

Reality-based Community Faces the Facts

My views on the current political climate, the importance of hopelessness, network theory and swarm intelligence, the possibility of political change, and more details on the Brilliant Swarm workshop.

An October 17, 2004 New York Times Magazine article by writer Ron Suskind quoted an unnamed aide to George W. Bush: The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." ... "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

If that stings a bit – good!

If that stings a bit – good! There's some truth in it. The left has been largely reactive to Bush initiatives, rather than taking the initiative themselves. The result has been a failure to reverse Bush's faits accomplis, and inability to prevent him from creating "new realities." That is not to say that opponents of the administration have been lacking in zeal, nor disparage the good work of good people trying to make a difference. However, too often we seem to be moved to action by our outrage, our reaction to the latest depredation. By then, it's too late, and we are left to judiciously study the terrible new reality that has been created. Unless we learn to be proactive we will always be one step behind "history's actors" in the White House.

Nowhere are the potential consequences of inaction more catastrophic than in the planned attack on Iran. Unlike the invasion and occupation of Iraq, which involved the mobilization of large numbers of troops and materiel, the plan for Iran is a three-day blitzkrieg of airstrikes against 2,000 targets. Such an attack does not require the same kind of logistical planning as a ground invasion. It would be executed within hours of Bush giving the order. This time we will not have months to marshal moral indignation, or to mobilize opposition. Waiting to react means failure. If we are to prevent the attack, we must be proactive, not reactive.

It's easy to call for initiative, but more difficult to propose specific actions. What avenues of political expression are available and effective? Massive street protests seem to have lost their appeal since the start of the Iraq war. Dismissed as a "focus group" by Bush, their ineffectiveness is manifest. Sure, we have the right to petition our government for a redress of grievances, but that's meaningless when the government feels no obligation to respond to them. If we had mobilized twice the number of demonstrators before the Iraq war, would we have prevented the "shock and awe" that lit up the skies over Baghdad? I don't think so. There's nothing wrong with street protest, but it's a bit naïve to expect such peaceable assemblies to sway the Bush administration from its lethal course.

The vote is another means of popular political expression, but one that has been compromised. There are many factors: doubts about the integrity of the electoral system, the influence of money, gerrymandered districts, media manipulation, voting machine machinations, outright electoral fraud, exclusion of third party candidates, etc. Any intelligent observer can see the game is rigged. Furthermore, even when it works, voting is a long-term strategy. Again, it doesn't hurt to participate and eke out what gains may be found in the voting booth. But real change – systemic change – via the ballot seems unlikely.

The 2006 midterm election brought an outpouring of anti-war voters, a Democratic landslide and a glimmer of hope. However, the subsequent failure of the Dems to cut off funding for the war underscored the fact that Democrats are not committed to ending the war. A solid majority of Americans wants to end the war, and yet it continues. At this point, it would be hard to say that our government represents its citizens in any meaningful sense.

Meanwhile, we continue to go through the motions. We can write letters to the editor and our congressperson. We can sign online petitions. We can march in demonstrations. We can contribute to an anti-war candidate who will eventually be eliminated by his party – if the media doesn't do it first. We can stage vigils. We can fulminate against Bush and his cronies. That's what we've been doing and it hasn't gotten us very far.

I don't mean to sound cynical, but I do want to cultivate a sense of hopelessness. We have to stop doing what doesn't work. Hope is like an addiction that keeps us trapped in passivity and ineffectiveness. Paradoxically, embracing hopelessness is the key to moving from reactivity to action. Hopelessness is not despair! Embracing hopelessness means stilling the soothing internal voice that tells us everything will be okay, and allowing ourselves to experience fully whatever we're feeling. It means accepting the likelihood that things will not work out okay without our changing who we are and what we do. Giving up the hope that the Democrats will save the day, or that the Bush enterprise will collapse under the staggering weight of its corruption and incompetence, leaves us with the sobering realization that if change is to come we are the ones who must bring it.

Our social context is changing. Today we are connected to more people than ever before in the history of humanity, and there is an immediacy to those connections – they can be accessed instantly and en masse. Today's metaphor of organization is the network, and it's revolutionizing how we do business, how we entertain ourselves, how we relate to

one another. It has the potential to revolutionize politics, too, but that potential has yet to be realized. What happens when a distributed system like a network collides with a hierarchical control system like the US political system? The history of that encounter has yet to be written. Certainly, we see politicians trying to exploit and co-opt the online world. We also see the network taking on the political status quo, as the chaotic democracy of the blogosphere investigates and exposes corrupt politicians. There is much more to be said about the interaction of these two organizational systems. For now, I want to focus on something called swarm intelligence.

The term swarm intelligence comes from the field of network theory. It's an attempt to describe the behavior of complex systems of independent agents. Think of a flock of birds, a school of fish, or a swarm of insects. Without a leader the flock finds its way South, the school of fish evades its predators, and insects create large, complex habitats. These are called emergent behaviors: complex patterns arising out of relatively simple interactions. There is a beauty and natural genius to the swarm intelligence of insects and other animals. What makes people different, perhaps, is that we can be aware that we're part of a swarm. In other words, we can simultaneously appreciate our autonomy and the intelligence we create when we act together. That's what creates a Brilliant Swarm.

Brilliant Swarm isn't the answer to the question of what to do about our vexing political impasse. Instead, it poses the question "What are the 'relatively simple interactions' we could engage in that would lead to emergent collective behaviors that are politically effective?" A Brilliant Swarm is a laboratory for exploring that question.

With self-organization, the behavior of the group is often unpredictable, emerging from the collective interactions of all of the individuals. The simple rules by which individuals interact can generate complex group behavior. Indeed, the emergence of such collective behavior out of simple rules is one the great lessons of swarm intelligence. — Eric Bonabeau, PhD. It's part of the nature of a Brilliant Swarm to generate unpredictable solutions to political problems — problems like, "How can we stop the US from attacking Iran?" And unpredictable (and therefore unorthodox, creative, novel) solutions are what we need, because what we've been doing hasn't really worked.

Margaret Meade wrote "never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Brilliant Swarm is about creating such a world-changing group — a group where we find allies, ideas, and constructive challenges. It's about creating a model that other agents of change can adopt and modify. And it's a vision of many swarms in alignment, acting in harmony.

On a personal level, Brilliant Swarm reflects my desire to surround myself with brilliant, committed, spiritually grounded, politically active and fun people. The fun part is important! By fun I mean laughter, sensuality, play and so on, whatever makes us come alive. If it's not fun it's not sustainable, and if it's not sustainable it won't be effective. What's more, if it's no fun nobody will want to participate. Fun is a political necessity!

More than just fun, imagine how it would feel to stop a war, to reassert democratic authority over a government that's spinning out of control! Wouldn't that feel great? It would sure beat feeling angry and powerless!