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OPINION

To Build A Better World, Start In Your Own Community

EDITORIAL

Icy route
needs
new rules

When Henry Hudson looked for it 400 years ago, all he could find was a good-sized river (which now bears his name), and a bay where he was cast adrift by his mutinous crew.

When Roald Amundsen became the first person to navigate it 100 years ago, he did so in a small boat under ideal conditions.

But still, the fabled Northwest Passage beckons both explorers and commercial shippers. It's not hard to see why: the Passage, a series of straits between islands in the Canadian Arctic, offers shippers a far shorter route between Atlantic ports and those in the Far East. For a shipper looking to transport goods from China to New York or Europe, an ice-free passage between the two ports could shave thousands of miles off a trip and perhaps bring in millions of dollars per shipment.

The key to the endeavor is in those seven small letters: i-c-e-f-r-e-e. Because the Passage lies at a latitude 70 degrees north, for much of the year, portions of it are frozen solid. Even icebreakers are wary to travel in the Passage during the two months it's passable because the ancient polar ice has leached out its salt and turned into the equivalent of a floating rock formation. It can and does take gashes out of even the sturdiest ships.

However, the conditions are changing up north, and they are even more noticeable than in more-temperate climates. You don't need to be a scientist to see that temperatures are climbing above the Arctic Circle. Open water in the Northwest Passage was observed through the end of October, a time in previous years when the waterway would be locked up solid.

Shippers have started to notice, and so have the governments of the United States and Canada. Scientists predict the Passage could become a viable navigation route by the end of the decade.

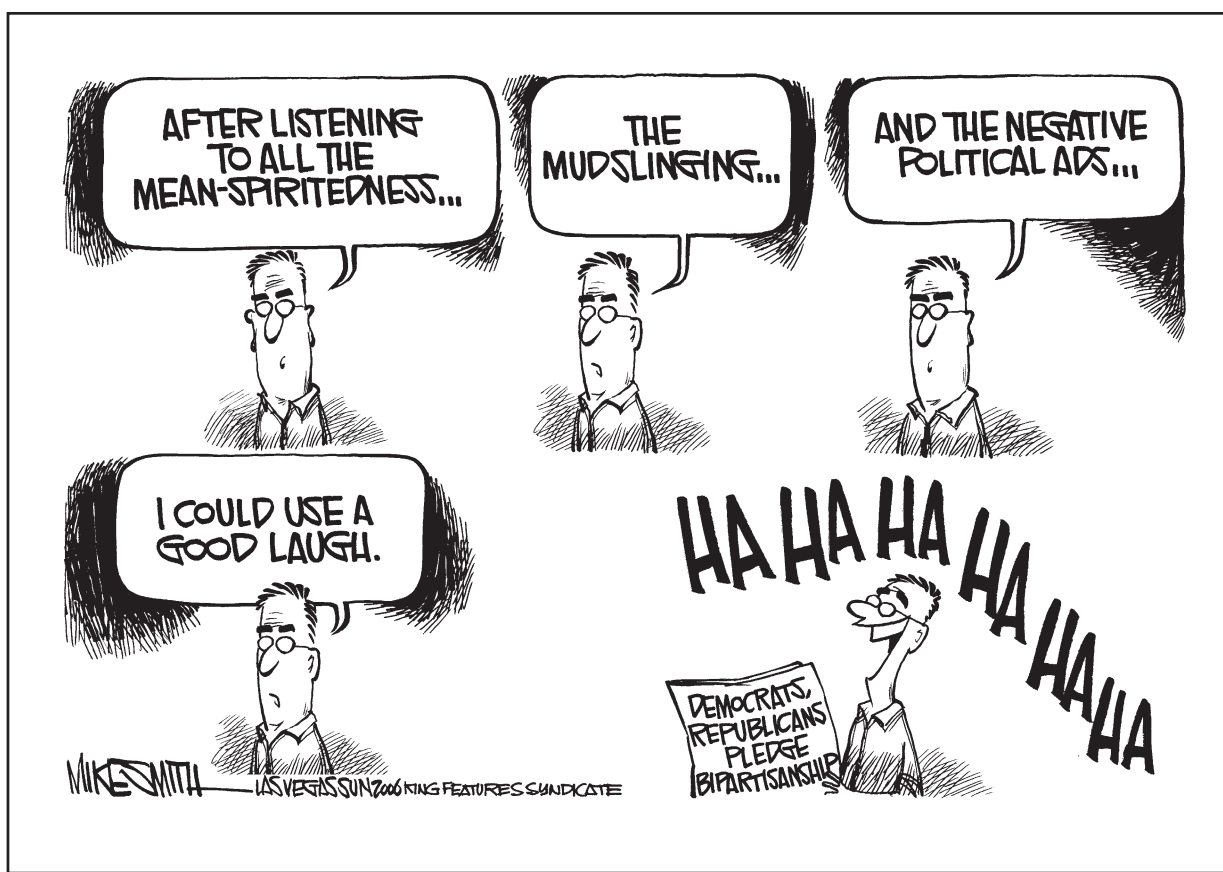
Under the rules of international trade, straits are open for all shipping. That makes sense in places such as the Straits of Gibraltar or the Straits of Hormuz, where heavy shipping traffic has to pass through a small funnel, and where each side of the strait is controlled by a different country.

