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Madison360: To reunite Wisconsin, elite leaders must step up

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Supporters and opponents of Gov. Scott Walker rally outside the Capitol on Tuesday, June 5, when Walker beat opponent Tom Barrett in a recall election to retain his post.

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Madison360 blog



Paul Fanlund

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“Together apart.”

Those words popped to mind in the aftermath of Wisconsin’s recall election as describing our political culture.

The phrase was part of the title of a reporting project 20 years ago by the New Orleans Times-Picayune about myths on race and segregation in the south. I met the project’s editor shortly after it appeared and the title stuck with me.

Now it seems to aptly describe Wisconsin’s gaping political divide. We are together, but very far apart.

What will it take to nudge us closer, move us back to when political debate seemed less a blood sport?

One compelling suggestion is that major business and academic leaders, people with the cash and clout to speak freely, need to step forward. The idea is not from a political scientist but rather a historian, a professor who left the University of Wisconsin-Madison last year.

Before we delve further, let’s reiterate the single most important reason why so many who oppose Republican Gov. Scott Walker’s governance do so, something his

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backers do not seem to fully grasp.

Rather than being solely or even mostly about unions, it is this: never before has a governor so categorically disenfranchised 40-some percent of his constituents, excluding them from any role in any decision-making. Predecessor Jim Doyle and every previous governor -- names including McCallum, Thompson, Earl, Dreyfus, Schreiber, Lucey, Knowles, all of them, back to the guys with the long beards -- at least tried to govern on behalf of

all.

Not Walker.

His funders and handlers shrewdly realized what many of us did not, that the cultural divide in Wisconsin had so widened that it invited their full-scale assault, one which they have executed with devious brilliance culminating in his cash-fueled recall victory.

That brings me to Jeremi Suri, who until last year was a star professor at UW-Madison and who [now teaches](#) in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas in Austin.

Amid 2011's Walker strife, Suri's departure [made news](#). He reflects now: "I just found the atmosphere so demoralizing in Madison the last couple of years," he says. "I wouldn't say it was causal entirely, but if the atmosphere had been different I don't think we would have moved."

But he remains dialed in from afar. His [post-election blog post](#) on conditions in Wisconsin is eloquent:

"The Wisconsin Recall was about two echo chambers," he wrote. "My friends, neighbors, and former colleagues in the cities of Madison and Milwaukee had strong and persuasive arguments about why Scott Walker has committed unforgivable sins. He slashed public services while he approved give-backs to his friends in business. He denied workers the right to bargain, drained public education and health institutions, and disdained peaceful student protesters. ... My friends, neighbors, and former colleagues worked incredibly hard to unseat this evil man. They cannot understand why anyone would support such a terrible person.

"Many other Wisconsinites ... cannot comprehend these heresies. Their perspective is more than a disagreement. It is an entirely different vision of the world. The recall advocates paint the state like Picasso with ominous colors and bright brush strokes; their opponents return to Norman Rockwell with virtuous, hardy, ordinary men and women, trying to make their way. ... The unseen (Madison-centric) elites and dependents do not really work, they do not maintain good families, they do not go to church, and they do not love their country. They are leeches who have sold out the good American stock. They must be contained and reformed by simple and sincere ordinary men, like Scott Walker."

Yup, pretty much sums it up, doesn't it?

In his blog, Suri also invokes the late historian Richard Hofstadter, who wrote about a so-called "paranoid" style of American populism and "anti-intellectualism" and its Wisconsin links to the late Sen. Joe McCarthy.

Suri, an Ivy League educated historian, describes how President Franklin Roosevelt, certainly a member of the elite himself, rallied Americans from the Depression and through most of a world war with a message of unity against a backdrop of anti-elitism that he says resonates again

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In an interview, Suri says: "I think leaders play an important role in helping to build the bridges by which we can connect and learn. It's very hard because we're educated in certain ways. We live in certain places. We tend to move in certain circles, and it's not like you can just go visit people and understand their world view."

He adds: "What FDR did, and what other great leaders do, is he was able to articulate ... the ways in which people experienced the Depression in different ways...the ways in which people experienced World War II in different ways. That's why rhetoric is so important, it seems to me."

But, I countered, today aren't we living in a climate in which leaders, especially on the political right, are severely punished for appearing moderate?

"I agree," Suri responds. "I don't think it's going to happen through traditional electoral policies. I think it's going to require people to do some extraordinary things. It's going to require some people in the business community to step forward. It's going to require people in the academic community, and I think there has to be a sort of wellspring of activity around this from different people who are, quite frankly, elites in their own ways."

In Wisconsin, he thinks it will require those with money and status "to say to themselves, 'This is important,' and actually put themselves out there." Suri says: "There are a lot of people around the state who have a lot of status who could make a difference. Where are the [Bud Seligs](#) (the Milwaukee-based commissioner of Major League Baseball) and the others speaking out on these issues? People who are respected."

Suri also contends that Walker's style has been more destructive than his substance. "The problem (is) with the attitude that Walker took, talking about dropping the bomb on people and everything like that.

"I also think one needs to put perspective on this," Suri says. "He's of course eliminated collective bargaining for (public) workers, but a lot of things he hasn't been able to change, right?"

"The university still pretty much operates as the university did, and most state agencies are doing what state agencies did before. This is not to minimize what he's done, but it isn't a coup d'état. The general elements of the state have gone on."

Some depressed Democrats might regard this as a distinctly glass-half-full analysis and Suri as a Texas-sized Pollyanna, but I think his overall prescription makes a lot of sense.

Many of us have yearned all along for mutual respect for both sides fostered by elites from business, academia, wherever, who possess the stature to push back against critics.

That path sounds optimal, but the fact is, it hasn't happened so far, not even a little bit.

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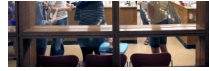
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