

COMMENTARY

The Eighth Day



The entire history of the United States can be stripped down to seven crucial days.

With apologies to those who know their history better than I, let me name them.

But first I'll state the obvious: On Tuesday, Nov. 4, Americans face the eighth crucial day — crucial, because so much is now at stake for our country.

For that reason, I'm breaking my own precedent. At the end of this column, I'll tell you exactly how I'm going to vote and what I hope you do, too.

Day one, May 22, 1782: George Washington refuses to accept a crown and become King, following a proposal by military commanders.

Day two, Nov. 6, 1860: The American people elect Abraham Lincoln as president, to meet the most momentous test ever faced by an American leader.

Day three, Nov. 8, 1932: The American people elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the darkest moment of the Great Depression.

Day four, Aug. 5, 1945: Harry Truman decides to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and then on Nagasaki (Aug. 9), to end World War II.

Day five, Sept. 5, 1957: Dwight D. Eisenhower decides to desegregate schools at the point of a gun, in Little Rock, Ark.

Day six, July 2, 1964: Lyndon Johnson

decides to end the American apartheid by signing the Civil Rights Act.

Day seven, Dec. 10, 1987: Ronald Reagan wins Mikhail Gorbachev's agreement to sign the first treaty to reduce nuclear arms.

Although Americans have made many other course-altering decisions, those seven days strike me as the gold standards. Directly or indirectly, we the people bear responsibility since we elected those leaders.

Now we must decide again, at an extraordinarily dangerous moment.

This is not a time for anger, recrimination, or small-minded allegiances; for faux exhaustion; for whining about "the process" or "the media"; for complaining about "the liberals" or "the conservatives." And this is not a time for indecision. (Uncertainty and trepidation are inevitable byproducts of any crucial day, but neither can excuse pettiness or a failure to act.)

Instead, this is a time for remembering Lincoln's prescription: "Stand with anybody that stands RIGHT. Stand with him while he is right and PART with him when he goes wrong."

A reader told me recently that she can't often tell which side I take — where I stand — as a columnist.

I tend to see sides the way I see beef. Hanging bloody and fresh, each side offers opportunities to chew the fat.

But now I'll tell you exactly where I stand, and why.

The why is simple. I'm a conservative, in the classic sense of the Latin word *conservare*, meaning "to save (with)," or "to conserve."

Let me remind you of Lincoln, again,

conserving his eternally contemporary vision: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.... We must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."

As it stands, we're enthralled by a \$10.33 trillion debt that will become the strait-jacket of our children.

We owe \$700 billion for foreign oil. We've yet to kill Osama bin Laden (with an axe, preferably) and we're losing control of the war in Afghanistan because so much of our muscle remains in Iraq. We've spawned a generation of now-experienced fascists there who hate us. Our housing market has imploded and our health care is tattered and sometimes second-class. Our status in the world is now at a two-century low. We've taken no significant steps to alter our dependence on fossil fuels, and we've eviscerated the federal agencies that protect the environment and us.

We've abandoned the long-term interests of our farmers, our ranchers and our commercial fishermen (and thus ourselves). We have no plan how to handle the emerging and militaristic Russia, or what to do with the immense but still wobbly China.

Therefore, while I'm a conservative, I'm also a liberal, from the Latin word *liber*, meaning free. I want to be free at last of those problems. And if not me, my children.

So I'm voting for John McCain — for hero. If he wins the election, I'll support him.

But I'm voting for Barack Obama for president. I'm voting for a man disenfranchised (to use Lincoln's expression) from the designs and mechanisms of the Bush administration. Unlike John McCain, he

did not support most of the actions that will inevitably hurt my children, my nephews and my nieces, along with yours, for years to come.

I've known two or three men who were true war heroes, like McCain (and a lot more who were decorated combat veterans of uncommon valor).

One was my uncle, B.F. Nash, a rancher who rarely talked about the war he fought across the South Pacific, beginning at Guadalcanal. Once he slipped ashore for many weeks onto a tiny island held by 5,000 Japanese soldiers (Kolombangara, earning him the distinction of being the only American who operated behind Japanese lines in World War II). There, while tracked by them, he reported the ship, troop and plane movements of a much larger Japanese force.

As McCain did, he endured unspeakable burdens. I loved him, I admired him, and I would not have voted for him to be president.

Abe Lincoln and Barack Obama are not war heroes, like John McCain or my uncle Franklin.

But Lincoln, imperfect though he was, came to epitomize the greatest American leadership. For all of us, he should now model our thinking on Nov. 4.

Therefore, wherever you stand on that eighth crucial day, I urge you to stand with Lincoln.

"With malice toward none," he advised. "With charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations." ■

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