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The Tag Team

Commentary

Our political center, lost

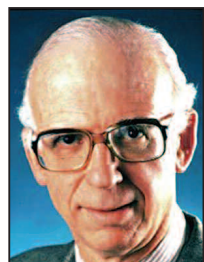
Republican extremists need dose of reality

Dipping back into conversation in the capital on a brief break from the campaign trail, I heard members of Congress, lobbyists and political operatives stewing about one topic above all others: What happens if this election blows up the center of American politics?

On both sides, they seem to accept the inevitability of significant Democratic losses, although one former party chairman, enjoying a holiday on the Nile, told me by phone that he thinks the Dems might retain their majorities in the House and Senate. But he was no less worried about the prospects for President Obama's government than any of the others I interviewed. The common fear is that the swing to the right that everyone expects on Nov. 2 will include such wild gyrations and produce such untried novices that the partisan warfare of the past two years will seem mild by comparison.

Bill Galston, the Brookings Institution's resident political philosopher, was the first of the day to point out that, statistically speaking, the center had already disappeared. He was referring to the congressional voting studies, which I have previously cited, showing that, apparently for the first time, there is no overlap between the most liberal Republican in the House and the most conservative Democrat when it comes to roll-call votes.

Historically, there have always been a



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few Republicans who voted often with the Democrats and a few more Democrats who lined up regularly with the Republicans. But now the ideological lines are more sharply drawn, and the distance between the parties is greater.

What I found on my return from a reporting trip to the Midwest was a widespread expectation that the gulf will be expanded by the election results. Obviously, we don't know who will emerge as winners. But there has been so much focus on some of the Republican primaries, where solid conservatives have been upset by men and women even further to the right, that the stereotype of a party of Sarah Palins is understandable.

The notion may be misguided. Surely some of the challengers whose credentials look most questionable will be stopped short of victory. And others whose opening comments seemed inflammatory may be doused with practicality along the way.

Nonetheless, what has dawned on official Washington is that one of our great political parties - Republican - has undergone much more than the normal between-elections transition. And the other - Democratic - is having a helluva struggle

adjusting to the change.

The Democrats oscillate between depicting their Republican opponents as know-nothing radicals, with barely a fragmentary libertarian view of government, or as pawns of a sophisticated Wall Street financial combine. They are happiest when the opponent permits them to dress him in Nazi garb.

The Republican leaders have to take the question of who these people are much more seriously, because these freshmen will soon be sitting in and calling signals for their caucuses. The fact that so many of them are being financed in their races by new, non-party, interest-group political operations makes the options for wild political swings even greater.

I don't foresee a challenge to Mitch McConnell or John Boehner for the GOP leadership in the Senate or House when the new classes gather in Washington. But I see a clear test ahead for those leaders.

This is not ultimately a radical nation, and those Republicans who are in love with radical notions of remaking the society to fit their own philosophy will have to be brought back in touch with reality.

When a party fails to do that, it can find the seeds of its own destruction in the victory banquet. Republicans, and the country, deserve better.

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Pop Culture

'Angry Birds': My private humiliation

I have accidentally become addicted to a game called "Angry Birds" on my iPhone. Several gamer reviews call it a puzzle. I'm not sure that I know the difference between a puzzle and a game, so that's irrelevant to me. All I know is that it's time-consuming and extremely frustrating. The object of "Angry Birds" is to launch, via a slingshot, said angry birds at a bunch of pigs who have stolen their eggs. I don't think that pigs have ever been known as egg stealers. That would involve some effort on the part of the pig. The birds, however, seem convinced that the pigs have stolen their young. That's why they are angry. As it turns out, the game makes me pretty angry too.

I was formerly hooked on "Bejeweled 2 + Blitz." I'm not sure if it's a puzzle or a game either. In that game, one attempts to line up as many sets of three jewels as possible in 60 seconds. Then your score is posted on Facebook and shared with friends who play the game too. I have spent hours trying to beat acquaintances and family members by "Bejeweling" the day away. Often, while I am playing games on my phone, it occurs to me that I could be doing something productive like writing a book, a Tribune column or helping the



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homeless. There is no meditative value to playing a game on one's iPhone, so I can't pass it off as that either.

"Angry Birds" is more of a private humiliation. You alone know what level you are on and for how long you have been stuck there. I was stuck on Level 2-11 for the better part of three days. I am currently up to Level 3-6, but "Angry Birds" has 120 levels. I will be playing the game until I either die of old age or those damned pigs give the birds their hatchlings back. A Finnish company, Rovio, developed "Angry Birds." That irony is not lost on me because it's a game that I will never finish. I also have a version of "Angry Birds" on my iPad, but I prefer to play it on the iPhone because it's always in my grasp.

Playing "Angry Birds" on my smaller iPhone screen is fundamentally stupid. The game is a lot easier to see on the larger iPad screen, but it doesn't sync up with my progress (or lack of) on the iPhone, so I'm stuck using the small screen because each level of "Angry Birds" is locked until

you earn it. There are several different types of birds, all of which do different destructive things to the hapless pigs. My favorite bird is the black bird. The black bird blows up on command or shortly after coming in contact with an object. They are especially helpful when it comes to blowing up the pigs when they have donned their military helmets.

A few weeks ago, I was taken in by a Rosetta Stone infomercial and spent close to \$500 on the complete Spanish course. It is still sitting in the box while I play "Angry Birds" and learn nothing. I could already be speaking fluent Spanish by now. Let this serve as a warning to all of you who have the availability to download "Angry Birds." It is a complete waste of time with no payoff. It's not even relaxing. There's a Web site called angrybirdsnext.com that features tips on navigating through the various levels of the game. I have yet to go there. That's like a crackhead going to a crack house.