The United States and Canada disagree on what rules should apply to the Northwest Passage, however. While the United States maintains the Passage is like others worldwide, the Canadians say they should have sovereignty over the waterway, especially because they would be the sole source of rescue and cleanup should an accident ever occur.

The Canadians have a good point. Existing maritime law and treaties were built on the experience accumulated through centuries of shipping in open-water straits. The potential opening of the Northwest Passage, if only for a few months of the year, offers a starkly new set of possibilities.

Before any container ship or tanker tries to ply its way through the icy north, new rules that address the specifics of Passage travel should be crafted.

A changing planet will require a new way of addressing old problems.



We're in this together

By Rosa Brooks

Special to the Los Angeles Times

Welcome to the new era of sweetness and light!

"W" graciously admits that the Republicans took "a thumping" in the elections, Madam Speaker-elect got a lunch date at the White House and "bipartisanship" is the flavor of the day.

The postelection rhetoric of bipartisanship is nice to see, but it can't erase the deep divisions in the American electorate.

By almost any measure, Americans are more partisan and divided than we've been in decades. A little more than a third of Americans are hard-core Democrats who would almost prefer to vote for Satan than for a Republican candidate. Another third of Americans are hard-core Republicans who assume that a vote for a Democrat pretty much is a vote for Satan. And the lonely independents waver in the middle, wondering why everyone else is always so mad at each other.

Being passionate about politics isn't a character flaw. Policies matter: They affect who gets rich and who stays poor, who can marry and who can't, who lives and who dies. But where did all this nastiness and mutual mistrust come from?

It's fueled as much by mutual ignorance and misunderstanding as by abiding philosophical and political disagreements.

I know Southerners who have never met an atheist, a Catholic or a Jew, and Northeasterners who have never met an evangelical Christian. I know military officers who genuinely believe that the media want to undermine the United States, and sophisticated urbanites who assume that anyone in the military is either oppressed or a brutal macho bully.

In this era of cable news, talk radio and the Internet, we hear only what we want to hear, see only what

That's what
'E pluribus unum'
means

we want to see and read only what we want to read. As a result, when we're confronted with difference, we react with mistrust.

Our coins still say "E pluribus unum," but does anyone remember what it means?

It's not too late to change this.

The military draft, for all its flaws, at least had the virtue of bringing together Americans from many different backgrounds, forcing them to learn to live and work with one another. Why not try something similar today?

I'm talking about universal national service. Why not call on every young American to spend a year or two serving our country? Some could serve in the military or in the Peace Corps; others could choose to help with post-conflict reconstruction, teach in our schools, staff our public-health clinics or screen passengers at our airports.

Universal national service would help us fill hard-to-fill jobs and create a culture in which service is the norm, not the exception. Just as important, a well-designed national service program also would help break down some of the barriers that keep us from a healthy and mutually respectful political discourse.

