Confessions of a Presidential Speechwriter

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Last Lessons out of the Whirl of Events

While managing the mess in the Film Department, I continued to maintain my academic publishing. In a law-review article entitled “Violence as Indecency: Pacifica’s Open Door Policy,” I attacked a bad, but still standing Supreme Court decision from 1978. It upheld the right of the Federal Communications Commission to reprimand a radio station for broadcasting a monologue by comedian George Carlin. The FCC then expanded its power to censor implied indecency based on context instead of specific words. Rulings based on context had become fairly arbitrary, which by most lights meant they were unconstitutional. For example, the FCC fined the radio network that carried Howard Stern, even though he did not say the condemned words; but similar implications about erections and even masturbation on CBS’s *Will and Grace* and *Two and Half Men* were not penalized.

Robert O’Neill, the leading scholar on the First Amendment came out of my field and then went on to law school, eventually becoming dean of the University of Cincinnati Law School, president of the University of Wisconsin system, and president of the University of Virginia. Now he was director of the Thomas Jefferson Center. Bob told me he had a grant to set up a summit on the First Amendment at the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., and he wanted me to participate.

In the fall, some graduate students, faculty, and I published an e-book on my Center’s site, *The First Amendment and Religious Freedom*, and presented it at the National Communication Association’s annual meeting in November 2008, and at the President’s Forum for Human Rights on campus in March 2009. In November 2009 we presented “A First Amendment Profile of the Sitting Justices of the Supreme Court” to the NCA convention,
and it was eventually published as a book by John Cabot University Press in 2011. I was very pleased that these outlets for the work of graduate students and faculty helped the graduate students get into PhD programs, and helped the faculty get tenured and promoted.  

THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

The primary season was underway for a successor to George W. Bush, whose administration had fallen on hard times. It bungled the crisis caused by Hurricane Katrina’s flooding New Orleans; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were indecisive and prolonged. The speculation going into 2008 was that Hillary Clinton had a lock on the Democratic nomination and Rudy Giuliani, the hero mayor of New York City during 9/11, had a lock on the Republican nomination. In December of 2007, I had warned on several talk shows that the early presumptive nominees rarely won their party’s nomination. Being in front of the pack means being a target for the other candidates and the media, who want to make a race out of it. Michigan Governor George Romney, the father of Mitt, had stumbled in 1968 when he said in an interview that he had been “brainwashed” by generals in Vietnam. Standing on a flatbed truck trying to address a crowd of supporters, Senator Edmund Muskie was reduced to tears during the New Hampshire primary of 1972 when the Manchester Union Leader revealed the foulmouthed utterances of his wife. In 1975, no one thought an ex-governor of Georgia who was a peanut farmer could win his party’s nomination; but in 1976, he not only got the nomination, he won the presidency. In 1979, the pundits thought Ronald Reagan was too old to win his party’s nomination; in November of 1980, he was president-elect. As late as January of 1992, the press was writing former governor Bill Clinton off because of sex scandals, but he became “the comeback kid.” And the rise of George W. Bush is almost beyond comprehension.

By February 2008, Barack Obama was giving Hillary Clinton a run for the nomination. So she put all of her resources in the Super Tuesday primaries of February 5, attempting to score a knockout. It didn’t work. Obama won a number of small states and scored heavily with his eloquent victory speeches. However, as I pointed out in my media interviews, he failed to ever match his poll-projected numbers in his victories, running roughly 3 to 6 percent behind them in each case depending on whose poll you read. I also pointed out that he did not debate well; on points, Hillary beat him in
most of their debates. However, she was an unlikable schoolmarm in most of these exchanges. The press helped Obama along by lobbing easy questions at him until a skit on *Saturday Night Live* shamed them into equal treatment of the candidates.

As I made clear in guest lectures, no one shone on the Republican side. Giuliani avoided the New Hampshire primary and bet a win in the Florida primary would catapult him into the lead. However, his campaign was so disorganized that it could generate neither funds nor enthusiasm. He was out of the race, and the field eventually narrowed to Senator John McCain and former governor Mitt Romney. McCain won that battle.

