

Obama and Christie: A Parable for Our Country?

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By Charles Strohmer and Kenny Woodhull

The day after hurricane Sandy devastated coastal New Jersey, Barack Obama and Chris Christie met and blew some minds. The sight of President and New Jersey Governor refusing to play politics with Sandy irritated some on the far right and far left, but the narrative presented the rest of us with a choice. We could see it either as a one-off example of bipartisanship or as a parable. If the former, the ideologically charged polarization of our country will continue to worsen. If the latter, we might just start to bring to end that polarization and move the country in a wiser direction. It's up to us. Especially now, after Barack Obama's re-election. Here's why.

In the midst of what was countless times called a "huge crisis," Obama the liberal and Christie the conservative came together. They meandered around New Jersey's devastated south shore neighborhoods to meet with the suffering and comfort the grieving. They joined their considerable forces to set in motion recovery and rebuilding resources. They praised each other in interview after interview for the other's "outstanding efforts" and "extraordinary leadership" in the crisis.

These were not touchy-feely photo-ops or sound bites contrived to pander to their political bases. The two political antagonists spent hours together in various venues, on and above the ground, talking earnestly between themselves and to others about how to deal with the immediate ravages and long-term effects of superstorm Sandy. In short, the two crossed the aisle, teamed up, drew on the better angels of their nature, and pooled their wisdom.

"Huge crisis." Where have we heard those words before? Between those two words, just stick any of the following adjectives: financial; economic; housing; energy; health care; national debt; Iranian; foreign policy. So how is that going for us? We have learned to recite the phrases to name the crises by rote anytime we want to. But what then?

Instead of taking these crises as opportunities to pool our collective wisdom as a country, we have chosen to deal with each crisis by intensifying the divisive culture wars of the late twentieth century. As well, we now have reached such a pitch of hubris that we strut about the land, absolving ourselves from anything whatsoever to do with the crises. Taking cues from the far left and far right, we fix blame on "them," demonizing each other and declaiming: We alone are right; everyone else is a fool. Huge constituencies in this country, all pulling against each other, are now organized around this house divided. Yet the facts of U.S. history tell us that it is not Democrats alone or Republicans alone, not liberals alone or conservatives alone or libertarians alone, not the religious alone or the secular alone who are the repositories of wisdom for addressing the ills of the land.

Why does it take the crisis of a superstorm to reach us into us deeply enough before we become willing to pull together? Why don't we let the sans-Sandy crises similarly reach us? After all, they will be horribly destructive for our country in the long run if they are not handled by us collectively. By working together on those crises, maybe, just maybe, we can move the country into some semblance of normal. It really is up to us.

What Obama and Christie have done, here, which surely anyone would have done in the face of such massive apolitical devastation, is to provide us with an alternative narrative (cohesion and cooperation for the common good) to the traditional storyline (adversarial politics and demonizing of the other). Whether that alternative narrative takes on the character of a parable, or remains just an example, now depends upon our capacity to retell it among ourselves, reflect on the narrative, and incorporate it into our own stories.

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