

## **B470. "Red State, Blue State, Light Meat, Dark Meat." Forward (November 26, 2004).**

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As my students were packing to go home for Thanksgiving, I asked them what effect "Post-Election Stress Syndrome" was going to have on their holidays. Only two expected any troubles.

One explained that his parents were dyed-in-the-wool Republicans and that they would tease him mercilessly for having worked his tail off as a volunteer for the Kerry campaign in Pennsylvania. He, in turn, would resent their support of a president who was making him consider moving to Canada for the next four years, if not longer. "It's going to be a rough Thanksgiving," he concluded.

Another student said that his parents were even more liberal than he was and that the whole family was sure to spend the holiday despondent, bemoaning the fate of the nation and wondering — in the inimical words of the British tabloid *The Daily Mirror* — "How can 59,054,087 people be so DUMB?" Above all, he both resented and was more than a bit envious of the few Republican students he knew who were oozing a deep sense of satisfaction as they prepared to go home and sit down to a meal of profound and all-around thanksgiving.

The other students demurred. One scoffed at the notion that politics were that important: "This holiday season isn't going to be any different from any other. We'll stuff our faces and watch football games until we're bleary-eyed. Stupid little lights will appear all over the place, mixed with plastic Santa Clauses, as we start the shop-till-you-drop Christmas season. The malls will be as full as they were last year, and the elevators will play the same tired tunes all over again. It all will be as familiar and comfortable as a well-worn pair of shoes."

No wonder, I said to myself, she is the best sociology student I have had in years.

I, too, believe that the holiday season will allow the healing to begin, to remind most Americans — all but the diehard liberals, of which there are surprisingly few outside of Manhattan, San Francisco and elite college campuses — that we are one nation, after all, and that we have much for which to be thankful. Most Americans will have an ample meal to sit down to, a roof over their head and the warmth of a properly heated home and of family members assembled from near and far — even if there are going to be the inevitable squabbles that mark such relationships.

Some families will avoid discussing politics altogether. Others will count it as a blessing that the elections were, by and large, fair and clean, recalling how concerned they were just a few weeks ago that the nation would face the trials of weeks of contested decisions, lawsuits, "Six Floridas," a loss of legitimacy of the democratic process and the possibility of becoming the world's laughingstock — all of which we were spared, for which much thanksgiving is due.

Indeed, the holiday season will serve well the partial reconciliation that has already begun. I say "partial" because not all Americans will be reconciled to four more years of President Bush or to the idea that they will have to share the same nation with 50 million people they consider religious bigots. Nor will the reconciliation of those who will calm down be complete. And Bush's next moves, both foreign and domestic, are likely to feed their remaining resentment.

However, despite all the rhetoric to the contrary, nobody I know is packing. Most are pondering where the Democrats should go next, rather than giving up on politics or talking about supporting some kind of Ralph Nader next time around. The very fact that for the weeks to come, most Americans will be absorbed in doing the same things they have been doing for years during the Thanksgiving/Christmas season should remind us that the American society is a resilient one and that there is a full and rich life — even after an important election loss.

Reconciliation will be greatly eased by the fact that the divisions, the often repeated claims of

polarization, were overblown to begin with. The notion that liberals occupy the two coasts and that the rest of nation is GOP land, or that there are states whose citizens hold to blue or red views, is a media artifact. Most blue states have many red citizens, and vice versa. True, in a winner-takes-all election, it looks as if New York has no upstate; as if New York City has no Staten Island; as if Orange County is not in California, or as if there are only Republicans in the Midwest and Mountain states.

However, a closer look shows that although many states were eventually called red or blue, Bush and John Kerry actually ran neck and neck in them, within a few percentage points of each other. Take Ohio, for example, which was called red with roughly 51% of the votes going to Bush and around 48.5% to Kerry; or New Hampshire, hailed blue with Kerry receiving about 50% of the votes and Bush 49%.

Moreover, most "red" people have some blue views and beliefs, and most "blue" people are far from fully blue. Elections, which force them to reduce all subtleties and nuances to one vote, make them look like one-dimensional creatures. A quick read of Morris Fiorina's "Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America" or of Alan Wolfe's "One Nation, After All," however, makes it clear that Americans are much more complex. It turns out that there are gay conservatives, pro-life Democrats, and so on and so on.

I do not seek to make light of the bitterness of the last election, fueled by, among other things, the injection of religious absolutes into politics. It is much easier to reach compromises on tax rates and expenditures for various social programs than on abortion, school prayer and litmus tests for Supreme Court judges. However, one should not make light either of the resiliency of the American society or of the legitimacy of its democratic polity — nor of the healing power of holidays we all share.