At the political conventions, Obama gave his acceptance speech in Denver, which was something of a letdown. His advisors had decided he should give a workmanlike address with pragmatic approaches to problems instead of relying on his usual high-flown campaign rhetoric. His address was delivered outdoors—almost always a bad idea, because nature sucks the energy out of the venue. (Kennedy’s acceptance of the nomination outdoors at the Los Angeles Coliseum was weak enough to induce Nixon to accept the offer of debates.) The Republican Convention seemed ready to take advantage of the situation. If McCain could define Obama in an unfavorable way while heightening his own credibility—the same strategy Bush Sr. used on Dukakis in 1988—the Republicans could win the election.

McCain surprised everyone by selecting Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. She had very little experience, being a small-time mayor who became governor when her opponents self-destructed. On the last night of the convention, Palin gave a speech that received solid marks, and McCain followed with a speech that was muddled until his peroration, where he finally hit his stride and brought the crowd to its feet. I was not surprised over the next few days when the polls showed that McCain-Palin got a bump out of the GOP convention. They would lead in the polls through mid-September, when the mortgage crisis brought the economy and McCain’s campaign to a halt. It didn’t help that Palin was revealed to be a lightweight. Tina Fey did a spot-on imitation of Palin that was so good that to this day, people swear that Palin said, “I can see Russia from my front porch.” She actually said, “You can see Russia from Alaska.” It didn’t matter, since that fact hardly qualifies as foreign-policy experience. Though she held her own in the vice-presidential debate with Senator Joe Biden, gaffes continued to haunt her on the campaign trail. She was out of her depth, and given McCain’s age, many people could not stomach the thought of her being a heartbeat away from the presidency. Had he won, McCain would have been the oldest man elected to the presidency. I
watched how the game was played and commented on it. But I was content not to be directly involved.

So I did commentaries on the election on KFWB locally and other news outlets around the nation, such as the Rocky Mountain Radio Network. I watched as McCain gamely tried to defend Bush’s wars, while Obama promised to end them posthaste. During the debates, it was shocking to me that McCain could not close the deal when it came to making an argument. He seemed to believe that the audience would fill in the missing pieces and infer the proper conclusion. In the town hall debate, he wandered around the stage as if looking for a lost cat. In all of the debates, he looked old and tired. Because of prisoner-of-war injuries, his gestures were stiff and limited. When in the last debate he sighed when he heard something from Obama he did not like, McCain reminded the audience of Gore in his first, eye-rolling debate with Bush in 2000. Television is a cool medium; overacting is detected immediately. And so a great patriot became a failed campaigner in part because of his rhetorical inadequacies.

Though Obama again ran behind the poll projections, which averaged an 11 percent advantage, he still won the election by a margin of 54 to 46 percent. His campaign had created an e-mail list of ten million supporters who were ready to phone others, walk precincts, and monitor polling places. Almost 62 percent of eligible voters turned out, the highest percentage since 1968. Republicans suffered many losses in the House and Senate; in the latter, the Democrats could now stop Republican filibusters. The only good news for Republicans was that the Democrats would have no excuses if they could not produce on the promises they made during the campaign. That would lead to the Republican comeback of 2010 and the decline of Obama’s popularity. But in November of 2008, things looked pretty bleak for the Republicans.

TEACHING IN ROME

As the fall semester grew to a close, I was excited about a whole new adventure. I would be going to Rome with my friend Karl Squitier for three weeks to teach a class abroad for our students. We planned to take them on various excursions that illustrated what we were teaching, whether it be the Senate House in the Forum or Villa d’Este in the hills.

On January 2, I arrived at our apartment on the Tiber: two bedrooms, two baths, and in the fashionable Prati neighborhood, an easy walking
distance to the Campo di Fiori and other famous sites. Karl and I quickly learned how to choreograph the preparation of meals in our tiny kitchen. Each night we traded the roles of master chef and sous-chef. We found the best local butcher, the best grocery store, the best liquor store, and were set for our three-week stay. Karl also found a lovely local bar/restaurant. The woman who ran the place was energetic and clearly in love with her gorgeous and brooding son, who was the brains of the operation. Almost every night we stopped in for an after-dinner digestivo (Campari, soda, lime) and were welcomed like visiting princes. We caught up on gossip and gave advice to the family, who took us under their wing. After we got in each night, Karl would call his partner back in California to report on the day’s events. And I would sit alone, reading.

One high point of the trip came at Hadrian’s huge villa, replete with ponds, a swimming pool, statues, and ruins. I told the students about Hadrian’s gay relationship with Antinous, a young man he discovered in Bithynia. When Antinous sacrificed himself to the Nile to end a drought, Hadrian created more statues of him than existed for anyone else in antiquity. He also struck a coin in his honor.

