

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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My defining quality is idealism: It's far better to light a single candle than curse the darkness. Most of the time, I see potential – in a person, an idea, a community. At times though, the gap between how things are and how they could be leads me to despair.

From this perspective, I've spent a lot of time recently mulling over two things I learned from my father. One is about optimism; the other about leadership.

My focus on optimism arose in reaction to the past decade's worth of increasingly gloomy news delivered in an increasingly shrill and nasty fashion. That got me wondering: Are we living in an exceptionally mean-spirited era, or is this just the way of the world? When I asked my father, he replied that, when he was embarking on his career, things were very different: “In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the world felt much more optimistic. True, we lived with the threat of nuclear annihilation. But good and bad were much clearer, and there was a can-do spirit which seems missing today, a sense that people could work together and big problems could be solved. There was a great faith that the future would be better for everyone. Today seems very different.”

My reaction to these pessimistic times has been to try to make a difference where I can, most often at the local level. In that spirit, one of the most wonderfully optimistic evenings I've spent in a long time was this past Saturday, when my 1% for the Tetons effort matched eight local filmmakers with eight projects we'd funded. In an effort we're calling our “Video Blitz,” each of the eight filmmakers has one week to make a three minute video about their project. The resulting films will debut this coming Saturday night, October 20, at 7:00 pm at the Center for the Arts theater.

The “match-making” left me elated because of the participants' excitement about the Video Blitz. The non-profits sponsoring the 1% for the Tetons projects are thrilled to share their stories with the community (and the world, once the videos are posted on the 1% website). That enthusiasm has infected the filmmakers, each of whom sees a chance to use their art to tell a great story. Plus, each knows that seven other teams will be competing to tell their stories in a compelling fashion. Put all this together, and Saturday's Video Blitz premiere should be electric with great energy - not just about the films, but about this remarkable place we live in, the people who care about the region, and the great work being done to sustain its essential qualities for future generations.

Breadth; depth; passion. That's a trifecta we don't get to enjoy very often, and it re-charged my optimism about our community, its residents, and our future. Join us on Saturday and let some of it rub off on you.

My father has equally clear views on leadership: A leader will not ask someone to do something unless he is willing to do it himself. Fail that simple test, and you're not much of a leader.

My father learned about leadership as a dive bomber pilot on an aircraft carrier off Korea. He was lucky to come home merely blinded in one eye, for his air group lost nearly three-quarters of the planes they started with. Even the most routine mission was dangerous, but when the squadron commander led the mission, they knew it would be extra hazardous: He would not ask his men to do something he would not do himself.

This came to mind when I heard friends lamenting President Obama's sleepwalk through the first Presidential debate. Had Obama simply lost, that would have been bad enough. Something far deeper was at work though: an anger borne of betrayal.

For these people, Obama's palpable lack of preparation and indifference to the moment produced an almost existential crisis. It took me a while to figure out why, but ultimately it hit me: Obama failed my father's leadership test. He wants people to support and fight for him, yet on the biggest night of the campaign, he couldn't be bothered to advocate or fight for himself. When that happened, he broke the fundamental covenant between leader and follower, and his supporters reacted accordingly.

As they explained it to me, Obama's supporters weren't asking for much; just for him to make a few basic points about Governor Romney, and ask a few basic questions.

- Romney is Mr. Etch-a-Sketch. The "severe conservative" of the primaries is now "Moderate Mitt." Which one is it?
- Romney is basically advocating a more extreme version of the same economic policies as George W. Bush. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.
- Many of Romney's foreign policy advisors also advised Bush, and their policies are similar. Why should they work this time?
- Romney's basic modus operandi is secrecy, and his budget numbers don't add up. He refuses to share his tax returns, and he's incapable of offering even one example of how he can dramatically cut taxes, dramatically increase the military budget, and still reduce the deficit. Taking things on faith is the realm of religion, not governance.

Yet at least Romney seemed to care. As opposed to Obama, who couldn't be bothered to prepare for the debate. Or defend himself during it. Or point out his opponent's shortcomings.

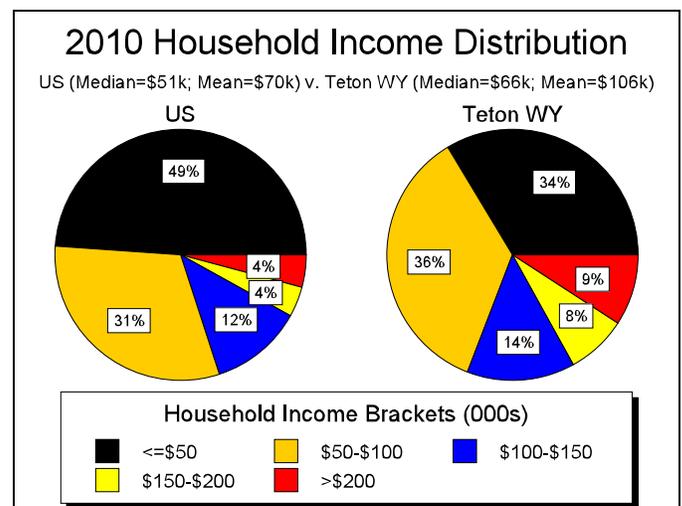
All of this was bad enough. Bordering on the unforgivable was then asking his supporters to continue to do that he was unwilling to do himself.

How does this affect Jackson Hole? Perhaps the President can right his ship and win re-election, but he made himself look so weak that we now have to assume Governor Romney is going to win: The man unwilling to define himself will defeat the man unwilling to defend himself. If that happens, there will likely be three major consequences for this region: one positive; two negative.

On the positive side, Romney's tax cuts will make our large number of wealthy residents even wealthier. (Graph 1) If trickle down happens, there's a chance the valley's economy will continue its current anemic recovery.

Not much of a chance, though, for on the negative side, that trickle down will get overwhelmed by the fact that the national economy will likely tank again. This one's pretty clear: To the extent anyone can understand Romney's vague policy proposals, all available evidence suggest that their combination of Bush-era tax cuts and European-style austerity demands will send us back into recession.

The other consequence will be the effect of Romney's policies on local institutions. Bush's tax cuts exploded the deficit. In order to keep his tax cuts from doing the same, Romney will not only have to sharply cut the budgets of federal agencies such as the park service and forest service, but alter the tax code to reduce provisions such as deductions for mortgage interest and charitable giving. Such provisions disproportionately help Jackson Hole's middle and lower classes, and it's hard to see how any tax-cut trickle down will offset these losses.



Graph 1

In one sense, Obama's empty chair moment made the election easier, for now neither candidate can claim a leadership advantage: Obama fails my father's definition; Romney fails the equally important leadership test of letting people know what he actually stands for. That makes policy distinctions that much more important, and my inner idealist hopes that the final two debates will actually shed some fact-based light on those differences. (Note: this is being written before the second debate.)

My inner realist, though, tells me I'm crazy.

Which brings me back to the 1% Video Blitz. If you, too, are looking for an antidote to the toxicity of partisan politics; looking for something to remind you of why you love living here; looking to re-affirm your hope for the future; then please join us Saturday night at 7 pm at the Center for the Arts theater. Count on being swept up by the passion of wonderful people doing wonderful things. Perhaps even more importantly, count on having a chance to celebrate your own inner idealist.