Participants should be given some choice of how they serve, but not much — and everyone should be required to go through several months of basic civil defense training. As in the military, participants shouldn't be able to choose where or with whom they would train — they should have to mix it up with people from other walks of life — and the training should be genuinely useful, focusing on the core practical skills

every citizen ought to have: first aid training, emergency response and survival skills, for instance.

So here's my proposal for the new Congress: If you're serious about pushing forward on nonpartisan initiatives, develop and pass legislation creating universal national service. There are several good proposals out there. Create a program that can break down the barriers between Americans from different backgrounds and help instill a shared ethic of service.

Yes, it will be expensive. Depending on the details, a universal national service program could cost up to \$70 billion a year. But in the longer run, such a program would pay for itself: Participants would be doing work our society desperately needs, and they would gain economically valuable skills at the same time.

Anyway, let's keep it in perspective: If the Bush tax cuts are made permanent, by 2013 our government will be forging an estimated \$400 billion to \$500 billion in lost revenues each year, according to a Brookings Institution report. Meanwhile, we're spending roughly \$100 billion a year on Iraq.

Compared to those expenses, the cost of a universal national service program doesn't seem all that outrageous. And unlike the war in Iraq, which has produced, so far, only chaos and coffins, a national service program would be a real investment in America's future, enhancing both our prosperity and our national security.

Just as important, a universal national service program might just give us back what our divided country needs most: the conviction that despite our differences, we're all in this together.

Rosa Brooks is a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center. She is on a leave of absence in 2006-07 to work on a book.

Race relations and politics

By S.R. Sidarth

Special to The Washington Post

This past summer, between my third and fourth year of college, I decided to volunteer in my home state of Virginia on the campaign of Democratic Senate candidate Jim Webb.

For most of the summer, I worked behind the scenes at the campaign office in Arlington, helping set up field offices statewide and performing other odd jobs.

In the second week of August, I was dispatched by the campaign to serve as Republican Sen. George Allen's tracker on a "listening tour" across the state. Tracking was a rather solitary pursuit; I videotaped Allen's public appearances whenever I was admitted into an event and killed time between stops in places I had never been to before.

Then, on Aug. 11, my experience took a strange — and now famous — twist. On that day in Breaks Interstate Park, located on the Kentucky border, Allen acknowledged my presence for the first time in one of his stump speeches. I was singled out at a GOP picnic, identified as "macaca or whatever his name is" — although Allen knew my name, as we had been traveling together for five days — and then "welcome(d) to America and the real world of Virginia."

Allen's actions that day stood out because they were not representative of how I was treated while traveling around the state. Everywhere I went, though I was identifiably working on behalf of Allen's opponent, people treated me with digni-

'Macaca' comment
made difference in
Virginia

ty, respect and kindness. I cannot recall one event where food was served and I was not invited to join in the meal. In southwest Virginia, hospitality toward me was at a high point.

The night before the incident in Breaks, I stayed at the home of Jewel Jones, Webb's aunt, in Gate City on the Tennessee border. I was treated like family even though I was a guest for only half a day, and I received a grand tour of the area where Webb's ancestors have lived for more than a century.

The following day, at the picnic in Breaks, even after Allen's comments highlighted my outsider status, I was not allowed to depart without eating, because as one woman put it, "Political differences are set aside at the dinner table." In the same spirit, I was given accurate directions to Allen's next event, held in Bluefield the following morning.

After the incident in Breaks, my heritage suddenly became a matter of widespread interest.

I am proud to be a second-generation Indian-American and a practicing Hindu. My parents were born and raised in India and immigrated here more than 25 years ago; I have known no home other than Northern Virginia. The hairstyle inflicted

upon me by two friends late one night also became newsworthy; for the record, it was intended to be a mullet and has since grown out to nearly the appropriate length.

The larger question that this experience brings up is: How far has society progressed on the issues of race and openness? By 2050, according to most projections, the United States will be a minority-majority nation. But the fact that Allen believed I was an immigrant, when in fact I am a native Virginian, underlines the problems our society still faces.

