

Who Are These Three Percent?

by Charles H. Calisher

calisher@cybersafe.net



It is all I can do to resist writing a column describing the background and results of the 2008 presidential election in the United States of America, but I must. I likely would not be able to contain all my many thoughts in a brief article and the Editor of the *Croatian Medical Journal* would not accept it anyway, which would be reasonable. Besides, I am a microbiologist, not a political scientist or historian, so I will leave that sort of thing to others. However, a bit of background might prepare you, dear reader, for what follows.

In case you hadn't noticed, the USA has been in trouble for the past eight years. Worse, we have taken the rest of the world with us down a long, slippery slope. Al Gore actually won the 2000 election but, by maneuvering and obfuscating, George W. Bush (a.k.a. "Dubya," "GW," "Bubba," "Captain Unaccountable," "Miss Representation," "Missionary Accomplished," etc., including many other pseudonyms which cannot be published in a decent journal) was named the winner of that presidential election. This was more than a bit shocking and many of us felt as though our election had been supervised by the Zimbabwe Election Commission. As supporters of the USA's major tenet, that laws, not men (or women), take precedence, we reckoned that we could tolerate almost anything and anyone for four years and would simply make the most of a bad situation. We were wrong (1). It was as though we had sort of chosen to hit an iceberg but hadn't realized we were sinking.

Fewer than nine months after George Bush took office, 18 guys flew two planes into the World Trade Center in New York City. My wife and I happened to be celebrating my birthday there at that time and were only a few streets from the disaster. Not being Europeans, we were unaccustomed to being attacked, and did not quite know what to do. The people of New York City were remarkably calm and went about the business of cleaning up and getting reorganized. We saw one taxi driver taking the rear seat out of his cab and asked him why. "I need the space to put bodies in," he said. The sides of the street were lined with rear seats from taxis, but there were no bodies. New Yorkers are so stressed by their daily challenges that a sanitation work-

ers' strike or a war is just another bump in the daily road of life.

The response by the rest of the world was generous and highly supportive of us (for a refreshing change) and provided an opportunity for George Bush to bring together the disparate factions here. Instead, he and his colleagues (ie, henchmen) embarked on an effort to frighten people, to foster paranoia, and to connect their agenda to this aggressive occurrence. Adding mean-spiritedness to incompetence, and bolstered by religionism, wishful thinking, and "gut feelings," these people relentlessly claimed non-existent presidential powers, violated laws covering separation of powers (executive vs congressional and judicial), privacy, free speech, right to counsel, and consolidation of government powers. The latter was the most worrisome because it was beginning to feel like Germany in the 1930s. We now even have a "Department of Homeland Security" ("Schutzstaffel"?; I expected that they would be using the word "Fatherland" at any time), to protect us from Canadians and other strange types. The outcry against all this became widespread and loud, but the law comes first here, and we are not a people who stand outside government buildings holding candles, so we waited and worked and got politically involved. And then along came Barack Obama. What was Red, White, and Blue now is shading toward Green, and not a moment too soon.

Also, in case you hadn't noticed, we Americans, or as George Bush says, "Amuricans," are insistent on being allowed to do whatever the hell we want to do. We would fight for that, and we have. That view comes from having been subjects of a King a couple of hundred years ago; we do not want that again. The fewer forms, rules, and requirements for obedience there are, the better. The problem is that this tendency often conflicts with the "social good," and so we are always arm-wrestling ourselves as to what is acceptable and what is not.

Whenever anyone tells me I "must" do this or that, she or he has a fight on her or his hands. As with individuals, the states here do things individually, and proce-

dures for choosing candidates for elections are not uniform. In some states, candidates are chosen by primary elections (formal voting) and in other states by caucuses (less formal, done in living rooms of people's homes). In 2004 I attended a caucus of my party's voters and nine people showed up. This year, there were 25. We live in a conservative area with very low population density (except for deer, and very few of them vote), so this was a remarkable increase. Apparently, it was like that everywhere in the country. This was less an election but more a tidal wave, with most Americans seeing the need for substantial change. I have never seen anything like it and likely will not again. It was as though this country, with all its considerable differences, took a deep breath and said "Enough."

Obama's opponent in the general election aimed low and still missed his target. His opponent's choice of a clueless vice-presidential candidate, the person who would have been a heart beat away from succeeding a 72-year old guy with cancer, was embarrassing and exceedingly frightening. You know the rest. With the election of Obama, we now are expecting immediate and huge changes: repair of the economic system, re-establishment of democracy, re-establishment of international friendships, a more equitable tax system, a better health care system, a straighter line to peace in the world, rebuilding the infrastructure (bridges, roads, dams, etc.), repairing the biodiversity loss, reversing climate change, re-ordering the distribution of money, restoring general equality, and more; a tall order indeed. We have to be careful not to expect too much. When Shelley and I cried when the results were announced, we were not alone. Apparently, much of the rest of the world agreed (2; (this video is hysterically funny, I recommend it highly).

During this election, which was part circus, part marathon, part embarrassment, as always here, polls were taken, some of them even daily. These polls are efforts to take the pulse of the public. What phrases resonate with the public? How can we bring to our side the potential voters who are undecided? How are Catholics (or Jews or women or Hispanics or religious fundamentalists or short people or people who drive fire engine red cars) seeing our candidate? Does the average worker see things our way? Are educated people with us or against us at this time? What about high income people? The results of such polls are used by politicians to tailor, moderate, or even change the direction of the campaign.

For six months I kept a close eye on these polls because ... well, I don't know. I was transfixed by the possibili-

ties and could not resist watching. These fascinating data are useful to those who manage political campaigns but all I needed to know is which candidate I wanted to see become elected. Still, within all those data was a singular oddity, the undecided voters. Some of us thought the election results might be 70-30 or even 80-20 in favor of Obama but, as usual, it was only somewhat more than 50-50. Okay, some people do not "get it;" let's move on, it is over.

