

# Downside UP

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*The following article is my first by a guest contributor. In fact, I never intended to have any guest contributors, figuring that it might open a Pandora's Box. Then Bud Brownsberger wrote such a lengthy and interesting response to the June issue of Downside Up that I asked if he were interested in expanding and elaborating on it as a possible guest article to be published in DU. He responded with more, we tossed some ideas and drafts back and forth, and below you have the result. -- RGW*

## **America's Stories: Do We Democrats Really Believe Them?**

By Bud L. Brownsberger

The story of America is one of hope and optimism evoked by our passion for freedom and equality. (1) It is a story of halos and horns in which the reach of our idealism has always exceeded the grasp of our enthusiasms. Our stories give purpose and meaning to our aspirations while, eventually, correcting the errors of our thoughtlessly self-serving, if not cruel, hypocrisies.

We Democrats have often ignored, cynically dismissed, or forgotten the stories of our national roots. This mistake was perhaps exposed in the June, 2005, issue of Downside Up. In an apparently innocent attempt to deal with policy and program ideas, Woodbury and his respondents seem to have forgotten the emotive context that frames the content and meaning of our proposals. By failing to refer to the stories that form our collective memory, shape our national self-perception, and explain the "whys" of our politics, the narratives of our American heritage fade into the background. But what we seem to silently assume to be background, our political opponents have made foreground. The effect is to concede our stories to the Republicans, which, without so much as a "thank you," they have hijacked and warped to propagate their own interests.

In two Presidential elections we have proposed policies and programs that have been proved to stand not on the firm, narrative ground of our identity as a people or a party but on the shifting sands of reaction and expediency. Program was piled upon policy, forming a rootless, amorphous mass open to whatever interpretations self-interested critics wished to employ. It is not surprising that we find ourselves defensively dodging conservative definitions and depictions of whom they want us to be.

It is a truism that "people won't care about what you think unless they think you care...about them." It is also true that, "Without a vision the people perish." We Democrats are perishing because we have yet to frame our alternatives in our version of a narrative vision that resonates with the American people's, and our own, idealism. Our silence suggests we don't care about the dreams and aspirations of the

American people and casts doubt on the strength of our dreams and aspirations. The Republicans have done a masterful job in framing their policies (however arrogant, misleading, flip-flopping, obstinate, and unjust we may think they are) in a vision that has twice resonated with a bit more than half of the American people –or at least a majority of those in the "red states." They aren't just pursuing policies. They have framed their programs with a vision of what they want America to become: their version of the American story (however dominated by crony capitalism, the self-centered rich, religious zealots and K Street corporate lobbyists it may be). In my view, Bush's "Texas swagger" embodies that version even though, as Molly Ivans has it, "it's all hat and no cattle." Her characterization could well apply to Democrats: our rational policy parade masks the vacuity of our vision.

### **Some Stories**

We need to learn from Reagan and Clinton. We need to tell stories. The "shining city on the hill," "the man from Hope" and "don't stop thinking about tomorrow" may sound cheesy, but cheesy can strike familiar chords in our national dreams. We need to put our policy ideas into contexts that echo the narratives already running in the common memory of the American people. This is Robert B. Reich's suggestion in his "Story Time" (March 28/April 2, 2005, New Republic). George Lakoff's latest, Don't Think of the Elephant, is helpful not so much because of his semantic game playing and his "middling generalities," but for his main point: how to frame arguments and policies. (See Matt Bai's, "The Framing Wars" in the New York Times Magazine, July 17, 2005)

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. In our narratives we find meaning and value. That's our frame. Kant said that there are only three questions worth asking: Who am I? (Identity), What can I hope for? (Destiny) and What ought I to do? (Morality). All philosophy and theology are but commentaries on these three questions. These issues are embedded and given answer in our personal and national narratives. For Reich, there are "four essential American stories": The Triumphant Individual, The Benevolent Community, The Mob at the Gates, and The Rot at the Top.

**1. The Triumphant Individual:** Franklin, Lincoln, Bill Gates, Horatio Alger, Rocky Balboa, Erin Brockovich: through effort, ingenuity and courage anyone can make it in America...and/or change it. These "anyones" are not the "I've-got-it-made" people but the "on-the-make" folks (which is most of us) who are pursuing their dreams and looking for access and opportunity. We need to retell such stories and recreate the conditions by which individuals can again believe they can triumph. Bankruptcy laws written by credit card companies don't help; tax cuts for the least needy don't help; corporate welfare doesn't help. Affirming public education and living wages do help; defining "life" as more than conception-birth and affirming the moral capacity of women to rightly choose would help; equal employment opportunity does help; and yes, something like "character development" would be helpful: stories illustrating that "making it" requires supportive conditions and that with rights come responsibilities.

