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Saturday, November 6, 2004

### Welcome

I have no clue as to who the hell is ever going to read this...but nevertheless I bid you welcome.

I've been spending just about every free moment I get during my "day job" reading blogs and leaving comments. And I've thought, on and off for a while now, that the best choice of all would be to just start my own blog.

Why, you might ask, start a political blog just after the most contentious, divisive, nasty, vicious election in my lifetime?

Well, I could say it's because the issues that matter to me aren't going to stop mattering, just because we now know who'll be occupying the White House for the next four years. The thought is anathema to everyone I know, but frankly the horserace that tops the news every night for a year is less interesting to me than the daily issues that get no MSM attention at all, and often precious little from the blogosphere. And that would be true, as far as it goes.

But the deeper truth is, even that explanation doesn't really cover it. You could imagine an amalgam of the beliefs of the folks on the blogroll I'll be building shortly, and that amalgam would probably come pretty close to describing how I think about the relationship between America and the world, and the relationship between citizens and government. I fear that I seldom have truly new things to say about those questions, and it makes little sense to start a blog if all I have to say is stuff other, smarter, more eloquent people have already said before.

No, I'm here to talk about the social side of my political life. So many people, on both sides of this year's fight, live lives almost completely isolated from those who disagree with them. Conservatives see the extreme left and the moderate left on television, "liberals" might occasionally flip past Fox News and hear a snippet of conservative commentary. But they don't intermix. They don't socialize with each other. They don't become friends. And they certainly don't have any of those kind of people in their families!

Well, not so with me.

I am, as the site title implies, what bloggers of a similar stripe are calling "libertarian/conservative". If you're here, you probably have some idea what that means in context...and if not, I'll surely spend a lot of time over the coming weeks and months talking about my specific opinions.

I live in Chicago...a wonderful city I can't imagine ever wanting to leave...but which presents a man of my political alignment with a lot of problems, and not just because every single elected representative I have below the level of the President of the United States is, of course, necessarily a Democrat (although that does tend to cause political outcomes that I find highly unpleasant). It means that every local friend I have is necessarily a part of the left-wing social culture. (Which probably has a lot to do with why I got hooked on reading blogs. :) ) It used to be possible to disagree with someone's political opinions without thinking they were evil...but no longer, it seems.

My family tree is composed, root and branch, of Yellow Dog Democrats. You could paint their portraits from a scrabook of left-wing clichés...only the police need guns, the best solution to any serious problem is to spend more government money on it no matter how much worse it's gotten since we started spending money on it, there's no excuse for war and we should just apologize for our past actions and hope the world forgives us, all workers should be unionized, tax the rich and give it to the poor...you name it, they believe it. I would be disowned if any of them knew how I felt about such things.

And although I've lived in many places in the short number of years since I was first legally recognized as an adult, I grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Some of you, familiar with the place, are now nodding your heads in recognition of what I'm talking about when I say I'm used to feeling isolated because of my beliefs. Others...well, I doubt you'll ever totally understand (or, if you do understand, believe) me when I tell you that Ann Arbor is the universal Mecca for the secular religion of intolerance which calls itself "tolerance". It is a city that will smile wide at you while it stabs you repeatedly in the back, and then as you lie bleeding to death on the sidewalk, proceed to explain that you people are really supposed to have a bunch of huge gaping holes in their skin hemorrhaging blood and they were really just doing you a favor after all. It is the kind of place where calling yourself a Democrat means you're generally the most conservative person in the room. The kind of place where it simply goes without saying that all heterosexual sex is rape, and school teachers lead the girls in class in discussions about how society might do away with men. The kind of place where absolute blind

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hatred for anyone who disagrees with the extreme-left party line is not new with the last couple of elections, but rather an integral and long-standing component of the social fabric. The kind of place that leaves scars on a person's psyche that still aren't even close to being healed eleven years after he moves away.

And, truth be told, I was not always as I am today.

I started out my adult life, as one might predict, a true blue product of my environment. Not, of course, as far Left as most Ann Arbor-ites, but certainly in line with the views of the world that prevailed among my family and friends. "Conservative" was a synonym for "stupid, ignorant, racist, sexist, and violent", while "Libertarian" was just a gaudy purple word-noise I sometimes heard folks at the Hash Bash using. The Democratic Party was of course the source of all that was right and good and true in American politics, and would never ever do anything to hurt personal freedom...et cetera ad nauseam.

A lot of ex-"liberals" will tell you that the events of 9/11 changed their minds. Not me. I abandoned the left wing of American politics as soon as I deserted the Democratic party and started seriously reading what non-Leftists had to say about the world. And, while post-9/11 events have done a lot to rein in my previously intense hatred of George W Bush and his political allies, my distaste for the Democrats goes back to an entirely domestic incident...the passage of the Communications Decency Act in 1995.

I'm not going to address the demerits of that awful ex-law at this time...the US Supreme Court gave us the definitive word on that subject in '96. But I will say that, for those who either never did believe that the Democrats were the Good Guys(tm), or still do believe in trashing the First Amendment, stifling the growth of the internet, and throwing even more of my colleagues out of work than already got hit by the end of the boom, it will undoubtedly be hard for you to understand the sense of betrayal I felt about that development.

