

Big Ideas

A Letter from the Farm

Stephanie Abbajay

I knew that I would experience some culture shock when I moved away from Washington, DC in 2002 to rural Dow, Illinois. I had gone to college in the rural Midwest, so I knew the difference between cities that seem never to sleep and cornfields that seem never to end. What I didn't count on was how political the shock would be.

I did it all for my man. After going to law school in DC, my husband Dave Stine started a custom furniture company but soon longed to move closer to his family (and the source of his highest quality lumber). So I sold my nightclub and restaurant in Adams Morgan and moved with him to a forty-acre farm in Jersey County, a heavily agricultural area 35 miles north of St. Louis along the Mississippi River.

I had been in the bar and restaurant business since 1993, when I was dismissed from my low-level Schedule C Bush (41) Administration appointment at what was possibly the pruniest of the plum jobs: special assistant to the director of WorldNet Television at the U.S. Information Agency's Bureau of Broadcasting. I made the move to Illinois willingly because the bar business had not only been very good, but actually a little too good. My sister Mary and I were very successful in our Adams Morgan ventures: the Toledo Lounge (which we still own), the Crush nightclub and the Nineteen Ten restaurant. But the life of a bar owner can be, well, indulgent. By 2002, I was exhausted from running too many businesses, raising a baby, and living the

DC life. It didn't take much to convince me that the corn-fed American heartland would be a better place to raise a family.

Everyone told me I would miss the Beltway buzz, but no one explained exactly what that meant. They didn't need to; the differences became clear as the reality of rural existence set in. Not only could I not get the *New York Times* delivered to my house, I couldn't even get the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. For a while I got a mail subscription to the *Times*, but what's the fun of getting Monday's paper on Thursday? I even offered to pay for a subscription for my local library if they could get it, but the *Times* simply doesn't do daily delivery to this zip code, or to any other zip code within twenty miles of it. Now I drive 48 miles round trip every Sunday to get my weekly and only dose of the Gray Lady.

But the real difference was about much more than a newspaper. Washington "buzz" is not found just in the inky symbols of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and the like, but in the sound of Big Ideas being hashed and rehashed, debated and discussed. That kind of buzz doesn't exist in Dow. This is bottom-line America, where DC's Big Ideas actually come home to roost. Out here, people don't think about a New World Order, or what American foreign policy should look like after George W. Bush, or the dangers of a resurgent Russia. No one here knows who Irving Kristol or Francis Fukuyama are. No, out here folks think about culverts, the price of corn, the teacher's retirement fund, the flood plain in Grafton or whether woodshop will have to be eliminated from the middle school because of

Stephanie Abbajay, former managing editor of *The National Interest*, makes a peach pie to die for.

budget cuts. They don't think about ideology; they think about reality—*local* reality. This was foreign territory to me, coming as I did from a Washington culture absolutely thick with talk about Hegel, Tocqueville and Locke. I never really understood Tip O'Neill's famous phrase, "all politics is local", until I moved out here. Now I get it.

At first, I must confess, the recognition of where I was, metaphysically speaking, filled me with disappointment and ennui. I had grown accustomed to a fairly high level of political discourse. As a graduate of Kenyon College, I was steeped in it from the get-go. Indeed, in the almost twenty-year span between entering college and leaving DC, my life was all about politics, foreign policy and debate. After Kenyon I worked for political consultant John Carbaugh, Jesse Helms's one-time foreign policy adviser, who now ran a mysterious operation at 1701 Pennsylvania Avenue that seemed to have something to do with overthrowing left-wing governments. (To this day, I am still not really sure what he did.) We discussed bringing democracy to Latin America and Africa, we talked about the Strategic Defense Initiative and Jonas Savimbi. It was heady stuff, and very conservative. At a 1988 book signing for Pat Buchanan's cleverly if predictably entitled memoir, *Right From the Beginning*, I asked Buchanan to please autograph a copy "to John." He looked up at me, raised his eyebrows, and said, "You work for John Carbaugh?" He shook his head once, chuckled and said, "That's a pretty right-wing shop over there."

