

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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$S=R-E$ (*Satisfaction equals Reality minus Expectations*)

– The equation for life

$S=R-H$ (*Satisfaction equals Reality minus Hope*)

– A variant on the equation for life

“AAAAHHHH!”

– Charlie Brown, after Lucy has once again pulled away the football he was trying to kick.

“*The place where triples go to die.*”

– The glove of Tris Speaker, the greatest defensive center fielder of his era

I spent the first half of February traveling around the country. Wherever I went, things seemed glum, a combination of anxiety and pessimism. That prompted me to write the following.

Dear President Obama,

I write with a simple question: What happened to hope?

Hope was the centerpiece of your campaign for the Presidency.

Hope was 2008's iconic image.

Hope is what you promised America, and 69.5 million voters trusted you to deliver it.

One year later, hope seems a distant memory.

Despair is the opposite of hope, and when you launched your campaign, America was wallowing in despair. For good reason. Your predecessor recognized that fear – despair's handmaiden – can be a great political tool, and governed accordingly. But while fear may win elections, it's a lousy foundation for governing (ask the Iraqis). As a result, you were left with two wars, an economy on life support, an out-of-control budget, and a deep distrust in government. And that's not the half of it.

Beyond this Herculean mess, your predecessor also left the country feeling bad about itself, half-believing that, thanks to pervasive greed, intractable partisanship, and general governmental incompetence, we were victims of forces beyond our control. “Every man for himself” seemed to be the only answer, but that only works if you're wealthy and well-connected. For the rest of us, underlying America's many woes was a soul-crushing deficit of hope.

You addressed this beautifully. As a candidate, your genius lay in recognizing that despair and fear are not what America is about. We are a hopeful people, and when that hope is given focus and wings, we can do great things. You offered that promise, and America responded.

Offering hope was the bedrock of your success, but once you took office, you lost sight of that fact. Cutting you some slack, I'll assume this is because you not only faced a plethora of serious challenges, but



essentially had to face them alone – Congress and the courts are, at best, feckless allies. But in the end, when it comes to hope, what Congress and the courts do doesn't matter – you were the one who ran on hope, and you are the one we trusted to deliver it. So the question remains: What happened to hope?

Hope is a funny thing, a powerful emotion. It's why people buy lottery tickets, go to singles bars, dare to buck the odds. It's why, in defiance of common sense, you received the Nobel Prize. It's a primal feeling, one you tapped into and rode to office. Substitute "hope" for "expectations" in the equation of life, and you raised Americans' hope off the charts.

However, that same equation shows that, for you to succeed, you must deliver a reality even greater than our hopes. Unfortunately, you haven't.

That you haven't is bad enough. Even worse is that, instead of delivering hope, you've cozied up to bankers. And big business. And the loathsome toadies who populate Congress, a pack of self-serving hypocrites who wouldn't acknowledge hope unless it first made a sizable campaign contribution.

Worst of all, you haven't pushed back against the Republicans, a group which defines itself solely in terms of wanting to destroy you. This seems to be the only area where hope still lives, for in defiance of all logic, you continue to think that, one of these days, the Republicans won't pull the football away when you try to kick it. You might as well believe in the Great Pumpkin, or that a grateful Wall Street will put nation's interest ahead of its own. Just ain't gonna happen.

I know there are good reasons for all you've done, but whatever tactical successes you've scored, the bottom line is that you've crushed the hopes we invested in you. As a result, Americans are a dissatisfied lot.

But what's important is that our hopes have been crushed, not killed outright. For we still want to hope – it's an expression of Americans' native optimism; it's inherent in our human condition. You recognized this; you gave voice to it; we still want it. Better still, we also recognize that you were dealt a really crummy hand, and need time to bring about the change you promised.

But you have to come through. You have to make us feel there is a reason to hope. Not just because hope's the horse you rode as a candidate, but because no one else out there can offer it to us.

Not Congress. Like Tris Speaker's glove, Congress is the place hope goes to die.

Not the Supreme Court. They've entered a reality-free zone, an ideological Fantasyland as extreme in its way as Alan Greenspan's was in his. And we know how that turned out.

Sadly, not your fellow Democrats. Apparently uncomfortable with actually being in power, Congressional Democrats seem intent on confirming every stereotype about their ineptness and political cowardice. And they're succeeding – spectacularly.

And certainly not Republicans. As the anti-Obama party, they're also the anti-hope party. As the party of "No," they've hitched their wagon to the most powerful anti-hope word in the language, offering America little more than what I call the FAD platform: Fear, Anger, Despair.

And for reasons I truly don't understand, you've let the GOP take control of the public discourse, dragging the dialogue – and with it, hope – down into their FADish swamp.

So, to slake our thirst for hope, it's up to you.

What can you do? For starters, since you were the one who put hope into play, you can neither refute

nor ignore it. Instead, you need to get back up on that horse and ride it. How? Through a two step process.

First, before proposing any action, ask yourself a simple question: Will this make people hopeful? If yes, take the step. If not, jettison it. Alternatively, if you must do something awful, be candid about it, as in saying “Look, this stinks, but it’s something I have to do.”

Second, package everything hopeful under the rubric of a “Hope Agenda.”

You face a wide variety of challenges. Tying all your solutions together requires a concept as broad as a “Hope Agenda.” Why? Because now, even more than when you were running, Americans need hope: for jobs; for national security; for a health care system which won’t abandon us when we need it the most. We need hope for an economy which not only works, but will continue working for our children and grandchildren. Ditto a global environment. And more than anything else, we need hope for a government which isn’t owned lock, stock, and barrel by the wealthy and the special interests, one which actually does things for the vast majority of us who can’t afford our own lobbyists or elected officials.

I know creating a “Hope Agenda” won’t be easy. But reasonable Americans get that. And reasonable Americans form the vast majority of our country. So we’ll cut you some slack if it looks like you’re making a good-faith effort to deliver a “Hope Agenda.” But where we’ll punish you – and you’ll have only yourself to blame – is when you do what you did far too often during your first year, act like it’s more important to cut deals and coddle fat-cats than give us the hope you promised.

Because that’s the problem with inspiring our hopes: You have to follow through, and you have to be straight with us when you don’t. Otherwise, you’ll pay the price.

Hope is the girl who brought you to the dance, but it sure seems like you’ve ditched her for some Congressional tramp, some DC floozy. That’s not hopeful; that’s not change; that’s not what people voted for when they gave you your chance. Please – stick with the one what brung you.

Very truly yours,

Jonathan Schechter

Addendum: I’d like to offer my condolences to the family of Megan Fisher. There are no words to capture, much less ease, the pain of losing a child. I only hope last Sunday’s outpouring offered a bit of solace, and marked the beginning of the journey out of that worst of places.