

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
Jackson Hole News&Guide– August 8, 2012

“Voting for President in Wyoming is the most liberating experience possible. Knowing your vote can’t possibly influence the outcome, you are free to vote for whomever you wish, for whatever reason you want.”
– *Captain Bob Morris*

In my last column, I wrote about how “Extreme Entrepreneurship” is going to be the next economic growth engine for Teton County. The problem is that this engine will be disconnected from our current systems of measuring the economy and, more crucially, funding local government. As a result, Extreme Entrepreneurship will create the paradox of “stealth growth” - growth going on right under our noses and affecting our community, but which we can’t really put our fingers on.

That paradox increases the importance of our second potential economic growth engine: eco-tourism. While ‘Extreme Entrepreneurship’ will clearly occur, it’s not clear whether we will actually seize the opportunity we have to become the world’s leader in eco-tourism. Yet, in another paradox, seizing that opportunity is not only critical to the future of our tourism industry, but also to the future of Extreme Entrepreneurship.

My intention had been to use today’s column to flesh out this thinking. However, I’m going to postpone my discussion of eco-tourism for another two weeks to focus on two time-sensitive issues which have just arisen.

The first is Michelle Obama’s visit to Jackson Hole this Saturday. Just like Mitt Romney’s visit last month, Mrs. Obama’s visit is about one thing only: raising money. Neither camp could care less about who you or I vote for, for there’s no question that Governor Romney will win Wyoming’s electoral votes. Instead, as is the case with all of Wyoming’s commodities, the presidential campaigns view the Cowboy State’s cash as nothing more than a resource to be exploited. Both campaigns will take far more money out of Wyoming than they put into it, extracting dollars from Wyoming and using them in the 8 or so swing states they actually care about.

This reality exposes two fundamental - dare I say existential? - problems with American democracy. One is how we fund campaigns. According to the *Washington Post*, this summer and fall the two Presidential candidates will spend more time at fundraising events with big donors than at campaign events with voters. This says all you need to know about each candidate’s priorities, and they ain’t with you and me.

The other problem is the Electoral College. Except in swing states, votes count only for show, not substance. Which means ours ain’t much of a democracy.

Of the two problems, the Electoral College is the more pernicious. Two reasons. The first is the Electoral College’s potential to further erode our faith in government and democracy. It’s one thing for billionaires to buy candidates and Congress, but that doesn’t cut to the metaphysical “one man, one vote” core of our system the same way the problems with the Electoral College do. In particular, in our closely divided nation, every presidential election holds the potential to reprise 2000. If President Obama receives more popular votes than Governor Romney but loses in the Electoral College, it will not only undermine Mr. Romney’s legitimacy, but also further reduce our already-diminished faith in our already-tattered governing systems.

The other reason the Electoral College is the more pernicious problem is that it warps both politics and policy. If there were direct election of the President, both candidates and officials would be forced to consider the entire country, not just the swing voters in a handful of states. Right now, we voters in America’s least-populous state are as thoroughly irrelevant as the voters in America’s most populous state of California – in both cases, there’s no doubt about which candidate will win. The result is that policies, messages, and

campaign expenditures are all targeted at a small number of people in a few dozen counties nationwide.

If, however, candidates and parties had to take into account not just what some Reagan Democrat in Ohio thinks, but what some Wyoming cowboy and some Chardonnay-sipping, Prius-driving Californian thought, we'd end up seeing a different political landscape, regardless of how many billions are spent.

Which leads me to Michelle Obama's visit. When Governor Romney came to town, the question I wanted to ask him was how he made his sums balance; i.e. how he could possibly raise defense spending, cut taxes, and cut the deficit without making draconian cuts to the federal budget. The answer is, of course, that he can't, which leads to the second question I wanted to pose: Where would he make those cuts? No one knows, because he isn't telling. That's his campaign's m.o. on all issues, ranging from the federal budget to personal tax returns. This may be good politics, but creates absolutely no foundation for governance. It also begs a number of questions vital to the future of Jackson Hole, such as what would happen to our public lands if funding were slashed for agencies such as the National Park Service, the Forest Service, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

So, assuming she's a proxy for the President, what would I ask Michelle Obama?

The same thing I asked in 2010: What happened to hope?

As a candidate in 2008, Barack Obama tapped into the fact that, after eight years of George W. Bush, Americans had a desperate need to replenish perhaps our most quintessential quality: hope. That was President Obama's promise to the country and, remarkably, it took him less than a year to screw it up.

Yes, I know: he came into office following one of the worst Presidents in history, forced to clean up a series of monumental messes: domestic and foreign; economic and existential. And arguably President Obama did stabilize things on a lot of fronts.

But in so doing he neglected to simultaneously restore our hope about the future, and that's where he really blew it. Reflecting the President's personal predilections, the Obama administration took the approach that good policy was good politics; i.e. that a good policy would sell itself. Well, actually, no it doesn't. Eating broccoli may be good for you, but it doesn't necessarily follow that it also lifts the spirits, and lifting spirits is what good politics is all about. As a result of this technocratic approach, the entire messaging battlefield was left open to the Republicans, who seized it with gusto. As a result, we've enjoyed four years of the GOP kicking political sand in the face of the 97 pound weakling.

The governance consequences of the Obama administration's political failures have been not just gridlock, but the nastiest, bitterest, most partisan gridlock since the 1850s. Worse still, there seems to be absolutely no prospect for things getting better – if the great change agent of 2008 has so thoroughly failed to deliver so far, what hope is there for the future?

In that context, what I want to hear from Mrs. Obama is how her husband will change the gridlock dynamic. That is the most pressing issue facing the country, yet President Obama has proven himself utterly incapable of meeting the challenge. How will that change?

My great fear is that her best answer would be something like "Well, it's all the Republicans' fault, and at least Barack will keep them from doing too much more damage."

Swell. The bosom heaves.

So, to repeat myself, where's the hope? If your husband is a leader, now is the time to show it. Get us excited. Show he stands for something other than being the not-Romney. Have him screw up his courage and propose something substantive, do something meaningful, say something inspiring. Have him

show leadership by moving this utterly depressing campaign beyond simply trashing the other person - that may pass for leadership in Washington, but to the rest of the country it's little more than grade-school name-calling.

Outside Washington, there are actual adults who respond to actual substance. Please acknowledge that by giving us substance; vision; leadership. That, or please step out of the way.

The second time-sensitive issue is much more personal.

During my time in Jackson Hole, my identify has gone through three phases.

The first was when I met someone and they recognized me as me.

The second was when I met someone and they recognized me as my son Alex's dad.

The third was when I met someone and they recognized me as my dog Athena's owner.

Phase 3 has come to a close, for after 14 wonderful years, I had to put Athena down this past Sunday. To the many of you who touched her life and made it such a magical one, my deepest thanks.