

## REVIEW

# A Politically Mixed Marriage

Left and right wed—and manage to live happily ever after

BY JEANNE SAFER

**NEXT ELECTION DAY**, like every Election Day for the last three decades, I will show up faithfully at my polling place, rain or shine, and register my choices for various offices. As long as they're Democrats, they can count on my support. It's a matter of moral obligation, not just civic duty: I've got to cancel out my husband's vote.

For 35 years, I have been a card-carrying liberal married to a conservative Republican. We vehemently disagree on every conceivable issue, including abortion, gun control and assisted suicide. His deepest convictions haven't budged in the years I have known him, and mine haven't either. But I can say unequivocally that marrying him was the best decision I ever made and that he is probably the only man I could ever live with.

I've long been aware that our mixed marriage is unusual, but I didn't realize just how exotic it actually was until I saw a recent study from Stanford University. It found that the ferocity of political partisanship in the U.S. is so intense that marriages across party lines are now "exceedingly rare"—just 9%. Parents worry about their children marrying outside party affiliations, and many single people consider political orientation a more important criterion for a potential mate than personality or physical attributes.

How did my husband and I find each other? So insular was I in my youth that I equated conservatism with the fanatical, paranoid John Birch Society. I certainly never imagined having a conservative as a boyfriend. But in my late 20s, I joined a Renaissance singing group in New York City, and there he was—tall, clever, with intense blue eyes and a lyrical baritone.

My future husband was considerably more open-minded about love across party lines. Even though his parents were both committed conservatives, he grew up in the era when liberalism was the dominant ideology, which gave him much more exposure to the opposition at an early age. He even dated a former communist in college.

We have only had one knockdown, drag-out confrontation over politics, and it was so unnerving that I remember all the particulars. One morning in 1989, I picked up the newspaper and read a front-page headline about the Supreme Court's *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* decision, which allowed states to place significant restrictions on abortion rights. I was beside myself. I said, half under my breath but audible all the same, "This is the end. I'm going to have to join a protest march." He uncharacteristically



rose to the bait and countered, with grim determination, "If you march, I march"—that is, on the other side.

Fortunately, I knew not to respond and let the tension escalate into real warfare. This was a fight neither of us could win, with the potential to destroy everything we had carefully built and both cherished. We kept our distance for the rest of the day. It was torture. I felt lonely and bereft, and so did he. That night, we agreed to disagree and drop the subject. We pulled ourselves back from the precipice and have made sure never to approach it again.

It is a pernicious fantasy that you can alter

your spouse's political opinions any more than you can transform his other habits, character traits or ways of seeing the world. Persuasion doesn't work, and showing him the error of his ways doesn't work because he doesn't think his ways are in error, even if you do.

Experience has taught us that there are times when avoidance alone, enforced by self-control and silence, is the key to forestalling painful and hopeless arguments, extended icy silences and sinking feelings in the night. It's like learning to forcibly restrain yourself from telling your spouse "You're just like your mother" when he has done some-

thing infuriating, even if it's horribly true. The moral high ground is dangerous territory in any marriage.

Conventional wisdom says that couples should always try to work things out because suppressed hostility will sneak out in destructive ways. In this case, conventional wisdom is dead wrong. Our hostility isn't suppressed; it has been consciously transformed into something manageable, defanged (more or less) through love and will.

Not every passionate disagreement is amenable to our solution, of course. Few libertarians could endure living with a communist, or Zionists with a PLO supporter or devout Christians with an atheist. But good will and appreciation can go a long way in negotiating many serious differences of opinion.

These days, we rarely fight, at least about public policy, and we never begin sentences when discussing the news with "Do you really believe [fill in the blank]?" We have learned to resort to non-incendiary inquiries like "What does your side think about X?" or "Who will you nominate?" I am much better informed and more sophisticated—and more liberal—as a result of being married to him than I otherwise would be.

My opinions, however, are reserved for my fellow liberals, and if they ask me, as they often do, how my charming and sensitive husband can possibly hold the opinions he does, I suggest that they ask him directly. It takes tact and dexterity, but doesn't marriage require these things of everybody? Doesn't every couple have profound disagreements, even if they vote the same? It is naive to believe that political lockstep is any guarantee of amity in a mate.

**We may vote differently, but we agree on what matters most.**

Living together so long has taught us that it is possible to tolerate our opposition on serious issues because we agree on what matters most, which is that the camaraderie we have created in every other sphere is more basic, and far more precious, than ideology. Nobody

makes me think and laugh, or comforts me when I cry, the way he does. The things that bring us together are deeper than the things that could have torn us apart; we can finish each other's sentences on every subject but politics. He loves me for what I am, which includes the ways I am maddeningly different from him.

I'm sorry for the growing number of people who look for love only on dating websites that are segregated by ideology. It's really no better than a match by astrological sign, because peoples' political beliefs say surprisingly little about who they really are. They will never discover, as I did, that it's possible to find a soul mate with whom the only thing you don't have in common is politics.

*Dr. Safer is a psychotherapist and the author of "The Golden Condom and Other Essays on Love Lost and Found," which will be published by Picador in early April.*