

# It's why Obama is slow to honk

- **June 13th, 2010**
- (0) comments

**Bill Hall**



**commentary**

Speaking for myself and for our oddly serene president, we kids who were brought up by Midwesterners tend, when outraged, to smolder deep underneath rather than to erupt publicly in loud, snarling hissy fits. We aren't like some Easterners, who erupt in transparent anger at the slightest provocation.

That may explain some of the bizarre misunderstandings between Barack Obama and media critics who don't comprehend his failure to jump up and down and shriek like a little talking head when crossed by political adversaries or by oil company scoundrels.

Easterners and Westerners seem to have evolved socially with different nervous systems. I have lived mostly in the West but briefly in the East. And while I suspect Easterners and Westerners are equally quick to take furious offense at wrongdoing, they can differ markedly in whether they are inclined to let that anger show.

Westerners (many of whom were influenced by Midwestern parents and grandparents who migrated here during the Depression) generally tend to feel embarrassed by blatant public displays of emotion. That includes not only anger but also affection as well. Both public yelling and public kissing can feel awkward to many of us. Day in and day out, we wear neither our tempers nor our hearts on our sleeves.

When I lived in Washington, D.C., and would neglect to notice for a second that the traffic light had turned green, the cars behind me would immediately howl loudly with their horns, cursing such an egregious error in the middle of a morning commute.

Here in Idaho, on the border with Washington state, the same offense will result in several seconds of silence as the driver in the car behind, though privately irked, will try to give you a little more time to wake up before he insults you with something so rude as a little tweet of the horn, let alone a full blast.

In fact, if you hesitate at a suddenly green light here in these small Western cities and the driver behind starts blaring his horn, you automatically assume it isn't a local. It's one of those poor, out-of-control Easterners who actually bares his naked temper among strangers.

Similarly, Obama is boggled when Eastern talking heads like NBC Today show anchor Matt Lauer (born in New York, of course) and CNBC Hardball anchor Chris Matthews of Pennsylvania (or is that Chris Mouthews?) demand that the president blow his lid in lurid ways that will terrify his enemies.

I am inclined to note at this point that Teddy Roosevelt said, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." However, it occurs to me that Roosevelt, also a New Yorker, didn't practice what he preached. He was a boisterous and emotionally flamboyant president who tended to both speak loudly and to carry a big stick, not to mention carrying a fleet of armed warships as well.

I'm not entirely sure which approach is better in every-day life - slow-burning, understated Western and Midwestern anger or volcanic Eastern anger that involves coming unhinged at both trifles and outrages to make sure that you get all the revenge you have coming for all the outrages.

On the one hand, it is probably more honest and useful to blurt out what's bugging you and give a person fair notice that he has stepped on your toes rather than just brood silently.

On the other hand, people with short fuses can become tiresome. And when they bellow at every little transgression, they seem merely to be crying wolf and therefore don't often get anyone's attention.

But as the spawn of Midwesterners, I prefer the approach of Obama and of other Midwestern leaders like the equally unflappable Ronald Reagan of Illinois. I would hate to see an American president become like those chronic hysterics Hugo Chavez of Venezuela or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran.

This whole question of whether No-drama Obama is too cool for his own good in refusing to shriek at his adversaries reminds me of a colorful country editor from years ago. He frequently wrote editorials admonishing his small community to simmer down when the citizens started getting carried away with their latest imaginary crisis. He used the same sarcastic headline on each of those editorials:

"All together now, let's get hysterical"

I'm on his side. That's why I hope Obama maintains that dry Midwestern tendency to keep it cool.

And I have a message for the likes of Matt Lauer and Chris Matthews as they dawdle at the green light of civility:

Honk!

---

*Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's editorial page. His e-mail address is [wilberth@cableone.net](mailto:wilberth@cableone.net).*