And so I found myself outside the American political mainstream years before things became as they are now. But for four of those eight years, it was still possible to maintain civility between sides. Even though the Senators and Congressmen my friends were voting for had supported a bill that, under certain interpretations, would have sent me to prison forever, I could have rational discussions with them about other things, and still call them friends. Even though I was out campaigning for a party they regarded as a silly distraction from the "important" issues, they could still invite me into their homes and we could have fun together. Just don't go back to Ann Arbor (easy...I'm glad to put that shithole forever behind me), and avoid discussing politics with the family (much harder...especially in my family...but still doable and well worth the trouble), and everything is fine.

But then, of course, came the election of 2000. One wouldn't have thought, going into it, that it would be the beginning of the era of intense hatred we're in today, considering how the Democratic nominee was the most singularly uninspiring candidate they'd had in my lifetime...not exactly the kind of person you'd expect to arouse passionate emotions...especially after having Bill Clinton as president for the previous 8 years. Not that the Republican candidate looked much more interesting...he seemed like a serious lightweight who'd somehow coasted into the nomination ahead of better men on the basis of his family's power...much the way he had for his whole life. Boredom city, really...just cast your ballot whenever you get a few minutes free, and go to bed early. (I didn't hear about Florida until I was driving to work the next morning.)

I think, though, that when the margin of Presidential victory showed up amounting to a measly few hundred votes in Florida, a lot of people got the idea in their heads that if they'd just prosyitized a little harder, they could have pulled it off. A few hundred more votes for your party is a reasonable goal for a single campaign worker, and if elections were going to be as close as 2000, that meant that the outcome of the election might come down to the success or failure of a single person's efforts. And the fervency levels of the average voter began to rise...

And then 9/11 happened. And it reminded us that we are fragile...our relationship with the rest of the world is more important than a lot of us thought. And history isn't over yet.

But if your mind is already occupied with thoughts of how your own personal success or failure in proselytizing your party's philosophy and candidate might alter the outcome of the election, a weird cross-breeding effect can happen. "What I do might make a measurable difference for American national politics" can come together with "The outcome of presidential elections has a real effect on America's safety" and give birth to "I, me, personally, can control the destiny of human civilization, if I just convince everyone I meet to vote for my party next time around...and if I fail, it'll be the end of everything".

I have news for such people.

Yes...if you live in a swing state, you have a massively disproportionate chance of altering the outcome of a national election by your own personal efforts.

But no, if you fail to do so, it will NOT be the end of everything. The United States was run by Republicans for 12 years in my childhood, and other than a mind-numbingly staggering national debt we came out of it pretty much OK. Even if you're right about the issues (I don't think you are, but I'll temporarily concede the point for the sake of argument), we will still be just fine in 2008.

And no, strident prosyletizing is not a good strategy. Bible-belt revival preachers may get donations by screaming at people that they're horrible sinners and going to burn in hell (I still haven't figured out how that psychological dynamic works...but it seems to), but the results in '02 and this Tuesday ought to prove to you once and for all that telling voters that they're stupid redneck bigots is not the way to make friends and influence people. Nor, for that matter, is disassociating yourself from your differently-believing friends turning out to be a good strategy.

I have exactly two issues on which I agree with the Republican party...and I have more than two on which I agree with at least the stated platform of the Democrats. Do you want to know why it is that I'm happy to see Bush re-elected, and would have been unhappy to see Kerry win, in spite of agreeing with more planks of the Democratic platform than the Republican one? Do you really want to know?

It's because I don't trust people who are as self-important as Democrats have become in the last four years. It's because we're at war now, which gives the government all the political cover it needs to do some really phenomenally evil shit domestically. It's because the Republicans I know regard Democrats as opponents and Libertarians as wayward would-be allies...whereas the Democrats I know regard any non-Democrat (Republican, Libertarian, or even Democrat-except-moreso Green) as a blood enemy.

People like that cannot be trusted with control of a government that was already too powerful even before the war, and is even more powerful now. They're not like drunk drivers so much as they're like drivers who scan the streets cold sober looking for pedestrians they can run over.

I've seen Democrats talk of mass defections in response to a Republican victory. I've even seen talk of rioting or civil war. And, while thankfully the blood hasn't run in the streets as some thought it would (and even should!), everywhere I turn I see Democrats once again ratcheting up the divisiveness, ignoring the plainly obvious lesson of the last four years, and pounding away in a ceaseless attack on the national morale and sense of self-worth.

Have they no shame? When the career politician from the most left-leaning city in the most left-leaning state in America, who just personally lost his chance to become President of the United States is on TV conceding defeat and calling for unity and the man-in-the-street Democrats are STILL screaming about how the election was stolen from them, are their supposedly cosmopolitan senses utterly deaf to the jarring irony? John Kerry had nothing whatsoever to gain (and potentially a lot of lucrative speaking engagements to lose) by conceding quickly and saving the country another nightmare of litigation and recrimination. Going the Gore route would have been a good choice for him personally. He chose to be a better man than that...and being moderately familiar with his history, I can say with a reasonable degree of confidence that it's the most noble decision he's ever made. The Democrats could do a lot worse than to pay attention and learn from that.

But they won't. They seem to be uninterested in admitting their failures and learning from them. They seem to believe themselves incapable of true failure.

The fact that the Republicans are not, at present, suffering from the same delusions is the one thing that makes me truly happy to see them win.

But I'd like to see America's Democrats recover from this problem. I'd like to get my friends and family back. I'd like to be able to open my mouth without fear of dire social consequences if a Democrat is in the room. In short, I'd like a return to national civility.

Can I get that? Please?