

WINSTEAD

Bridging the Gap

By Talmage Boston

The complaint goes out across the land---“The people are divided.” And the hope is that somehow the President should find a way to unify the masses. If he fails to unify us, then by golly, history should judge him a failure.

Let’s begin with the obvious: today’s major political issues are complicated, and the devil is in the details. The brightest and most religious people in the country are well represented on both sides of the litmus questions---abortion, limits on maintaining national security, stem cell research, gay marriage, tort reform, affirmative action, supply side economics, proper church-and-state relationship, and human rights with terrorists on the loose.

Energized by an often intellectually dishonest media, factions become entrenched, feeling more certain each day that, “I am right and you are wrong”, because (a) I have a higher intellect than you; (b) I have more enlightened values than you; (c) I have more common sense than you; (d) some or all of the above.

Regardless of which letter gets chosen in the multiple choice question, the answer leads each person to the same place—my judgment is better than yours. Such a conclusion then generates smugness and an ensuing attitude of wanting to separate from those with perceived inferior judgment.

As this process gets more locked in, enhanced polarization gains momentum. Somehow, during his first four years in office, President Bush did not solve this problem, and neither would have Senator Kerry if he had been in the Oval Office.

What to do about the failure to produce a national consensus on the hot button issues of 2004? Fellow members of the Great Unwashed, some Points of Depolarization for your consideration:

- Recognize that the issues are complex, and therefore different opinions will arise, even among those with the highest intellect and strongest moral fiber.
- When meeting someone with a different viewpoint, have a civil discussion about positions, searching for common ground, and remembering my granddaddy’s maxim, “Convince a man against his will and he’s of his opinion still.”
- Get out of the judging business as to who’s smarter or has more enlightened values. Let’s leave judging to a Higher Authority.

- When the conversation distills down to the essential differing gut beliefs, and further efforts to persuade become futile, conclude with, "Let's agree to disagree on that one. I respect your opinion, and I hope you respect mine."
- Be glad political opponents care enough about our country's best interests to hold strong opinions on important issues.
- Living in a democracy, where the voting majority rules, accept the results of an election and move on. Democrats managed to survive Nixon-Watergate, as did Republicans during Clinton-Lewinsky, and in some respects even benefitted from their years of being on the outside looking in.
- Acknowledge that in leading our country, close calls on hard decisions *must* be made, and they will always generate strong reactions from media pundits whose job is to fill the air waves with the entertainment of controversy. Any President who makes decisions based on fickle public opinion attempting to go with the pollsters' flow will develop a raging case of the flip-flops. Decisions should be made based on principles, wisdom, and the most accurate information available when the critical choice is made. Period.

No one *wants* a divided country. Regardless of our wants, however, we will stay stuck in this ever widening gap scenario, as long as we overlook these Points of Depolarization which can provide the framework for a bridge to cross the divide.

Bottom line, division in our country has *not* come from the President of the United States. It has come from people, following the lead of media talking heads more interested in ratings than accuracy, who have lost sight of the fact that most of the time, reasonable minds and committed hearts will not reach identical conclusions. For living in a country where our Constitution guarantees us the right to express those different conclusions, I say, "Thank God!" Now, let the depolarization process begin, inspired by the proverb, "Begin to step on the bridge of accommodation—not so much to 'accommodate', as to understand and conciliate."

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Talmage Boston is a trial lawyer in Dallas and Fort Worth with the firm of Winstead Sechrest & Minick P.C.