One night we cooked for Mary Merva, the dean at John Cabot University in Rome, a wonderful liberal arts American university on the Tiber. She brought her delightful husband, Stefano, whom she had met when she came to teach in Rome the first time. A few days later, Mary called to invite me to give a lecture on famous inaugural addresses as a lead-in to Barack Obama’s inaugural. I must say it was a great thrill to see him sworn in. The inaugural has a whole different feel when you watch it from a foreign country. My pre-lecture was carried on Italian television, followed by the President’s inaugural address live at 6 p.m. Italian time. After it was over, the president of John Cabot University asked me to teach a course there in the summer, and I’ve been going back ever since.

Early in the spring semester of 2009, I went up to see Mom. My sister warned me that “Mom seems out of it.” It never failed, however, that when I walked into her room, Mom immediately brightened up. What had been slurred speech was suddenly clear and fluent. I spent the rest of my arrival day with her. The next day I spent the morning with her, then went off and caught my limit of fish at Little Medicine Lake with my brother-in-law. When we returned, Mom loved it when I brought the stringer of trout into her room for examination.

Also in the spring, I decided that six years was long enough to have been chair of the Film Department, and that two terms was long enough to be on the CSU Board. California’s budget was in the dumper along with the
economy. Being chair of a dysfunctional department was bad enough. I didn't need the added headache of no replacements for the departing faculty and no equipment money once the Spielberg funds ran out. As for the board of trustees, being forced to raise students' tuition was galling. So on May 7, I gave a farewell address to the Statewide Academic Senate, urging them to become more proactive and not to be overshadowed by the self-defeating faculty union. I received a resolution commending my service. A week later, I said my farewell to the board and was named “Trustee Emeritus.” The most moving moment came when the chair called me “the conscience of the board.”

The semester wound down, our graduation was completed, and I was finished as chair of the Film Department. I settled back into writing, exploration of spiritual ties, cooking for friends (most of whom were former students), playing tennis, and walking on the beach. The new, simpler rhythm of my life was interrupted by a call from my sister. Mom had suddenly fallen into a coma and was going fast. “Should I come up?” I asked.

“She’s not talking to anyone, and I’m not sure you can get here in time.” As I was packing, I received another call. My mother had passed away. At the end, with only her granddaughter in the room, my mother had lifted her arms toward heaven and given out a sigh, and died. Now, I needed to arrange for her to be buried next to Dad in National City.

When the hearse arrived at St. Mary’s Church, I nearly lost my composure. Surrounded by relatives, we wheeled the casket into the church where I had been baptized and received my First Holy Communion. At the gravesite, I gave a eulogy in which I tried to relieve my sister’s grief. I told those assembled that Mom was proud of what my sister Avis and I had accomplished in life, but it did not compare to what my sister Renée had given her: grandchildren. They were the lights of my mother’s life. I concluded: “It is a long way from the woods of Pennsylvania to the clouds of heaven, but Mother has now completed that journey.” My sister fell apart when the casket was lowered into the ground. Then we all commiserated for a while and headed for home. It wasn’t until a week later, when everyone had finally departed, that I got some rest and was able to let go of my feelings. Mom had lived to be ninety-three. She was at peace and it was her time.

On the Fourth of July, 2009, I landed in Rome, where the temperatures were tolerable but I could feel that they were going to get much hotter and combine with the humidity coming off the Tiber, one block away. However, every evening a soft breeze came down the river and cooled things off. To celebrate the summer, Romans lined the Tiber with open-air bars,
restaurants, and other amusements. One night I taught a bartender how to make a decent martini.

I decided to take a day trip to Orvieto and was delighted to find that when I exited the funicular at the top of the plateau, it was much cooler than below in the train station. However, while in the cathedral with a beautiful variegated front, I was suddenly struck with anxiety. I would be going home to teach as a regular faculty member for the first time in six years; no board of trustees, no chair of a department. The year would be my lead-in to the semiretirement program (half-time teaching, full retirement salary, plus half of my regular salary). What would I do with myself? My anxiety increased on the train back to Rome.

