

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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One does not have to be a connoisseur of irony to note the following: There is no holiday less hospitable to the questioning of tradition and authority than the Fourth of July, the day on which when we celebrate one of history’s most important and eloquent challenges to tradition and authority. In the spirit of celebrating revolution, here are three changes to the status quo I would like to see, presented in increasing likelihood of occurrence.

1) *Abolish the electoral college*

Captain Bob Morris is one of the most thoughtful people I know. Years ago, he told me: “Voting for president in Wyoming is the most liberating experience, because there is absolutely no doubt who will get Wyoming’s electoral votes. As a result, there is absolutely no possibility my vote will make any difference to the outcome, leaving me free to vote for whomever I think will make the best president.”

He’s right of course. And that really bugs me: As we celebrate the 232nd anniversary of the founding of our democracy, what could be less democratic than a system where most voters’ votes don’t matter?

Since 1980, Wyoming and 17 other states have voted exclusively for one party’s candidate. In most other states, the outcome of a given year’s presidential race has also been a foregone conclusion. As a result, for the last couple of decades, the only people whose votes have truly mattered are those residing in a handful of swing states: Florida, Ohio, and a few others. As a result, save for raising money, there’s no reason for candidates or parties to pay attention to the rest of us.

Which is just wrong.

“Not so!” say the defenders of the status quo. These folks make two arguments. First, the Electoral College was set up by the Founding Fathers. However, this is the same group who granted suffrage only to property-owning white men, aged 21 or older. Arguably, those guys weren’t infallible.

The status quo-ers also argue that, if the electoral college were abolished, sparsely populated states like Wyoming would be ignored by the presidential candidates. To which I reply: “How could Wyoming be any more ignored than it is today?” Because the electoral votes of Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, and the like are foregone conclusions, candidates already focus their resources elsewhere, and not necessarily on the most heavily-populated states: The current system also lets them ignore California, New York, much of the south, and many other regularly non-contested states (no more than 10 states are considered “in play” this year).

It seems to me that, without an electoral college, candidates will have to mine for votes anywhere they can get them. As a result, if we directly elect our president, for the first time ever my vote in Wyoming will actually matter, placing me on an equal footing with every other voter in the nation. Isn’t that how democracy is supposed to work? Further, because candidates will no longer be able to tailor their platforms to just a few states, we will also see an erosion in the extreme divisiveness that has hallmarked national politics since Nixon devised his “Southern strategy” 40 years ago.

Markets are the ultimate test of products and ideas, and the Electoral College does not subject candidates to market forces. Sadly, neither does it expose them to democratic ones.

2) *Require private planes using the Jackson Hole Airport to buy carbon offsets*

Actually, I’d like to require everyone using the Jackson Hole Airport to buy carbon offsets. However, given the state of the airline industry, it’s probably easier to start with private planes.

My desire to require private planes to buy carbon offsets is based on four facts, two of which may surprise you.

First, even as commercial airlines are floundering, private jet usage is booming: since 2000, private jet trips have grown 40 percent; in the past year, private jet orders have increased over 30 percent.

Second, buying carbon offsets for a private jet costs less than one percent of a plane's hourly operating cost.

Last October, the folks who run *Halogen Reports: Jets*, the self-styled "Insider's Guide to Private Aviation," calculated the cost of purchasing carbon offsets for eleven of the most popular private jet models. The hourly operating cost of planes on this list ranges from \$1,900 to \$12,800; the hourly cost of offsetting the carbon dioxide produced by one of these planes runs from \$5 to \$43 (0.1 to 0.6 percent).

In comparison, between taxes and fees, rental cars at the Jackson Hole Airport are subjected to a surcharge of around 30 percent. Do the math, and someone renting a car at the Jackson Hole Airport for a weekend will pay a bigger surcharge than someone would pay in carbon offsets for flying their private jet to Jackson Hole from L.A. or Chicago.