I left John Carbaugh to work for Owen Harries, editor of *The National Interest*. There we were expected to read three newspapers daily and as many periodicals as possible across the ideological board, from *The Nation* to *Foreign Affairs* to *National Review*. Irving Kristol, the publisher, would from time to time wander over to Owen's office and bring up an idea, and the staff would slowly filter in to join the discussion. Owen would routinely gather us outside his office, throw out a heady topic and make us debate it. None of us hesitated: Europe switching to the euro? Bring it on! *The End of History*? Here's what Sam Huntington said! If you weren't participating enough in the usual lunchtime discussions, Owen would make you

talk. Irving paid for staff lunches from the office kitty, and got more than his money's worth in higher staff morale and general education.¹

The National Interest staff would routinely pick policy fights with the staff at *The Public Interest*, Irving's domestic policy magazine, which was right next door. They were a clever lot, the *PI* bunch, and we usually had to resort to besting them, in the end, with a rousing game of in-office whiffle ball. The game usually ended with Michael Lind, then Owen's executive editor, hurling himself out of his chair, yelling at us to "grow up." (He couldn't hit a whiffle ball to save his life.)

After four years at *TNI*, I landed at USIA's WorldNet, where I was special assistant to the director, the conservative documentarian Michael Pack. Our mandate was to develop television programming to encourage the spread of democracy. Pack and I spent hours arguing about that mission and a host of other ideas. Many times we simply argued over what type of letter we could send to Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lew Wasserman to entice them to make blockbusters about fledgling democracies, but weightier topics were also on the menu. And I thought this was completely normal because in Washington everybody talked about ideas. Where else could you get into an edifying debate about U.S. policy in Africa with your Somali cab driver?

Even after I left publishing and politics and entered the bar business, the discourse continued, with the added benefit of alcohol to lubricate discussion. Every bar fly and bar back in the city seemed to have intelligent and well-formed opinions about foreign and domestic policy. I remember debating health care with Mongo, one of my bar backs at the Toledo Lounge. Mongo had a mohawk, a pierced nose and a blood-red Bela Lugosi tattoo on his forearm, but he knew the nuances of Hillary Clinton's health care plan, and he had ideas of his own to boot.

I got used to seeing (and overhearing) Irving and Bea Kristol, Charles and Robin Krauthammer, and George Will discussing politics and

¹Editor's note: Having learned the luncheon drill from Irving and Owen, we do this at *The American Interest*.

policy every Sunday at my restaurant, Nineteen Ten. They would come for brunch after George finished taping *This Week*. White House and Capitol Hill staffers came every night to drown their sorrows and celebrate their victories. Ideas and theories flowed freely between political friends and foes alike. Every watering hole was a setting for a great debate, or at any rate a loud one. I got spoiled: glitzy *TNI* dinners where the likes of Kissinger, Kirkpatrick and Kristol (*père et fils*) debated American foreign policy; boozy lunches arguing about Palestinian statehood; long Sunday afternoons spent poring over op-ed pages; debates at the Toledo Lounge with Andrew Sullivan, Jonah Goldberg, assorted media correspondents, and wingers from *The Nation* and the *Washington Times*.

Here in Dow, the debate does not continue. That doesn't necessarily mean people here are less educated or less concerned about the country or the world, or that Big Ideas don't resonate with them. Sure, I have never been able to draw anyone into a debate about whether economic growth tends to support the growth of liberal political institutions, but this is a place where the foot soldiers of those Big Ideas spring forth. Here, the results of Washington's Big Ideas shape the minutiae of daily life: the price of gas and heating oil, the lack of affordable health care, the price of soybeans, pre-K for four-year-olds, extended tours for soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I learned this truth the hard way. I was a reporter for the local paper, the *Jersey County Journal*, for three years, as well as its editor for a short time. I didn't realize how deeply averse people were to sharing their views, let alone discussing ideas, until I had to kill a feature I had started called "Faces." Every week, we would ask six local residents a politically topical question—about gun control, an upcoming election, a bill before the governor, the war in Iraq, immigration and so on. Then we published their answers along with their mugshot. But every week I had to go to three or four places and interview two or three dozen people before I could find just six who would agree to answer and be photographed. It be-