I'm also saying that "Bejeweled 2 + Blitz" is a gateway drug, so watch out.

Steve Dahl is a Chicago Tribune special contributor. To read and hear more Steve Dahl, go to dahl.com.

Guest Commentary

Tribute to Ned Barlow and Ben Mondor

By JAMES R. HOYT JR.

Life is difficult enough for any of us when we're forced to cope with our grief after a good friend passes away, but the sense of loss grows even more profound when two friends are lost at the same time. That is what sadly occurred in what we, and many, many others, consider the widespread family of the Boys & Girls Club of Pawtucket.

We lost two friends. Ben Mondor and Edward "Ned" Barlow passed away recently, leaving holes in the fabric of the Club.

We mourn the loss of Ned and Ben and, in private and public moments, we have done just that. But here, we choose to honor and celebrate two civic leaders, two philanthropists, two fine gentlemen, two friends that gave so much, touching the lives of thousands of local kids and their families.

As has been well-chronicled, Ben took over a struggling minor league baseball team and through his drive and personality turned a banjo hitter into an all-star, as the Pawtucket Red Sox became a model franchise, which has long been emulated by other major and minor league clubs. Ben, however, for those who knew him, was definitely a man who mixed business with pleasure - and for him life was more about bestowing pleasure than receiving it.

Once, when the Club was trying unsuccessfully to book a "name" athlete for its annual sports banquet, a last-minute call was placed to Ben to see if one of the PawSox might attend the event. Ben indicated that he would see what he could and then, much to the delight of hundreds of youngsters and their parents, walked into the banquet hall that evening accompanied by the entire PawSox team.

There was the time when McCoy Stadium was opened up to kids from the Boys & Girls Club for monthly "collective birthday parties" for members. That was Ben's idea. The kids always had a ball, and Ben enjoyed the celebrations as much as they did.

Ben helped the Club develop the concept for "Homers for Kids" that has become our annual corporate solicitation campaign, and which has remained essential to the Club's financial well-being for the past 16 years. The money raised through "Homers" greatly helps Pawtucket's children and teens through educational and recreational programs. Every year, with Ben's encouragement, the PawSox provide event support and promotional

assistance.

Lastly, although many more stories could be told of Ben's generosity, two Junior RBI League baseball players are sent on a trip to the World Series annually with all expenses paid by the PawSox. That was Ben. Thoughtful. Kind.

Ned Barlow lived less in the public eye, but was every bit as well-liked and highly respected by all who knew him. As a civic leader, Ned was so active in the community that his schedule rivaled that of a mayor's. He made his living in the textile industry, but much of his time was given in service to others through his efforts on various boards and committees as well as his charitable contributions to many worthy organizations. The Boys & Girls Club of Pawtucket is fortunate to have been among Ned's favorite places. He gave of himself above and beyond donations, and, by doing so, improved the lives of Pawtucket's youth.

One of Ned's favorite places was Camp Ramsbottom in Rehoboth. The scenic, 160-acre site was originally donated by family member George Ramsbottom, and Ned upheld the tradition by always supporting the Club's summer camps. He did so by funding several improvement projects at Ramsbottom, but more meaningful to Ned, was his support of kids in need through the hundreds of camp scholarships he made possible over the years.

Ned also gave the Club his stewardship, his acumen, and his best judgment, serving the Club in various capacities for an astounding 55 years. As both President and a member of the Board of Directors, Ned helped lead the Club through thick and thin for more than 20 years. Through his dedication and incredible generosity, the Elson Clubhouse was constructed in 1988 without debt.

This anecdote speaks to Ned's meaningful, yet often, quiet charity. Following a meeting regarding the Club's boiler that was on its last legs, a repair crew arrived within days to install a brand new boiler - courtesy of Ned Barlow. That was Ned. Concerned. Giving.

Ned and Ben, you will be missed. We mourn your passing, but we gratefully realize that through what you did in life - especially for all the kids at the Boys & Girls Club of Pawtucket past, present, and future - your memory and legacy will live on.

From all of us in the Club's family, thank you both so very much.

James R. Hoyt Jr. is the CEO, Boys & Girls Club of Pawtucket.

What Others Are Saying

Boston Herald on the rescue of the Chilean miners:

The world needed this moment - this collective experience of watching a near miracle take place, watching 33 Chilean miners emerge one by one after 69 days under ground.

Sometimes amid the daily doses of political controversy and economic hard times, people long for some good news. We just want a sign that there is a larger wellspring of goodness that we can tap into.

The rescue of those miners has been just such a story. From the time they were found alive 17 days after the mine's collapse to their heroic forbearance in awaiting their rescue, this group of men has shown us the enormous capacity of the human spirit in a way we haven't seen it in a very long time.

"I think I had extraordinary luck. I was with God and with the devil. And I reached out for God," said Mario Sepulveda, the second miner to be hauled up the shaft - which is as long as two Empire State Buildings - in a narrow capsule.

As many emerged they knelt in prayer.

They were as young as 19 and as old as 63. Some had spent their lives in the copper and gold mines that account for a huge portion of Chile's economy. They were greeted by their wives and children and lovers and sometimes all three. They were, after all, just ordinary men who became part of an extraordinary story.

And it is safe to say their lives will never be quite the same. The memories of those 69 days and the ride to freedom will remain with them. Some will cope better than others. Some may become minor celebrities as they retell their stories. All will be changed by the experience.

And for 24 hours we were there with them, sharing the joy of their return, the joy of simply being alive.

We are grateful for their safe return and for the reminder that sometimes hope does triumph.

Write to us

E-mail your letters to editor@pawtuckettimes.com

■ Keep your letter short - no more than 500 words. We reserve the right to edit letters for length and clarity.