My class at John Cabot was composed of a dozen students from Cal State Long Beach and three students from Europe. They all earned A’s or B’s, doing very well on the final exams. Their five weeks in Rome and around Europe on the weekends changed their lives, as did their newfound knowledge of the power of rhetoric. And I had some great teaching experiences. One student had returned from soldiering in Iraq and was just beginning his college education. He thought of himself as a slow learner. I worked closely with him, allowing him, as I do with most students, to rewrite his papers in light of what I hoped was constructive criticism. The first time he rewrote a paper, a light went on. He came to me with tears in his eyes when he saw that he got an A.

I needn’t have worried about adjusting to my fall schedule. I realized that throughout my life, I had gotten a wonderful education that continued to blossom in new publications and new ways of teaching. My love for history gave me a sense of prudence and opened the door to writing about historic events and important speakers. My immersion in films and the study of English literature, particularly Shakespeare and Hemingway, gave me a feel for language and the difference between the spoken and the written word. These experiences continually expanded my vocabulary, which is important if you are trying to say something in just the right way. It is as simple as this: the more words you know, the more precisely you can say things. Hemingway taught other lessons. First, watch for unneeded adverbs and adjectives. Second, if you get writer’s block, try to think of one important, true sentence. Use it as a conclusion and inductively work your way back to it. If you read a good Hemingway story or book chapter, you’ll find that it often ends with one important, true sentence to which you are led by all that has gone on before it.

Being immersed in rhetorical theory had made me adaptable to new job situations and had given me the ability to write for a variety of occasions,
from the Bicentennial of the nation to a speech on the new product line at Chrysler. My years in competitive debate and public speaking, both as a participant and a coach, gave me an appreciation of research for sound evidence to produce solid arguments. These skills led to my advancement at CBS, the White House, the National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, and Chrysler, and contributed to my academic publication record over the years. I continue to pass these skills on to my students as best as I can.

My relaxed schedule gave me more time to explore Los Angeles and its environs, which I have come to appreciate. The diversity of neighborhoods and cultures cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Our symphony orchestra is superb given the lineage from Zubin Mehta to Esa Pekka Salonen to Gustavo Dudamel. The opera is run by Placido Domingo, who brought us the innovative and over-the-top Ring Cycle of Wagner done with puppets, masks, and lots of neon. The combination of the Music Center, the Mark Taper Forum, and Disney Hall gives Los Angeles some wonderful venues. Then there are the museums: the Los Angeles County Museum is world-renowned; the Getty, sitting on its hill overlooking all of L.A. is beautifully designed; the Getty Villa on the ocean in Malibu is filled with ancient treasures. The Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, and the Huntington with its gardens and Gainsboroughs in San Marino are perfect for a day’s visit. The beaches are all different, some facing south, some west. They are accessible all year long, refreshed by a soft, cool ocean breeze. It serves to keep our climate moderate; in fact, I don’t believe there is a better place to live year-round than along the coast in Southern California.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

The spring semester of 2010 led into campaigning for the midterm elections and therefore, calls from local cable shows and national radio programs. I dwell on this moment in history because as I write, it mirrors in some ways where Republicans find themselves in 2013: lacking a national majority. If they could bring the party back in 2010, they may be able to do it again in 2014. So let’s see what happened in 2010.

In my media interviews, I argued that 2010 paralleled 1966. In 1964, the Republicans had suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of Lyndon Johnson. At the top of the ticket, Senator Barry Goldwater had been painted as an extremist. (If only we could have his kind of “extremism” now.) He received only 40 percent of the vote and took many a senator and
congressman down with him. Newspaper editorials predicted the demise of the Republican Party. But in the midterm elections of 1966, the Republicans came roaring back. Two years after that, Richard Nixon captured the White House and the Republican Party was back in the saddle.

I predicted a 1966-like comeback for the Republicans in November of 2010. I based this prediction on a number of factors. First, many Democrats who won new House seats in 2006 and 2008 won by very close margins and could be picked off if the Republicans played their cards right. Second, the 2008 presidential loss was less devastating than the media portrayed it. The fact is, Barack Obama, as he always did, ran behind his poll numbers. Remember too that Obama’s endorsements of candidates had proven toxic as early as 2009 in Virginia and New Jersey for governor, and, heaven help him, in Massachusetts for senator, where the Republicans had picked up Teddy Kennedy’s seat, ending the Democrats’ filibuster-proof hold on the Senate. Third, the country was not recovering from the Great Recession despite all the stimulus Obama and his House and Senate majorities provided. Unemployment remained very high. On January 20, 2010, the second anniversary of Obama’s inaugural, the chair of the congressional panel appointed to oversee the bank bailout reported that 20 percent, that’s one-fifth, of all Americans were either jobless, underemployed, or had given up on finding a job. People were hurting as they lost their jobs and/or their homes.