came so difficult to get people to participate that we changed the format to feature an inane question instead of a political one. It was much easier to get people to answer "What's your favorite movie?" than "Should the U.S. wait for Security Council approval to use force in Iraq?" It just depressed me, so we stopped running the feature altogether.

But it took Michael Moore to drive home the reality of the political culture here. In 2004, I wrote a column for the paper called "Michael Moore: American Patriot." I argued that Moore showed bravery in *Fahrenheit 9/11* to ask so many unpleasant and unpopular questions (however unfairly they were presented). Why did I do this? I just wanted to put some ideas out there for people to talk about.

The effect was explosive. To put it bluntly, I got my ass handed to me. Our two biggest ad-

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vertisers pulled their weekly full-page ads—and didn't return for more than a year. So many letters of hate and vitriol poured in that for weeks we ran whole pages of them. I have fairly thick skin, but I must admit it got to me. I had tried to encourage debate about a Big Idea—whether the war in Iraq was justified—but instead of debate I got an education.

I had not really understood before this incident how Jersey County, Illinois worked, politically or ideologically. This is a community in which a large number of men and women serve in the military. Nearly everyone has a family member or close friend who serves. People take this very seriously: Street posts and diner windows here are covered with signs and banners listing the names of local service people. In an area where more than a few e-mails end with, "If you are reading this in English, thank a soldier", one must tread carefully. Any debate about the war, even one framed firmly in the realm of abstract ideas ("Can democracy be exported?"), is liable to be taken as an attack on a son or daughter, a husband or a wife.

This is not necessarily narrow-mindedness. It's hard to discuss Big Ideas when people are worried about the safety of their husbands, the price of their crop, whether they can afford a mammogram, or whether a berserk meth head will steal the anhydrous tank from their bean field. But there is another force at play here, too, one that I hadn't encountered in DC. Even though Wal-Mart and Walgreens and other corporate giants have a huge presence here, as they do in all rural areas, there are still enough thriving independent businesses to matter—banks, insurance agencies, chiropractors, coffee shops, car dealerships and so on. This means that alienating people out here can be economic suicide, as my publisher learned after my Michael Moore column appeared. That's a big reason people do not argue politics much. It can do more harm than good, economically and socially, so it's not part of the culture.

I have adapted; not easily, but I have adapted. I have come to understand if not yet to embrace the political culture here. I find debates about Big Ideas where I can. Usually this is with my husband, but since we agree on almost ev-

erything except immigration, it's really not that much fun. So I Google "Francis Fukuyama" to see what he's up to; I read *The American Interest* and the *Sunday Times*; I listen to Diane Rehm; I read Bill Kristol's new column in the *Times*, and Jonah Goldberg's and Krauthammer's columns serialized in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. I engage people when I can, and I appreciate more than ever those who enjoy debate.

I also take advantage of what Dow offers that DC doesn't. I can't debate people, but I can collect eggs. We raise our own vegetables, chickens and beef. We drink milk fresh from the family farm and make our own cheeses, yogurt and butter. My husband fells his own trees for his furniture line, and we all tromp around the woods with him. My chocolate-chip almond biscotti took Best in Show at last year's Jersey County Fair (my peach preserves, made with peaches from my tree, scored blue ribbons, too). I may not have anyone to debate global politics with, but listening to the coyotes howl at night, my chickens cluck contentedly in the morning, and my kids laugh as they run around our forty acres makes up for it. Sort of. Hey, visitors from DC welcome here. 🌍



The author, with peaches

Stephanie Abbajay