In every poll result I saw, there was a 3% minority who said to every question, "No opinion" or "I do not know" – people who do not know what they think. Surely it is inevitable in a country this large that some few people have not read the newspapers, seen the TV, listened to the radio, talked with other people, or just did not care. But it always seems to be 3%, maybe the same 3%! Here are some (completely fabricated) possible examples:

Pollster: "If Iran attacks Israel, should the USA attack Iran, destroy its infrastructure, and kill millions of people?"

Yes 80%

No 17%

No opinion 3%

Pollster: "If your spouse was having an affair, would you object?"

Yes 96%

No 1%

No opinion 3%

Pollster: "Should the red card be eliminated from football?"

Yes 0%

No 97%

No opinion 3%

Pollster: "Should Tajikistan pass a law making cats the only house pets?"

Yes 10%

No 87%

No opinion 3%

Pollster: "Would you like to have AIDS?"

Yes 1%

No 96%

No opinion 3%

Pollster: "Does hand-washing reduce the likelihood of acquiring infectious diseases?"

Yes 95%

No 2%

No opinion 3%

Pollster: "Will you have your children vaccinated against measles, mumps, and rubella?"

Yes 92%

No 5%

No opinion 3%

Pollster: "Has anyone in your family, anyone you know, or anyone you have ever heard of died of an infectious disease?"

Yes 95%

No 2%

No opinion 3%

In Russia, a recent poll asked the person being questioned who s/he would vote for, if s/he had the opportunity to vote for John McCain or Barack Obama (3). The results –

Obama 27%

McCain 6%

No one 34%

"Hard to answer" (ie, No opinion) 33%

It is remarkable that these 3% (33% in Russia?) are allowed coffee breaks, given that they probably have to be re-trained when they return to work. These are people who think that turning on the kitchen light causes cockroaches. Every Monday morning is like a new life for them. Worse, there are 3% of people within every population who have no clue as to how to avoid diseases, and so these unfortunates may serve as reservoirs of diseases subsequently affecting others. Makes one think that there should be a bit more chlorine in the gene pool.

For many hundreds of years, the poor, and those who are incapable of being educated, have been blamed for many things; being a source of disease is one of them. This is ridiculous. Stupidity knows no economic boundary. Many otherwise well-educated people have no idea what causes diseases, how they are transmitted, or how to avoid them.

As is information about political policies, how to keep one's automobile engine clean, what to wear on specific occasions, and where to purchase a new laptop at a low price, information about diseases is well publicized. Articles in magazines, newspapers, on TV, and by hand-out from local health authorities are informative and readily available. Nonetheless, the general public's lack of knowledge about diseases, particularly infectious diseases, is evidence of governmental failure world-wide. In addition, there are some countries which have a particularly startling history of failure to care for their own citizens.

One definition of "government" is "The continuous exercise of authority over a political unit" (4) and the antonyms include anarchy, chaos, lawlessness, and revolution. One can argue that those who have authority over a country and of the lives and well-being of its citizens also have responsibility for those citizens, including for their welfare. If these kleptocracies are going to steal its citizen's money, the least they could do is build a functioning hospital or two. By my definition, therefore, a government that merely exercises its authority over its citizens and does not take active responsibility for them is not a legitimate one. These governments usually are pariahs in the eyes of decent, well-socialized people but little can be (or has been) done to remedy such situations. At the very least, the rest of us might make a better effort than we have to prevent or alleviate the sufferings of our fellow humans and of the rest of the natural world.

How much effort should be expended? That depends on how much we value our fellow humans and how sympathetic we are to their sufferings. Even if we only develop and maintain an adequately functioning health care system for "show," for the tourist trade, or for economic reasons, it's a high-minded idea and the decent thing to do.

Every country in the world has a health care system. On a scale of 0 to 100, nations rank low or high, with most in about the middle. Keeping in mind that half of all physicians graduated in the lower half of their classes, not all are of equal competence. Still, it is better to be seen by a person with a diploma than by one who has only read a few books and watched someone more skilled at work.

Ignoring incompetence for the moment, what about long waiting periods in emergency departments, lack of funds to purchase the most basic of preventatives and treatments (vaccines and drugs), proximity to health care providers, poor or non-existent record-keeping, and

so on, which is the usual situations in some countries? In some places, people with adequate financial resources get the best treatment available, while those who are poor are at the mercy of probability. This sort of situation was one of the many things Communism was supposed to redress; Socialism also. Perhaps it is the underlying human view that "if my family and I are doing well, then other people's problems are other people's problems, not mine." This clearly is the case with respect to decisions about childhood vaccinations.

This is short-sighted. If others are not well, no one is safe. In an earlier column I wrote some simplistic comments about the relationship between poverty, human development, and infectious diseases (5). I probably should not have done that. I am not a social worker or otherwise expert in anything except a few small areas of infectious diseases. Still, if those who see the problems do not speak out who will? Who speaks for the sick? Mother Teresa (dead)? The United Nations (expensive suits, expensive haircuts, and speech-making)? Whoever is speaking at any given moment, that person is not sufficiently effective at changing human nature. Perhaps it is an evolutionary problem – "first take care of me (and mine)." They know nothing about "herd immunity" and seem not to care to learn. Whatever the problem,

it is long past time to change things. If the first order of priority of every government were to do whatever it took to take real, rather than propagandistic, care of its citizens, the rest of the problems and desires might then take care of themselves. We might best begin by convincing the 3% that they have an investment in their fellow humans (and the environment, wildlife, and natural resources). It is impossible for me to imagine such a would-be paradise, but that is no reason to not try. I vote for decency.

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