Fourth, the President lost his leftist and youth bases because he did not deliver on his promise to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan quickly. He also defaulted on the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on homosexuality in the military. There were more “Defense Department contractors” in Iraq than when the President took office. He continued the rendition program of the CIA and turned those apprehended over to other countries for torture. He expanded the terrorist prisons at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. His approval of the use of drones often resulted in civilian casualties.

Fifth, Obamacare was unpopular across the country. Sixth, while a great campaign speaker, Obama was lackluster from his inaugural address through the 2010 election. Somehow, he had become a boring president. Reading from teleprompters at press conferences is a turn-off, as is not scheduling them in the evening when the public has time to watch, or not scheduling them at all because you don’t want to answer tough questions.

Even the dumbest Republicans could see that 2010 presented them with an opportunity. Understanding the numbers, the Republicans, under the leadership of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Minority Leader John, “the dour but well-tanned,” Boehner, decided not only to say “no”
to Obama’s policies but to say “hell no!” They launched a passive-aggressive strategy that proved effective. The passive part was to just sit back and circle their wagons in partisan unity while the Democrats whooped and yelled and ran up the deficit. The aggressive part was to be negative and positive. Republicans opposed the stimulus package, and when it failed to produce results, they said, “I told you so.” They opposed the healthcare reform, particularly on the hustings in town hall meetings, and eventually got the majority of Americans to oppose the program too. They charged that Obama could campaign, but could not govern. Smartly, and better late than never, the Republicans aggressively recruited Hispanic candidates for public office, from Abel Maldonado for lieutenant governor of California to the charismatic Marco Rubio for senator in Florida. When all the votes were counted, Susanna Martinez became the Republican governor of New Mexico; Brian Sandoval became the Republican governor of Nevada. Many house races featured Latino and Latina Republicans.

The rhetoric of Republican resistance emboldened two other groups that proved important in the election. In January 2010, that is, just as we were heading into the midterm elections, the Supreme Court narrowly ruled in the *Citizens United* case that corporations and unions could spend independently and to their heart’s content in federal elections. The FEC reports that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce poured $75 million into the midterm election. American Crossroads, which was founded by Karl Rove, spent $52 million; free-market backer Americans for Prosperity spent $45 million; and the conservative Club for Growth spent $24 million. Many more joined in. This money was particularly effective in down-ticket races for the state legislatures.

Just as important, out of the discontent of 2009, the Tea Party movement emerged to energize the election and the conservative wing of the GOP. Flogged on by Sarah Palin and the sophistic Glenn Beck, Tea Party members helped turn out disaffected voters, and that, combined with the unenthusiasm of Democrats, particularly the young, gave momentum to the Grand Old Party.

Other important variables in the elections of 2010 included early absentee voting during a time when the President and his party were particularly unpopular, and a toxic political environment in which compromise was nearly impossible and negative advertising reigned supreme. This environment was reinforced by commentators such as the rational Rachel Maddow and William Kristol, to the semi-rational Bill O’Reilly and Chris Matthews, and the irrational Keith Olbermann, Ann Coulter, and Rush Limbaugh. Almost anything you wanted to believe could be reinforced somewhere on a
cable channel by some talking head. You can fool some of the people all of the time, as Lincoln suggested in one of his debates with Douglas. Americans were becoming more and more segregated and dogmatic. They believed they knew it all because even their dumbest positions, such as “There is no global warming,” were being reinforced on some cable channel by some nut somewhere. The situation was also ridiculed by comedy news shows, including Jon Stewart’s telling quotation-for-quotation matchup between George W. Bush and Barack Obama on the wars and the deficit. It didn’t seem to matter who the president was; the same policies were being embraced by the Democrat that had been endorsed by the Republican.

In a stunning Gallup Poll, Americans claimed to have confidence in only three of the sixteen standard institutions that make up the country: the military, small businesses, and police. Others in which there was less than a 25 percent confidence rating included the media, banks, health insurers, and Congress. The Supreme Court and organized religion did better, but failed to achieve a 50 percent rating.