**2. The Benevolent Community:** "Responsible Citizenship" might be a better characterization here. Either way, the focus is on the common good or what the title of T. M. Scanlon's book suggests: What We Owe Each Other. We, the people, are the government. We are corporately responsible to and for one another. We do owe each other something. If that were not so, Lincoln's Gettysburg statement about being a

"people dedicated to the *proposition* that all men are created equal" rings hollow. All that binds us together are the *ideas* of freedom and equality set forth in the propositions of our sacred documents. We do have a sense of place, but we are not primarily a people of language, geography, history, ethnicity, or nationality. We are an idea. And that idea is embedded in, and is, our form of government. It is an idea that gives us a sense of identity, destiny, and morality, an idea that gives meaning to our place. Take away the idea and there is no government, there is no "why" to our politics, there is no "us," there is no place.

The stories of America live in M. L. King’s dream, in Norman Rockwell’s "Four Freedoms," in Frank Capra’s It’s a Wonderful Life, in the images of volunteers and 9/11 firefighters, in Western Landscapes, in our collective pursuit of Deals, Frontiers and Societies, and in JFK’s, "Ask not...." In this context, health care, safety nets, national service, environmental concerns, campaign finance reform, medical research, budget and trade deficits, gun control, "outsourcing", immigration, etc., are all part of the fabric of responsible citizenship and are part of what we owe each other.

In this context too, we must ask: if America is truly on a war footing, why is so little sacrifice asked of the nation at large? This is a question being asked not by our politicians or even by our fellow citizens. It is being asked by officers and military personnel here and abroad. (C.f., Thom Shanker’s "All Quiet on the Home Front and Some Soldiers Are Asking Why," New York Times, July 24, 2005, pg. YT17) Our symbolic support is fine but not enough. Responsible citizenship under these conditions should mean at least trying to approximate the stories of the "Greatest Generation" and their "home front" families’ broad sense of sacrifice. Our young women and men are being maimed and killed while we complain about gas prices. Military contracts are being involuntarily extended through the "back door draft" while the rest of us enjoy tax cuts, "Wal-mart discounts," and the economic fruits of cheap Chinese labor. Shanker reports a professor’s comment: "...political leaders are afraid to ask the public for any real sacrifice, which doesn’t speak too highly of the citizenry...it is patriotism lite."

If we are mutually responsible one for another, we need to step up and make the sacrifices needed not only to support our troops and their families but to reaffirm our stake as individuals and as corporations in our common destiny. Cutting taxes limits our resources, raises our grandchildren’s debt, makes us vulnerable to international financial blackmail (e.g., China and Japan), and limits our capacity to act. In my view, this is the arrogant, myopic illusion of the "have-it-mades," a denial of our responsibilities as citizens and clearly not a vision of what we owe each other.

**3. The Mob at the Gates:** Star Wars, Star Trek, the Axis, Communism, terrorists, "evil empires," "evil doers," echo themes about real threats to our freedom and equality. America’s story includes responding to the "mob," however defined, internally or externally. Internally, the mob is not the middle class or the greedy poor seeking to deprive the least needy of their "hard earned" capital or who seek something for nothing. It might include "theocrats" of the religious right who want to breach the gates of government with their dreams of theocracy. It might include those at the top who want to shut the gates of opportunity for everyone else on the arrogant assumption that, "I got mine the hard way; now let’s see if you can get yours." Externally, the mob clearly includes the issues of national security, terrorism,

any kind of "know nothing" fundamentalism, North Korea, Iran, Syria, African poverty, and HIV-AIDS, all of which can or will threaten the gates of democracy. All of which demand a firm and constructive response.

**4. The Rot at the Top:** King George, the muddling Revolutionary politicians, Willie Stark (*All the Kings Men*), Joe McCarthy, Enron, et. al., bishop cover-ups of pedophilia, press plagiarism, government liars/misleaders, administration-paid journalist/propagandists, are all part of our narrative. From the beginning, we have been suspicious of power and tend to believe, with good reason, that those who achieve power will inevitably become arrogant and in some sense, corrupt. Within the context of these stories, the notions of "checks and balances," the rule of law, rigorous regulation, press freedom and "shields" may resonate. Our government is not the problem. In this context, our governmental system is the only countervailing power big enough to protect the idea that is us.

