

The Spirit of America

[1] NEW YORK — Four years ago, on the eve of the victory of Obama in the 2008 election, I attempted to define what America is.

[2] It is renewal, I suggested, the place where impossible stories get written.

[3] It is the overcoming of history, the leaving behind of war and barriers, in the name of a future freed from the vengeful clamp of memory.

[4] It is reinvention, the absorption of one identity in something larger — the notion that “out of many, we are truly one.” Americans are decent people. They’re not interested in where you came from. They’re interested in who you are.

[5] At the close of this endless campaign — on one of those crisp, clear New York days where the glimmer of possibility seems to lurk at the tapering edge of the city’s ruler-straight canyons — it is worth recalling that America, alone among nations, is an idea; and that idea dies when hope and possibility disappear.

[6] As a naturalized American who recalls the 1,000 faces in the room where I swore the oath of allegiance and how they mapped the world and yet shared some essential notion of humanity, I confess to the convert’s zeal. I had to take a dictation back then to become a citizen. It was supposed to prove my command of English. The second sentence was, “I plan to work very hard every day.” So here I am writing, loneliest of tasks.

[7] It has been a hard, uneven road from 2008. The idealism vested in America’s first black president was also vested in an introverted man whose talent for the deal-making that oils the wheels of politics proved limited. Barack Obama is the least “political” president since Jimmy Carter.

[8] The United States is as divided today as it was four years ago — over economic policy, of course, but more deeply over social policy: the whole regressive God-invoking push of the Republican right against a woman’s right to abortion, gay rights, marriage equality and so on.

One nation sometimes feels like two.

[9] But even with its debt and division and uneven recovery the United States has come a long way from the abyss of 2008. Obama is a man more likely than not to make smart decisions. He’s also lucky. Sandy blew in a week before the election and by the time it blew out Mittmentum was dented, Bloomberg on board and New Jersey’s Republican governor cooing.

There have been big achievements: the winding down of the wars, health reform, getting Osama bin Laden, and restoring the battered American idea.

[10] Obama has fallen short of the pledge he made in 2009 when said we “cannot keep this country safe unless we enlist the power of our most fundamental values.” Drone killings have nothing to do with due process. But the country no longer inhabits the “dark side” of torture and rampant renditions.

[11] By allowing gays to serve openly in the military and by signing legislation to back equal pay for equal work for women, Obama has strived to make the United States more inclusive. America turns its back on its core ideas when it discriminates against women or on the basis of people’s sexual orientation.

[12] Romney has led a campaign that has said everything and the contrary, embracing war then peace, changing positions on Obamacare, refusing to reveal how he will offset tax cuts. He wants to deny women the right to abortion. His America, it seems, would be more unequal and divided.

[13] Last week I wrote about the sharp divisions in the Jewish community of Cleveland, Ohio, where the Senate candidacy of a young right-wing Jewish ex-Marine named Josh Mandel has exacerbated the tensions of a close campaign where some Jews have tried hard to portray Obama as anti-Israel. Mandel, who has campaigned against the Democratic incumbent Sherrod Brown, is related by marriage to the influential Ratner family.

[14] After the column a paid ad in the form of an open letter to Mandel from several members of the Ratner family appeared in the Cleveland Jewish News. It read in part:

[15] Dear Josh, Your cousins, Ellen Ratner and Cholene Espinoza, are among the many wonderful couples whose rights you do not recognize. They were married almost eight years ago in Massachusetts, at a time when it was the only state in the nation to allow same-sex marriage. Their wedding, like yours, was a beautiful and happy occasion for all of us in our family. It hurts us that you would embrace discrimination against them.

[16] We are equally distressed by your belief that gay men and women should not be allowed to serve openly in the military. Like you, Cholene spent many years in the armed forces. A graduate of the Air Force Academy and an accomplished pilot, she became the second woman in history to fly the U-2 reconnaissance plane. And yet, you have argued that she, like many gay and lesbian soldiers, should be forced to live a life of secrecy and lies.

[17] The letter embodies the spirit that overcame slavery and Jim Crow and has made America an ever-reinvented land always pushing to the next frontier. It is cause for hope.