A typical example of the rhetoric of Republican resistance came on Friday the 13th (hello) in August. The President gave a speech at a Ramadan dinner (hello) in which he addressed the question of the right of Muslims to build a mosque near the tragic site of the attack on the World Trade Center. The President was correct, in my opinion, when he said, “[Muslims] have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in Lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws.” However, Representative Peter King (r-ny) immediately responded that “It is insensitive and uncaring for the Muslim community to build a mosque in the shadow of ground zero. While the Muslim community has the right to build the mosque, they are abusing the right by needlessly offending so many people who have suffered so much. . . . Unfortunately the President caved into political correctness.” Would Representative King have resisted the President’s defense of the First Amendment had he not seen a CNN/Opinion Research Poll earlier in August which showed that 68 percent of the public opposed plans to build the mosque?

By Labor Day, the Gallup Poll found that voters preferred Republicans over Democrats for Congress by a margin of 51 percent to 41 percent, the largest gap Gallup had ever found in favor of Republicans in the history of its polling. Furthermore, the poll revealed that Republicans were far more enthusiastic about voting than were Democrats. The Pew Research Center Poll showed that since the 2008 election, Obama had lost 14 percent of the support he had from single women, moderates, and white men; he had
lost 13 percent of the support he had received in the election from Latinos, suburbanites, older voters, and younger voters. He had lost 9 percent of the support he had from liberals.

As I had predicted as early as November 2009 at the National Communication Association’s annual meeting in Chicago, the result was a massive defeat for Democrats in the House, governor’s races, and statehouse seats. Republicans also made a moderate gain in the Senate. They picked up 63 House seats, the largest gain by a party since 1948. But what is often overlooked is the depth of the Republican victory in statehouses. The Republicans won control of the legislatures and governorships of twenty states, including Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Florida, and Pennsylvania. In only six states did the Democrats control all three branches of governance.

Thus, Republicans controlled most of the redistricting across the country, which would have important consequences in the 2012 election. They quickly passed laws requiring voter identification and went after public employee and other labor unions.

The problem was that leading into the presidential campaign of 2012, the system had produced gridlock, the Republicans did not expand their appeal to minorities, and the Republican field of candidates was very weak. Each side had become more entrenched. And the Republican Party continued to slide to the right, away from sensible positions on gay rights, gun control, and freedom of expression. In the Republican presidential primary debates, it was horribly disheartening to listen to the likes of Congresswoman Michele Bachmann and former senator Rick Santorum spew their venom. It was even more upsetting to see the former sensible governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, cave in to the Republican Right to get the nomination. That more than anything else put him at a severe disadvantage in the general election. Romney’s elitist core was revealed when he claimed at a fundraising dinner that he would never get the support of the 47 percent of voters who paid no taxes and relied on government support.

The general election, though closer than expected because of Romney’s performance in the first presidential debate, accomplished little. The most remarkable statistic from the election indicates voters’ dissatisfaction with the system. This was no mandate, and had the Republicans run a candidate less prone to errors and revelations about his true values, they might have won.

Let’s look at the numbers. President Obama was returned to office by a margin of 51.3 percent to 48.7 percent. However, a closer reading of the election statistics should send tremors through both parties. In the final count, Romney ran about 300,000 votes behind McCain’s total vote of
2008. And Obama ran 6 million votes behind his vote total from 2008. In other words, the voters basically said, a plague on both your houses. It is almost unfathomable that a sitting president would run 6 million votes behind his first-term election numbers and be returned to office. Even when Franklin Roosevelt broke tradition and ran for a third term, he maintained his total vote following from the previous elections.

But don’t let these statistics paper over deeper cleavages in the electorate. White voters, particularly males, voted overwhelmingly for Romney, while women and minorities gave their support to Obama. Even among women there was a huge divide; married women supported Romney by a margin of 53 to 46 percent, while single women supported Obama by a margin of 67 to 31 percent. Suburban and rural voters went Republican; city dwellers went Democratic.

Often neglected among the exit-poll statistics was the fact that Obama ran even better among Asian Americans than among Hispanics. He received over 70 percent of the vote of each group, but the turnaround among Asian Americans was the most spectacular. Libertarian Republicans could take some pleasure in the fact that four states approved same-sex marriage and two legalized recreational pot smoking. However, because the House remained in Republican hands, it will be extremely difficult for this system of checks and balances to reduce unemployment and the deficit, monitor wars abroad, deal with climate change and international trade policy, to name just a few of the challenges we face. Social issues continue to be shunted off to ballot propositions or the Supreme Court, where one hopes they will continue to come down on the side of civil rights for all citizens.

