

Beyond Partisanship, a Huge Political Moment for WI and Its Minorities

By Stewart David Ikeda

MILWAUKEE - October 2, 2004 - After the Florida photo-finish in 2000's Presidential race, all Americans have a heightened understanding of our civic duty as voters. But this realization was made powerfully fresh for me at a recent Milwaukee fundraiser for Senator Russ Feingold, where the crowd was as diverse as any I've seen in the toney East Side neighborhood. Asian Americans and African Americans, Jews and Lutherans, Latinos and Russians, gay and straight, elderly and collegian – and yes, even some Independents and Republicans -- all mingled, waiting to shake hands with the Senator.

In his speech, the Senator rebutted recent attacks by passionately detailing his intense commitment to combating terrorism, the need to pursue and “destroy” bin Laden, and efforts he's spearheaded in Congress to track Al Qaeda cells proliferating in Africa. And it is *equally* important, he insisted, to defend Americans' civil liberties, economic well-being, health, and position on the world stage.

Beyond any partisanship, as a Japanese American I appreciate how courageous, lonely and thankless a path Feingold took in standing against the Patriot Act's now-infamous, blanket undermining of civil liberties. It resonates powerfully with me, given my own family's WWII experiences. As loyal Americans, they were rounded up by Feds, fingerprinted, relieved of their possessions, cast out of their California homes, tagged like yard-sale furniture and bused to Arizona, locked away in desert concentration camps on commandeered Indian land because they *looked* like the enemy. Even on release, they were forced to relocate not homeward but to unfamiliar destinations eastward, including Wisconsin – where my grandfather was barred from enrolling at UW by restrictions against citizens of Japanese ancestry.

Cheesehead Independence

Concern for fundamental Constitutional freedoms is no more the exclusive domain of Democrats than commitment to national security is exclusive to the GOP, however the parties may spin it. Some of Feingold's most stolid allies on the Patriot Act now are at the farthest tip of right-wing, and no less cautious about ceding unchecked power over their lives, freedoms, and privacies to a Federal government. However, for daring to take independent, often unpopular stances, Feingold has taken many unfair hits and will take many more this month. Opponents have impugned his loyalty for defending civil liberties; derided his anti-racial profiling proposals as “pandering to minority interests”; and attacked his bipartisan championship of campaign finance reform, along with John McCain. Regardless of party or ethnicity, though, all Wisconsinites can be justifiably proud of this brand of stubborn independence -- a notable virtue of what outsiders see as our “quirky little Cheesehead state”.

Equally impressive that day was Gwen Moore, fresh from the resounding primary victory launching her toward becoming Wisconsin's first-ever African-American member of the U.S. Congress. With eloquence and the no-nonsense toughness of a mom who has pulled herself up

from welfare, Moore also spoke forcefully about preserving civil liberties. “If the Patriot Act had been around in the 50s, 60s and 70s, we’d *all* be in jail,” she observed sternly to her “fellow baby boomers,” referring to historic demonstrations for civil rights, for women’s equality, and in legitimate protest of military abuses and secret policies in Southeast Asia.

Not the Bill of Suggestions

While their styles couldn’t be more different, the candidates’ shared commitment to civil liberties also heartened me because, as a multicultural media publisher, I see polarized identity communities too often fail to “get” an obvious point. Wrong-headed folk discount civil rights as “a Black thing” or civil liberties as “a Japanese or immigrant thing,” when the fundamental principle underlying both is: We are all Americans and we have inalienable rights *if* we assert and defend them. As Sen. Feingold memorably observed: “It’s called the Bill of Rights, not the Bill of *Suggestions*.”

Most moving of all was the event’s wholly nonpartisan lesson about the extraordinary power of our 2004 votes – as Wisconsinites, Milwaukeeans *and* minorities. There’s been much talk of us as a “battleground” or “swing” state, of course. But simulations by strategists from all parties project that more specifically, the Presidency could very possibly hinge on a *minute* handful of key cities -- Milwaukee prominent among them. More specifically still, it’s the X-Factor of our first-time, youth, and Black, Latino, Native and Asian “*unlikely*” voters – that stands to swing the day *in either direction* on November 2.

Moore hammered this point home, stressing the importance of cross-generational political discussion and motivating first-time voters especially among minority youths. Moore herself has shown an astonishing ability to inspire previously disenfranchised, first-time voters *and* build bridges to national support far transcending race and gender. So much so that as one Feingold campaign staffer put it only half-jokingly, Kerry and Feingold could win here on *Moore’s* coattails, as much as vice-versa. It’s just slightly hyperbolic to say that our Gwen could well be one of the most powerful women in America for the next 30 days.

A Wisconsin Moment

Regardless of stereotypical jokes about us living in the nation’s “most white-bread,” segregated, “*Happy Days*” state, independent-thinking and minority Cheeseheads will briefly wield a national influence that’s *wildly* disproportionate to our numbers. Even the tiniest of our communities – the much-disenfranchised Hmong youth voters, just for example – can have enormous potential clout *if* we can show up, pull a lever and have it count. It can have an equally huge impact if we don’t. This is why minority activists have pulled out all stops to “import” bilingual canvassers and poll workers from Chicago and the Coasts, why legal groups are flying in attorneys and law students to monitor our poll stations. It’s a bit embarrassing, but voter harassment in 2000 and 2002 proved it sadly necessary to protect minorities’ rights at the ballot box.

Again, the point is less partisan than it sounds. Sure, Democrats *hope* that Moore’s passionate new voters will vote party-line, but this is a district where it’s not uncommon to see Bush and Feingold signs side-by-side on the same lawn. This is a state that in 1998 sent Tommy

Thompson back to Madison *and* Tammy Baldwin to D.C. as the first out lesbian in the U.S. House. In more polarized parts, we might be seen as “flip-floppers,” but unless you’re a rigidly frozen ideologue, that’s a good and right thing to be. For just a brief shining moment, it gives us leverage to press the candidates on important points of principle -- civil liberties, civil rights, plain old civility and fairness -- not just vote for a party or our pocketbooks.

And to a great degree, after 2000’s fiasco, Wisconsinites’ opportunity to help restore the country’s faith in the integrity, fairness and equality of the voting process is as important as who we vote for. If we fail in this, it will be to the lasting shame of us all.

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