

## It's Our Country, Whether We Like It or Not

by Tim Size, Executive Director, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, Sauk City

Americans on both the political left and right have finally found something to agree about. And in my opinion, they both have it wrong. Both sides now tend to say “this” country instead of “our” country. This matters because words represent ideas and ideas lead to or away from useful action.

You'd expect a visitor from overseas to say “this country” when they visit America. I'd expect an economist to compare this country to that country. But for those of us who live here, and aren't writing a research paper, I believe we have a responsibility to think and say “our country.” Not as in “my country, love it or leave it,” but as in the sense that all of us here are part of America, its flaws and its unique blessings alike, whether we like it or not.

Who would take me seriously if I came home and said “this” family or “this” house needs to do such and such. It would be a clear message that I was taking the right to complain but none of the responsibility for either the problem or for its solution.

I believe Peter Beinart is 100% on target in his essay, “Patriot Games” (*Time*, 7/7/08), when he says that love of country requires both affirmation and criticism. “Patriotism should be proud but not blind. Critical but loving.”

We need more roll-up-the-sleeves patriots and fewer partisan zealots and whiners. The currently fashionable verbal tick of saying “this country” allows a speaker to pretend to be a thoughtful observer or expert who is some how more believable by not being quite so personally involved. If we don't understand that we are personally involved, we are part of the problem.



If you intend to change a country you need widespread support. That is easier to do when we recognize that “winner take all” arm wrestling is a lousy way to address major issues. For example, if we are serious about improving our country's health and what we pay for it, we need to find more common ground with each other. Significant longstanding change usually requires more than a slim margin of majority support, whether in Washington D.C., our State legislatures or our local communities.

Health and healthcare reform is a minefield of competing values and biases. Most Americans support the need for reform but only if it is done their way. Progress has been slowed because the second best option for most of us is to do nothing. Some of us feel that individuals need to have some responsibility for their behaviors; while others see this as “blaming the victim” of cigarette, alcohol and food industry advertisements. High deductible health insurance makes for more responsible consumers or is just a way for employers to shift costs to employees? Advocates for clinical “best practices” continue at odds with those against “cook book” medicine and care plans.

There is no one “right” answer to any of the above and related conflicts. Sustainable solutions require common ground to be found in both public and private arenas. We will get there more quickly if we understand that while many of us have strong beliefs, we are all intimately part of one country. America is a country that benefits from the energy of much diversity, including the diversity of political beliefs.

The challenge of helping our country achieve the health it deserves requires a higher level of cooperation than any of us have yet experienced. This is true in Washington; this is true in our communities. The Institute of Medicine is our country’s highest medical authority. In their report, *Quality Through Collaboration: the Future of Rural Health*, they make a very critical point: “Strong leadership will be needed to achieve significant improvements in health and health care in our communities. Comprehensive community-based efforts will require extensive collaboration, both between stakeholders within the health care sector, and between health care and other sectors.”

Cartoonist Walt Kelly’s most famous cartoon (not the one above) was done for Earth Day in the early 1970s. Pogo, speaking about trash strewn in his beloved Okefenokee Swamp, says “we have met the enemy and he is us.” I think he had it right.