**Paralysis Rules**

**By Joe Klein**

As the Democrats gathered for their convention in Charlotte, the mood among a crucial constituency--my esteemed colleagues in the fourth estate--was sour and curdling. Politico ran a story in which an all-star team of journalists complained about the 2012 campaign: how joyless the process, how pointless the conventions, how cynical the campaign staffs, manipulating us relentlessly. Normally, I would push back against the dyspeptic tide. I've been working this dodge for more than 40 years, and I'm still amazed that I get paid to travel the world, meet fascinating people, pontificate, puntificate and slag off spinmeisters.

But this campaign is wearing on me too, and I think I understand the source of my colleagues' mood. It's a closely held secret in the tribe, but most journalists are more romantic than cynical and are also, by the way, real patriots. We obsess over the game and get cheap jollies when the pols screw up, but we also have mortgages and 401(k)s like normal people, and we are freaked out by the paralysis in Washington and the truly diseased atmosphere of take-no-prisoners partisanship. (And some of us are very much aware of our role as a conduit for the prevailing ugliness.) We're really rooting for the country to do better, and we're afraid it won't.

The press depression reflects the mood of the country. As I've traveled on my annual road trips, I've seen the zeitgeist shift from real fear for the future in 2010 to frustration that nothing was moving in Washington in 2011 to ecumenical disgust with both parties, all politicians and, yes, the media in 2012. There is an enormous question hovering over the presidential campaign: How do we get out of this place, past this paralysis? How do we break the fever?

I don't want to leave you in suspense: I don't know. And I suspect it's going to seem worse over the next few months as the air is clogged with $1 gazillion worth of political advertising, almost all of it negative. The only events--barring an economic or national-security disaster--that will matter between now and the election will be the debates. And those are likely to be won or lost not on substance but on the visceral impression the candidates make on our low-information-trending electorate. The biggest question in any presidential campaign isn't "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" It's "Which of these guys do you want to have in your living room for the next four years?"

The tension of the next few months will be reinforced by the encroaching reality of what is going to happen immediately after the election. The crisis of paralysis will reach its climax: the Maya calendar will end, and the fiscal cliff will loom. A deal will have to be made as the Bush tax cuts expire and draconian budget cuts, agreed on by both parties in a Thelma & Louise moment, kick in. Absent a deal, most economists agree, we will have another recession. Absent a deal, the sense that our republic is crashing will become a global problem.

So the real question for the next two months is: Which of these candidates is more likely to make the deal? I have mixed feelings about that. President Obama's policies and priorities seem more reasonable to me than Mitt Romney's--more reasonable, at least, than the policy mirage that Romney has presented so far, stained by the preposterous extremism of the Republican Party's base. But Obama has had no luck over the past four years in luring Republicans toward compromise, and if he wins this election, the GOP backlash against the "moderate" Romney types in their party is likely to make flexibility on taxing and spending more difficult.

Romney may be in a better position to negotiate, for two reasons: First, he knows how to do it, having spent a lifetime as a businessman making deals and four years as a Republican governor haggling successfully with Massachusetts Democrats, passing significant legislation like a universal, individual-mandate health care plan. Indeed--and this is the second reason--Romney's biggest advantage is that he'll have some Democrats across the table. They tend to value government more than Republicans do; they're more willing to compromise to keep it operating. Of course, any real attempt to engage the Democrats would probably destroy Romney's credibility with Rush Limbaugh and the other stupendous citizens in his party.

What a conundrum! And yes, how depressing. The frustration in all this for me is that I believe there are real answers to the problems we face, from education to economic growth to health care. I've seen and reported on them. There should be real cause for optimism. But I don't know how we get from here to there.