Equally insidious are the monopolies in the communications industry, insatiable monsters that regroup as quickly as Congress can dismantle them and that represent serious threats to our privacy and freedom. (When Republicans talk of freedom, they refer not to human rights but rather to any opportunity to make as much money as possible.) Billionaire polluters continue literally to get away with murder. But the most dangerous entity on our planet, as the kindly Republican grandfather of my childhood, Dwight D. Eisenhower, tried to warn us, is the military-industrial complex, whose corporate lobbyists have controlled our legislature since the end of World War II.

As a State Department brat, I attended elementary school in Israel and high school in Holland. Most of what I took from the first tour was spiritual and personal, until I was old enough to understand what was and still is going on there. But being an American teenager in Europe at the height of the Vietnam War was a humbling experience. I was not surprised to learn that my Continental peers knew their own culture better than most Americans did, but I was amazed at how much better they knew ours as well. (This was news even to a Beatles fan.) The average Dutch teen could tell you more not only about Ludwig van Beethoven but also about John Coltrane and Miles Davis than certain stateside music teachers I have known. Oddly, those kids sometimes could not tell one English speaker's nationality from another's and tended to assume that anyone using the King's was British. Given the low esteem in which Americans were held in those days, we Yanks often decided not to spoil the illusion.

Our grateful allies continue to recognize the United States as the most culturally illiterate society in the developed world. The Ugly American is like the boorish rich uncle whose dreaded holiday visits are the subject of low comedy the morning after.

All adult Americans can remember the renaissance of our country's global reputation when Barack Obama was elected president, following eight years of sheer embarrassment and the decimation of our thriving economy in an insane witch hunt for common thugs. Hardly anyone talks about our destruction of priceless archaeological treasures in Iraq, the cradle of civilization. And we do not belong in Afghanistan any more

than we did in Vietnam. Pakistan's complicity in the Afghan debacle is reason enough to pull the plug, on the war and on Pakistan's billions in military aid. Imagine what we could achieve in our own country were we not wasting our resources in these futile charades. Revenge is not justice. We as a nation necessitated the so-called war on terror by prosecuting decades of arrogant imperialism in the cause of cheap oil. Patriotic slogans and Christian hypocrisy will not help our situation. The simple fact is that no one likes a bully.

Swept up in the social symbolism of President Obama's election and in the renewed spirit of hope and change that echoed down from previous charismatic Democrats (FDR, JFK, still vital Carter and Clinton), I was disappointed to see how swiftly Obama was kidnapped by the partisan Washington machine—and how politely he tried to negotiate with his intransigent captors. I hoped he would end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan immediately and that he would have a much easier time showing Congress the wisdom of his initiatives. He should have been more persuasive. For years Americans had been asking for universal health care, safer food and medicine, better education, clean energy, serious environmental reforms, a much smaller military, and a new attitude toward our place in the world—but Obama's honeymoon was over before dawn. The ignorance, intolerance, racism, xenophobia, selfishness, and greed at the heart of conservative politics are the elephant in our national living room, and the current Party of No *must not win* in 2012.

The Occupy movement, inspired, not without irony, by the Arab Spring, is emblematic of a quiet revolution that I expect will make its voice heard loud and clear on Election Day. We the people of this nation are extremely angry with our representatives for not doing their jobs. I would love to see Obama reelected in a landslide.

Like all first-term presidents, Barack Obama has learned some hard lessons about Washington's serpentine byways. But I believe that most educated Americans support him, his achievements to date, and the progressive policies we still expect his administration to enact. Our economy is in such bad shape that the United States simply cannot afford to continue acting as the world's police force. We must return to the practice of leading by example, something we have done so well during our brief respites from warfare. We must ignore the polls, the media frenzy, and especially the feckless characters the Republicans have offered as presidential candidates—none of whom could be taken seriously on the world stage. We who believe in the promise of America must reelect Barack Obama to reclaim our national soul, and to remind our sisters and brothers around the globe that we deserve their respect. I invite you to join me in sending a generous donation to Obama for America, P.O. Box 802798, Chicago, IL 60680-4263, USA, www.barackobama.com.

I found myself writing this on November 30, 2011, the thirty-first anniversary of my father's death. (I am sending it, with seasonal optimism, on Beethoven's birthday, December 16.) Dad was a Republican and surely would have disagreed with some of the above, but, like his moderate contemporaries, he had compassion. He was fond of pointing out that what sets our country apart from certain others is our willingness to admit our mistakes. This year I miss my old man more than ever.

Happy holidays, peace on earth, and *goodwill* to those who know what that word means.
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