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FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2008

## The American Way: A Swing State Epiphany\*

by Erin Ryan

After weeks of country rending culture-warmongering in the final stretch of the presidential campaign, my neighbors brought over some cookies last night and offered something that reminded me why we, as a nation, will always come through these ordeals intact.



We live in Hampton Roads, Virginia, or battleground central in the campaign. It's been widely reported that this southeastern region of Virginia could decide the election, and with it, the new direction our world will take. As all swing-state residents will attest, the pressure of a presidential campaign is relentless, fraying nerves and straining collegiality. Accordingly, we avoid talking politics in my heavily Republican neighborhood. We share a stereotypical suburban cul de sac, where I walk my baby in his stroller at the same time many walk their dogs. I like my neighbors and enjoyed getting to know them since we arrived five years ago. I know that many will be voting for McCain, and though I cast my ballot for Barack Obama with a passion I have not previously felt at the polls, I felt no need to broadcast my politics with something as pronounced as a yard sign.

But then the first one appeared in the neighborhood--a McCain-Palin sign that went up right across the street. I felt a twinge when I saw it, a physical

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indication of the subtle barrier it erected between us. The McCain sign did not stay solitary for long; within days, others sprang up along the road like saplings. Soon there were five, then nine, and nary an Obama sign in sight. Although my husband and I have always opted for the respectful separation of neighbors and politics, a reluctant impetus to put up our own sign began to build. At first, we hadn't wanted one because we feared it would seem divisive; now, we also feared how it would marginalize us. So we rationalized our inaction: after all, we live on a dead-end street! A yard sign was unlikely to change the minds of our neighbors, and Obama didn't need any help with name recognition.

After the eleventh McCain sign completed a formation down the street, my husband finally asked, if not now, when? If we weren't willing to risk scorn for supporting this candidate, whom we admired beyond politics as usual, in this election, which we believe of global import--for what would we take a stand? So we waited for sundown, held our breath, and put the Obama sign out front. It did not take long to feel the effects. Some neighbors were cooler as they passed our stroller. Were others avoiding eye contact? Our politics were now a fact, a cat that was out of its bag and unlikely to return there, even long after the election. Though confident in our choice, we mourned the feeling of belonging we feared we had forsaken.

And then last night came the visit from down the street, from a family with two McCain signs. We have come to be friends in the best tradition of neighborliness. They brought us Christmas dinner when our baby was so new that we could hardly open a can of soup, and my husband regularly helps them with computer problems. The wife and I share stories about our children, and their daughters feed our cats when we are out of town. We had not spoken since the signs went up, and I wondered whether things would change. But here was the wife with a plate of home-baked cookies and the following extraordinary offer: She explained that it means a great deal to her and her husband to vote together. Realizing that we would not be able to do

so with our new baby, she was offering to babysit to give us that chance. I almost cried.

With allegations of voter registration fraud and voter suppression tactics drowning out the issues, my McCain-supporting neighbors were going out of their way to help us cast our ballots for Obama. Each of us feels strongly enough about our candidate to profess it from our lawn, and we all know that in our state, every vote counts. Our votes for Obama would cancel out theirs for McCain. And yet, here they were.

The warmth in their simple gesture meant everything. It was their way of telling us that--regardless of that silliness about who counts as the "real Virginia" or "pro-America" areas of the country--we are all Americans, and Americans care about their neighbors notwithstanding our differences. We vote our contrasting views, but we cast our ballots with respect for one another, and with the certainty that after they are tallied, we will rejoin to build our children's future, side by side. My neighbors' kindness reminded me that we will survive the best efforts of the election to divide us, by rising again to our best selves. We are all in this together. This is the American way.

--Erin Ryan teaches law at the College of William & Mary. A version of this piece appeared as an Op-Ed in the Chicago Tribune on November 5, 2008.

Posted by Hampton Roads Partnership at 6:49 PM