

# Inquiring Minds topic paper – 2 November 2012

## Ginny Lupfer, Moderator

### **Our Secret Sauce**

By Thomas L. Friedman – 23 October 2012 – *The New York Times*

It was striking how much Monday's presidential debate on foreign policy came down to two subjects: America and the Middle East. The two actually provide some instructive contrasts, starting with one that I've noted since the onset of this campaign: the contrast between the high degree of American pluralism and trust that makes our country work, and the near total absence of it in the Middle East, the region most vexing us and most likely to blow up on the next president. Muslims are killing Muslims across the Middle East and Central Asia today: Sunnis versus Shiites, Pashtuns versus Pashtuns and Kurds versus Turks. Christians are not faring well there, either. The absence of pluralism and the prevalence of "rule or die" politics — either my sect or party is in power or I'm dead — is the dominant political trend in the Arab-Muslim region today. Nobody trusts anybody, but it is impossible to build a modern state or an innovation economy without trust. Meanwhile, here in America, we are debating whether to replace our first black president — whose middle name is Hussein and whose grandfather was a Muslim — with a Mormon! Who does that? Nobody else. That radical pluralism is the secret of our sauce, and blessedly so. America, take a bow.

But not for too long.

We have a very special country, but we have to take care of it, not kick it around like it's a football. And we can't do that if we're imitating the Middle East's rule-or-die politics: my party or scorched earth. Barack Obama has been far from a perfect president. At times, he has treated friends and opponents with arrogance or just a stubborn unwillingness to play the game of politics to co-opt those who needed to be co-opted (he should have embraced the Bowles-Simpson federal debt plan) to get legislation passed. No one would confuse Obama for Lyndon Johnson. But no one would confuse today's Republican Party for the G.O.P. of the 1960s or 1970s, either.

It is impossible to look at the G.O.P.'s behavior in the last four years — from its unwillingness to consider Obama's jobs bill, which was praised by independent economists, to the unwillingness of its presidential candidates to consider a \$1 increase in taxes for \$10 of spending cuts, to the time it spent on sheer lunacy such as questioning the president's birth certificate — and not conclude that many in the party just wanted Obama to fail in the hope that they could pick up the pieces. Too many Republicans, particularly moderate business types, don't want to admit how much their party has been led around of late, not by traditional conservatives, but by a radical Tea Party base that has driven decent, smart conservatives — like Bob Bennett of Utah, Bob Inglis of South Carolina, Richard Lugar of Indiana and Olympia Snowe of Maine — out of office.

**What I'd say about Obama's domestic and Middle East policies is that, given the messes and political constraints he inherited in both arenas, he did about as well as anyone could. He kept the homeland safe, prevented us from getting drawn into any sinkholes and killed bad guys. It is not the stuff of foreign policy legend, but it was not bad. I'd say the same at home. He stanching the bleeding in the economy and initiated some smart reforms in education, energy and health — the true effectiveness of which we will only know in the future. It was not exactly the New Deal, but considering the deep hole created by the years of George W. Bush, it also was not a New Depression. A quick turnaround in either arena was never possible.**

**But while that kind of politics got us through the last four years, it won't get us through the next four. We cannot have another term of partisan gridlock. We are heading into a world where the breakdown of the European supranational state system, combined with the breakdown of the Arab nation state system, combined with climate change, combined with a much greater global interdependence, means that we will be more and more buffeted by problems that are too dangerous to ignore but too complicated and big to fix alone. And when a country finds itself in that kind of situation, there is one thing it absolutely must do, and that is *build resiliency*.**

**We need to weatherproof our house so we can control our destiny and play the vital stabilizing role the world needs us to play. And that leads to another difference between us and the Middle East. We don't know how to fix their problems anymore. But we do know how to fix *our* problems. In the short run, we have to invest in infrastructure, education and research — the sources of our strength to stimulate growth — while simultaneously putting in place a credible long-term plan to cut spending and both raise and reform taxes as our economy improves.**

**Regardless of what they have on their Web sites, neither candidate has spoken honestly to voters in their speeches or commercials about what this will take. Hey, it's election time. What else is new? Well, there is something new. Just doing as well as our domestic political constraints will allow will not cut it anymore — not given where the global economy, the Middle East and climate change are going. Just doing what the political traffic will bear will not lead us to resiliency. It will lead us to painful, destabilizing vulnerability.**

**We need a whole new traffic pattern. That will require a president who will dare to challenge the country to do big, hard things together, not just tack with the winds of public opinion, and it will require an electorate that is ready to value and demand such leadership.**