Then again, Webb's victory last week gives me hope that Virginia will not tolerate playing the race card.

It is still hard for me to accept that I could have had a pivotal role in the election results; I would not wish the scrutiny I received on anyone. But I am also glad to have helped Webb.

Every little bit counted, especially in an election decided by about 9,000 votes out of nearly 2.4 million cast.

The politics of division just don't work anymore. Nothing made me happier on election night than finding out the results from Dickenson County, where Allen and I had our encounter.

Webb won there, in what I can only hope was a vote to deal the race card out of American politics once and for all.

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Congress,
it's time to
clean house

By Tom Fitton

Judicial Watch

Republicans got their clocks cleaned by the Democrats in the mid-term elections on Tuesday. So bad was the loss that Republicans did not even attempt to spin it. In one night, the Grand Old Party lost control of Congress and the majority of the governorships. The question Republicans are asking themselves today is: "Why did we lose?"

Some pundits blame the electoral defeat entirely on the war in Iraq which is, perhaps, one reason why President Bush promptly asked for Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's resignation. Obviously, the war had a bearing on the election, but it does not begin to tell the full story of the Republican collapse.

Just a few days before the election, The Washington Post published an electoral analysis that suggested at least 15 seats in the House of Representatives would be decided solely on the issue of corruption. The same was said for a few key Senate races as well. The analysis proved prescient.

Consider the Senate race in Montana, a normally dependable "red state" that gave President Bush a 20-point margin of victory over John Kerry in 2004. Incumbent Republican Senator Conrad Burns, tainted by ties to convicted felon and disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, lost Tuesday's election by about 3,000 votes to Democrat challenger John Tester. Corruption was the difference-maker in this critical Senate election contest and, ultimately, in the transfer of power in the Senate. If Burns had won, Republicans would have maintained a slim Senate majority.

Instead, the voters taught Burns, and other defeated Republicans, a lesson — a lesson Republicans should have learned 12 years ago.

The 1994 "revolution" that swept Republicans into power in the first place was caused, in part, by a decade's worth of congressional scandals on the Democrats' watch. House Speaker Jim Wright, D-Texas, under investigation by the House Ethics Committee for obtaining bogus book royalties, was forced to resign in shame. So, too, was House Majority Whip Tony Coelho D-Calif., for his alleged participation in a junk bond scheme. And then there was the "check kiting scandal," which resulted in an 18-month prison sentence for Dan Rostenkowski, D-Ill.

"Throw the bums out!" was the rallying cry of voters in 1994, who ultimately decided to put an end to 40 years of Democratic control of the House of Representatives that year. Republicans should have learned from the Democrats' mistakes. They did not, and were therefore forced to share their fate.

Today, Republican leaders across the country are licking their wounds and searching for answers as to how to right their ship. I have but one recommendation: Clean house! "Conservative" Republicans who are crooks should be abandoned by principled conservatives. No more Abramoffs. No more Mark Foleys. No more Tom DeLays, please.

Democrats, meanwhile, are popping open the champagne, but they would be foolish to think yesterday's message was not intended for them as well. Voter distaste for corruption may not bode well for an Abramoff-connected Sen. Harry Reid or the ethically-challenged Senator Hillary Clinton, who escaped a perjury indictment by the skin of her teeth.

Incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi must now figure out what to do with scandal-ridden members of her own party, such as Michigan Congressman John Conyers. Conyers is in line to head the Judiciary Committee, yet he is credibly alleged to have engaged in criminal wrongdoing. Will a Pelosi-led Democratic House majority hold him accountable? Or will they "stay the course" and continue to sweep congressional scandals under the rug?

Much is made of the divisions that exist within the electorate. To be sure, the public is deeply conflicted on a range of issues, including the war on Iraq. But when it comes to corruption, the American people tend to be of one mind and one voice.

On Election Day, the voters told members of Congress loud and clear to clean up their act.

Let's see if Congress finally pays attention.

Tom Fitton is president of Judicial Watch, a non-partisan educational foundation that fights government corruption. Visit www.judicialwatch.org for more information.

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