The third fact is that the Jackson Hole Airport the only commercial airport operating inside a U.S. national park. The fourth fact is that our economy is inextricably linked to the health of our environment, especially our public lands.

Put these facts together, and an obvious question arises: "Why not require those who can most afford it to help sustain the very qualities which attract them to Jackson Hole in the first place?"

That sound you hear is the howls of protest erupting from hard-core global warming deniers. Please. When even the U.S. intelligence community recognizes global warming is a problem (as it did with last week's "The National Security Implications of Global Climate Change Through 2030"), the deniers are standing on increasingly thin ice. More to the point for these self-styled "conservatives," what is more "conservative" than conserving for the future that which we've been given by past generations? To do otherwise – to squander a legacy, particularly in the face of overwhelming evidence – strikes me as the absolute antithesis of true conservatism.

More valid are the concerns of those who rightly point out that carbon offsets are the modern-day equivalent of the Middle Ages' papal indulgences: Far better not to sin at all than to buy your way out of sins you do commit. However, it's also far better to have half a loaf than no loaf at all: people just ain't gonna stop flying private jets.

Also legitimate are the many concerns surrounding carbon offsets, ranging from greenwashing to lack of efficacy. But for me, two reasons trump such criticisms. One is the low cost of doing the right thing; the other is the model we could set for the world.

Buying a carbon offset would, of course, be chump change for someone using a private jet. In fact, the cost is so low that I'd take things a step further and levy a flat one percent conservation fee on all private planes using the Jackson Hole Airport, using the excess to support local sustainability efforts. If FedEx can unilaterally impose a "fuel surcharge" on each package, why can't our airport levy a "sustainability surcharge" to help preserve the region's environmental health? All that's missing is a bit of courage.

I have no illusions that offsetting the carbon dioxide generated by planes using the Jackson Hole Airport will make any real difference on overall global warming. But that's not the point. Instead, the reason to adopt the "sustainability surcharge" is the message it will send. This summer, the Jackson Hole Airport will host thousands

of private plane take-offs and landings. On those planes will be some of the world's richest and most powerful people, including the finance ministers of the leading industrialized nations. My hope is that, by creating a direct link between actions and consequences, a "sustainability surcharge" will raise the consciousness of these folks. If that happens, my further hope is that the Jackson Hole "sustainability surcharge" model will, in due course, spread across the planet. Doing that won't be as revolutionary as adopting the Declaration of Independence, but it would still be a pretty cool legacy for us to leave.

3) ***Make an environmentally-based "Statement of Ideal" the foundation of the revised Jackson/Teton County comprehensive land use plan***

I've written about this before, so I won't belabor the point too much. However, for the same reason we should require carbon offsets for air traffic in and out of Jackson Hole – because our short- and long-term economic health is directly dependent on our environment's health – we should make this basic fact the foundation of our most important statement of local public policy: our land use plan. By extension, if we are going to memorialize this basic fact, we should do so in the clearest, simplest, and most unambiguous language possible: *Human activities in Teton County will allow for viable populations of all native species, and preservation of all natural scenic vistas.*

Inevitably, objections will be raised to this concept and this language. For some, it is too new or radical an approach; for others, the concept and language are overly simple and or insufficiently sophisticated. To me, however, such objections are little different than those offered in 1776 against American independence or the Declaration of Independence: there are always a zillion reasons not to do something, but sometimes you simply must do the right thing.

With the revision of the Comp Plan, we in Jackson Hole have the opportunity to do something no modern community has done since the birth of the Industrial Revolution: state, and then act upon, a belief that both humans and nature can thrive within the same general ecosystem. That no other community has acted on this belief has profound – and profoundly negative – implications for the future of the planet; that we have an opportunity to show the world otherwise is a remarkable gift. At a different time and on a different scale, America's founding fathers did something similarly revolutionary; in this, our hour, I hope we will show similar courage and determination.