The Democrats added a few seats to their majority in the Senate because Senate races are less influenced by super PAC money, and, let’s face it, the Democrats had better candidates, and some Republican Senate candidates said such outrageous things that their remarks disrupted the presidential campaign by bringing to the fore issues that Romney wanted to ignore. However, even with these wins, the Democrats cannot prevent filibusters, one of the most anti-democratic parliamentary procedures ever adopted in this republic.

It should now be clear that the Republican Party needs to revise its manifesto. The party’s flirtation with the radical, religious Right produced some wins over the years and will probably keep Republicans in power in the more rural states and congressional districts, but such pandering will no longer produce a national consensus in favor of a Republican presidential candidate. If the Republicans want to remain a minority party, stay the course. However, if Republicans want to return to a time when they controlled the
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House, the Senate, and the presidency, they need to take several important steps, as they did in 1966 and in 2010.

First, the party should show some pride in its past. The Republican Party under the leadership of Lincoln freed the slaves and passed the Thirteenth Amendment. In his martyred name, it passed the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Those amendments gave African American men the vote, while extending equal protection under the law and due process of it to the states. Over the objections of the Democrats, Republicans got suffrage for women; the first female members of the House and Senate were Republicans, as was the first woman to sit on the Supreme Court. Teddy Roosevelt was a superb diplomat, winning the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating the end of a war between Japan and Russia. He was a conservationist who created our national parks system. Dwight Eisenhower gave us peace and prosperity while negotiating the difficulties of the nuclear age and fixing the nation’s infrastructure. Nixon and Ford continued that tradition with fiscal responsibility and environmental concern. And it wouldn’t hurt to remind people that the SALT I limits were signed and the voting age was lowered to eighteen under Nixon. Ronald Reagan continued the battle for disarmament and taught Republicans not to speak ill of one another, to be optimistic rather than divisive, to transcend party lines when possible (remember those Reagan Democrats), and to communicate their message effectively.

Second, Republicans should have learned from him that when you favor an unpopular position, such as prohibiting abortion, do so in a rational and compassionate way. When you support a strict reading of the Constitution in its historical context, include the Bill of Rights, which means freedom of expression and religion, separation of church and state, and a right to privacy and fair trial. You can’t invoke the Constitution on such issues as gun control without embracing the rest of the document. In other words, if you are going to be conservative, be sensible about it. True conservatism, the conservatism of Edmund Burke and William F. Buckley, is very attractive to most voters. They know that we need a strong defense; that we shouldn’t entangle America in unwinnable foreign wars that are not in the national interest; that civil rights should protect individual freedom; that creativity should be nurtured and rewarded; that the states can function as laboratories for better policies (Massachusetts’s healthcare plan developed under Romney became the model for Obama’s national program); that unless it is vital to the national interest, education should be left to the states and localities; that religion is essential to the national spirit, but must be a private matter.

Third, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to tell you that nominating
trogloidytes and witches for senator at the expense of seasoned veterans will cost you elections. These nuts will get airtime and pop up into the national election with their ridiculously uninformed and/or offensive remarks. Whether for House, Senate, or president, picking a strong candidate is the most important element in producing a victory on election day. Given the huge numbers of voters who now call themselves independents, people are voting more and more for the person rather than for the party.

Fourth, Republicans must adjust to their audiences. In states like New York, California, and Maine, moderate Republicans need to be nominated for office. In most of the South, Republicans can rely on a traditional conservative framework to carry the day as long as extreme positions don’t puncture that framework of the national election. But even in such states as Texas and Arizona, as they did in 2010, Republicans need to nominate well-qualified Latinos/as for office because that population is growing. The successes of Hispanic Republicans in Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada, among others, should have found the Republicans nominating many more Hispanic candidates in 2012. Of course they need to appeal to women, who make up over half of the electorate. They did this by electing Susan Collins and Olympia Snow as the U.S. senators from Maine, and Susana Martinez and Nikki Haley as governors of New Mexico and South Carolina respectively.12 They must also find Asian American candidates, as they did a decade ago in California.