#### **Do we believe them?**

Imbedded in each of these narratives (two hopeful and two fearful) are responses to Kant’s three questions. The June *Downside Up* issue articulates policies that, from our Democratic point of view, we believe to be valuable, meaningful and necessary. By not connecting them to the stories that have identified, given hope to, and outlined the morality of Americans, as both Gore and Kerry were perceived not to have done, these policies are simply that: policies.

Our narratives are the means by which we make sense of the world. They tell our beliefs. Policies and programs perceived to be disconnected from these stories of identity, destiny, and morality are going to get lost in the nattering noises of the Coulters, Limbaughs, Falwells, Robertsons and Dodsons. As President Cheney/Rove and V.P. Bush, in their way, have demonstrated, those that echo our idealism will win. We need to begin recasting the stories of America so as to frame the context in which our policies can be understood—and actually believe what we are saying.

Beliefs are action guides. As we believe, so will we act. But that could be the problem. Unless we believe our stories, we will perpetuate the "disconnect" we have allowed to develop and fail to act on our own idealism and that of the American people.

In a Letter to the Editor of the *New Republic* (May 30, 2005), Marc Schneider states the issue suggesting that while Reich has some useful things to say, the problem "...is that many Democrats don’t believe the stories and, therefore, aren’t likely to be persuasive in shaping Democratic themes around them...The Triumphant Individual is a story that most Americans identify with but many on the left would dismiss as a self-serving myth. Progressives are unlikely to consider this to be a story they want to tell, because (they believe that) the United States was built on the backs of genocide and slave labor. Moreover, they decry the focus on the heroic individual."

If Schneider is right, we Democrats are in big trouble. If he is right, we will continue to allow conservatives to wrap themselves in the flag (and cross?), to define us and give credence to their "liberals hate America" mantra. If he is right, I’d opt out of the Democratic party.

But he isn’t right. I don’t buy the cynical "decrying" he attributes to progressives. Granted, there are some who, in the name of "intellectual honesty," seem to dwell on America’s dark side and on our diversities rather than our unities. But these folk tend to forget that for just about every evil we have perpetrated in the name of our "freedom" we have (eventually) asserted the stories of our of our identity, destiny, and morality, and imposed a corrective. We have responded to the Rot at the Top and the Mob at the Gates; we have encouraged individuals to triumph and have asserted the responsibilities of citizenship. All because we (eventually) realize that we are "We the People" and owe each other "our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor." Our idealistic reach has, for the most part, always exceeded and overcome the errors of our hypocritical grasp.

Until we can get our stories straight, actually believe them, speak them convincingly, and act accordingly, the conservative mantra will prevail and we will continue to be defined, not by our vision of America, but by their characterization of us. We have to redefine and really believe stories that demonstrate our love for America, warts and all: an American story that projects our identity, destiny, and morality.

**A challenge:** You may not agree with Reich’s story selection but his question remains: what narratives of hope, optimism, and idealism do you believe, if any, and which would you choose to frame our policies and programs? Or is Schneider right?

Footnote

1. With considerable reluctance, I am letting pass my guest contributor’s use of “America” to stand for “The United States of America.” In the context of this article, with its broad review of American culture and its values, to use “America” is to convey and reflect that culture. For myself, especially as a Latin American historian, I abhor the usage. We are the United States of America. I, with all the world, accept and use “American” as an adjective and the word for the people of the United States because there is no other pronounceable usage available. (Latin Americans do have a word, *Estadounidense*,” but, since it is about as awkward as “United Stateser” would be in English, they rarely use it.). America, however, is an entire hemisphere from Argentina and Chile to Canada, and we should not use the term as if we were it – especially when we so often act as if we actually believe that we are it! I would say this especially for people like Bud Brownsberger who are as good critics of our country’s attitudes as any.

**Web Site:** Downside Up has had a web site, and will have one again, but since I changed internet service providers, I have not set up a web site on the new server. When set up, once again all previous articles will there and can be read and printed out with a few clicks of your computer. Take a look for back issues. Suggest changes. Make copies. Tell me about problems. Tell your friends about it. The web address is <http://v-home.ws/~downsideup/> You should be able just to click on this address and go to the site.

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**Ronald Woodbury** is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters and occasional other pre-publication readers, they

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will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous. The web spinner's name is also best left anonymous.

Woodbury has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history and economics from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL, where he continues to be active in church and community. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.