

Silent Majority by Dan Jacoby

On May 9, 1969, Vice President Spiro Agnew said, "It is time for America's silent majority to stand up for its rights ... America's silent majority is bewildered by irrational protest." Agnew, in a speech written by William Safire, was referring to the majority of Americans who were sick of the apparent anarchy of the anti-war, anti-establishment activities on one side, and the intellectual musings of the power elite on the other. It was part of the Republican strategy that culminated in 1980 with the so-called "Reagan Democrats," a large swath of blue-collar voters who were disenchanted with the way things were.

Today, with a professor in the White House and anti-government Tea Party protests getting all the media attention (despite their relatively small numbers), a new silent majority has emerged. This time, however, it will not be so easy to capture them. They are not of a single economic, regional or social class, but span almost the entire spectrum. They are not conservatives, but they are wary of too much liberalism. They consider themselves to be pretty well informed, but don't really understand what most of the shouting is about. They feel left out of the conversation, because neither the politicians nor the press bother to explain anything clearly.

The new silent majority doesn't like President Obama's explanations of anything, because he doesn't really explain anything. They don't like Sarah Palin's explanations of anything, because she not only doesn't know what she's talking about, but doesn't care about nasty little things like facts. They don't trust anyone who claims to be an expert, because they've heard that claim before – many times – from people who are more concerned with pushing their own point of view than in a real debate.

An enormous factor in the problem of distrust is the failure of our schools even to attempt educating students in the rudiments of economics, history and government. If the vast majority of American adults understood the basics in these three areas – and they aren't difficult to understand – politicians would never succeed with mere platitudes and buzz words, because voters would know the truth behind politicians' claims.

A second factor is the failure of the media to explain, partly because media owners are more concerned with hype than facts, and partly because most self-described "journalists" have no idea what they are talking about – which is logical, since they were "educated" in our public schools. As a result, mass media reports are based on the squeaky wheel theory – only the loudest story gets reported. The reports, too, are failures of true journalism, as reporters merely parrot both sides' press releases rather than getting the facts and reporting the truth. Cable "news" anchors and editors are among the laziest people in the business, preferring just to put two people on the screen and let them argue and shout.

It is in this atmosphere of distrust and disaffection that Michael Bloomberg can be politically successful, at least at election time. Bloomberg is a Democrat-turned-Republican-turned-independent (who still ran on the Republican line) turned ... who knows what's next? He plays the "true outsider" game to its fullest extent, and has been successful where most other self-funded "outsider" candidates, from Lew Lehrman to Ross Perot to Steve Forbes to this year's Linda McMahon, Meg Whitman and Carly Fiorina, failed.

Bloomberg's positions on issues are often unpredictable, giving him at least the aura of independence from standard left vs. right delineations. His operating style, developed as a business tycoon, is to make a firm decision and then move forward regardless of political consequences, certain of his ability to make his policy work. It earns him both enemies – those people who are left out of his policy – and respect from those who are sick of spineless, finger-in-the-wind politicians.

What most people don't see is that Bloomberg has consistently surrounded himself with the best political operatives around. They don't see his political savvy, partly because he masks it brilliantly, and partly because the media just doesn't report that part of the story. The result is an image, however inaccurate, of a non-politician slaying the dragons of ordinary political corruption to solve seemingly unsolvable problems.

It's an attractive image.

In theory, Bloomberg could be elected President by attracting the following voters:

- 8-10% of eligible voters who identify as moderate to conservative Democrats;
- 6-8% of eligible voters who identify as moderate Republicans (there are far fewer moderate Republicans than moderate to conservative Democrats);
- 12-14% of eligible voters who identify as independents.

The total would be 26-32% of all eligible voters. If 65% of eligible voters actually show up at the polls (a very high number by recent results), Bloomberg gets a minimum of 43% of the vote in a three-way race, and wins (in 1992, Bill Clinton got 43% of the popular vote in a three-way race).

Whether Bloomberg enters the race probably depends on whether President Obama can turn his political standing around. It is obvious that there is no Republican who can appeal to the new silent majority while maintaining support within the Republican Party; the Tea Party groups, while energizing the extreme right-wing base, have effectively limited Republican appeal. That silent majority, therefore, is ripe pickings for a Democrat, and right now the only Democrat planning to run in 2012 is President Obama.

How can President Obama appeal to the silent majority?

The first thing President Obama needs to do is stop positioning himself based on fearful political considerations. The silent majority is neither liberal nor conservative, and generally don't care for those labels. They want a leader, not a politician, and they don't particularly care whether a leader's ideas are tagged as left-wing or right-wing, as long as the solutions make sense. They want answers and solutions, and they want to understand what's going on in government.

President Obama needs to explain why his plans will solve problems, and challenge Congress either to go along with him or present a better plan. He needs not to worry about making political enemies, particularly among Republicans who are guaranteed for the next two years to remain unalterably opposed to anything he supports.

But first, President Obama needs to craft plans that will actually solve problems, rather than positions that have a chance of getting passed by Congress. He needs to stop letting Congress take the lead. In other words, he needs to *be* the President.

The silent majority will follow anyone who shows an ability to lead, provided only that his or her ideas make sense. They want someone who demonstrates an understanding of what too many Americans are going through, and can provide valid reasons why those ideas will make things better. They're not looking for permanent solutions, just some way to get our economy back to where it should be so that we can move forward again, combined with a vision for where "forward" can get us.

Unfortunately, almost every political consultant, whether Republican or Democratic, refuses to acknowledge that this silent majority is worthy of consideration. Elections are won, according to these consultants, by bringing out the base, not by reaching out to "new voters."

The one good thing about the Tea Party is that its supporters are challenging political consultants' views, at least on the Republican side. The problem for Republicans is that the Tea Party has no understanding of economic reality and no viable positions on economic issues – we can't cut taxes and balance the budget without draconian spending cuts that nobody is willing to make. Republican leaders may be unable to get the Tea Party's elected representatives to compromise with reality; this potential split within the Republican Party is their internal problem.

This would seem to be a boon to Democrats. On the Democratic side, however, there doesn't appear to be anyone left to challenge the consultants. When Howard Dean was the DNC chairman, he challenged them with great success; Democrats gained over 50 House seats, 14 Senate seats, and a bunch of governorships and state legislatures. Unfortunately for Democrats, the DNC has gone back to its old ways; the old consultants are back, spouting their same old failed views on how to win elections, and President Obama is listening to them.

There is no way to know if Michael Bloomberg would be a good President. But if President Obama and the Democrats don't get their act together, and quickly, we may find out, for the silent majority will be heard.