Fifth, and for now, Republicans can function as the loyal opposition and score points with the public on many issues. They should monitor foreign policy and make sure the administration is engaged in realpolitik instead of romanticism. They should call the President out when he violates the War Powers Act (as he did in the Libyan intervention), and they should consider questioning the moral and legal implications of using torture and drones as weapons against terrorism. They should point out that when you add income taxes, property taxes, state taxes, Social Security taxes, Medicare taxes, city taxes, and sales taxes, you’ll find that many Americans are paying half their income to their governments. If they are getting the services they want for those fees, fine; if they are not, we’ve gone down the wrong road. It is also fair to point out that the federal government continues to grow and take on more and more responsibilities that were once the province of the states while running a national debt that is going to come due with a vengeance someday soon. They should continue to protest that the states have lost many powers to the federal government while being burdened with unfunded mandates and regulations tied to federal aid. They should reveal the bloat and fraud in the welfare system, as well as in defense spending.
Sixth, be smart. Read the poll data to figure out what the voters want to hear about and what their positions are on the issues. With the help of super PACs, the Republican Party should nurture young, promising candidates from city-council and assembly seats all the way to the White House. Recruit at the lower levels of the electoral system and support a career that is promising.

If the Republicans don’t make these changes, the party will not only continue to lose people like me, it will wind up nationally where it now sits in California, where the Democrats have super-majorities in both houses of the legislature and hold the governorship. The Republican Party of Earl Warren, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Pete Wilson is now irrelevant to governance in this state. I give this advice because America needs a two-party system; it is out of the dialectic between them that sensible policies used to emerge.

THE LAST ACT?

Between the midterm elections of 2010 and the presidential election of 2012, I continued to teach and run my Center. I participated in a grant the campus received from the Doris Duke Foundation by giving ten lectures in downtown Long Beach to the community. Five lectures concerned the terrible times of blacklisting in Hollywood, and five lectures concerned censorship of violence and indecency. Each lecture was followed by a feature film that was either written or directed by a blacklisted artist, or illustrated the point of the lecture. That such artists could be censored in an America that had just won a world war in the name of protecting freedom and democracy should give us pause.

The Center runs forums in Rome with John Cabot University each summer on freedom of expression, often comparing American freedoms to those of European nations. We have completed six episodes of a cable series on *The First Amendment and You*,13 which tries to bring an understanding of all the clauses of the amendment to the public. It also points them to our website, where they can find objective studies of issues surrounding freedom of religion and expression. Under a grant, we have expanded our program of fellowships to graduate and law students around the country.

In 2010, I was humbled to receive a letter informing me that I would be given the Douglas Ehninger Award from the National Communication Association for “distinguished scholarship in rhetorical studies.” At the
convention, as the MC read my accomplishments, I looked out over the sea of academics and reflected on the arc of my life. There were a lot of successes. But I learned more from the failures. After the event, some of my friends speculated that semi-retirement would be difficult for me. Because of my publication record in the midst of a busy life outside of academia, they often see me as a Type A. However, I had made some major adjustments after I returned from Rome. I am happy to sleep in every morning, make my breakfast, and spend an hour quietly reading the *Los Angeles Times*. If the morning is open, I write. At school, I’m happy to pour my abilities into just one class a semester, and to mentor as many students outside of class as is feasible. Being out of the closet, I can make up for lost time helping LGBT students. I’m happy to go on long walks beholding birds on the beach, to watch the evening news at the end of the day, to cook for my friends, including students, several times a week. I’m happy to share my sense of spirituality with them and see it surface in their work, hoping they can pass it along to others. Though a step or two slower than I used to be, I play tennis whenever I can get a game up. I’m happy to putter in my garden and read good books.

As a genuine conservative in Edmund Burke’s definition of the term, I hate changes. Yet, as this narrative makes clear, I’ve had to endure many. My training in rhetoric, more than anything else, has helped me cope with and adapt to these changes. If there is anything I’m sure of, it is that you can’t have it all. With no romantic relationships, not to mention a partner, I’ve had plenty of time to do the work I do. I have found contentment by reducing desire and enhancing spirituality. And I have been blessed with many spiritual relationships that have stood the test of time. Yes, it is difficult to balance spiritualism with reality and to keep dreaming in a world that lets you down. However, if you develop an association with spirit, refine it, and use it, your talent can take you to places you’ve never dreamed of. From there, you can reach back and bring others along. You can expand the sense of spirit in the world, diminishing the pain of living in a troubled environment, and thereby make this world a better place, one that nurtures and inspires.