Divining Sarah

More than any other unsuccessful candidate for vice-president of the United States, Sarah Palin has established herself as a potent force in American politics. Selected by Time Magazine as one of the world's 100 most influential people, she is a Tea Party favorite. Although a majority of Americans remain skeptical about her qualifications to be president, she is a frontrunner for the Republican nomination in 2012. This week, she's burnishing her credentials with a humanitarian mission to Haiti.

Palin exemplifies the "celebrification" of American politics in the 21st century. She knows how to stay at center stage while steering clear of serious scrutiny of her views. She's a commentator for Fox News -- and a speaker at Tea Party rallies. Her first book, Going Rogue, made it to the best-seller lists. Her "reality" TV show, Sarah Palin's America, debuted this fall on TLC. And now, with America By Heart, she is casting herself, once again, as the spokesperson of the "real people" in our country. The men and women who pay the bills have "awakened," she writes, and are demanding nothing more - but nothing less - than a return to the principles "that made our country great: keeping our government limited, our markets free, and our families strong."

It's easy to lampoon -- and lambast -- America By Heart. In a belated response to Katie Couric, for example, Palin presents herself as a voracious reader, not only of inspirational books, like Charles Stanley's How To Reach Your Full Potential For God, but of abstruse and abstract treatises on American political development. She provides comically inadequate -- and misleading -- summaries of them. J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's Letters From An American Farmer, written in 1782, she tells us, is "full of truths that all husbands and fathers would recognize, such as the peace and joy that wives (!) and children bring." The discussion of "our propensity to govern ourselves" without the direction of the federal government in the first volume of Alexis de
Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, she opines, without mentioning his concerns about cultural mediocrity and the tyranny of the majority, is "particularly meaningful today."

Palin also indulges in distortions -- and untruths -- about the "shameful tendencies on the left" in modern America. She deems environmental regulations, Obama's stimulus package, health care, and income taxes unconstitutional violations of the Tenth Amendment, which reserves "to the States or to the people" all powers not delegated to the federal government.

Critics of Arizona’s recent statute giving law enforcement officials enhanced authority to interrogate suspected illegal aliens, "including members of the Obama administration," she claims, treat the legislation, along with the war in Iraq, "as a sign of the inherent badness of America." These same folks, she insists, are trying "to convince our kids that hard work isn't necessary anymore"; trying to convince their parents that "the purpose of government -- the purpose of America -- isn't to promise equal opportunity but to produce equal outcomes"; and trying to assure everyone that if we all "just magically had the same number of material possessions, we'd all be happy."

There's nothing new in *America By Heart*. And Palin's politics is, well, Paleolithic. Nonetheless, as with many celebrity productions, her book is, at times, compelling. It's instructive and important, it seems to me, to look behind the curtain to figure out why.

Palin understands, intuitively, that Americans don't know much about politics; don't like politicians; are more pragmatic, result-oriented, and restless than ideological. No matter what their level of education and income, they gravitate toward ideas and policies that address their emotional agendas. And so, Palin is personable and personal. She talks about Todd (her dog-sledding husband), Track (the Iraq War veteran), Trig (the Down Syndrome "gift from God"), Bristol (the teenage mom), and Levi Johnston (the apostate), as if they are your next door neighbors (or characters on The Hills). She provides glossy color photos of herself greeting soldiers at Fort Bragg and Fort Hood; shooting a caribou to feed "my kids healthy, clean, organic wild protein;" and of Todd giving baby Trig "a bottle break."

Palin simplifies. She sentimentalizes. She celebrates American "exceptionalism." She is unfailingly optimistic about its future. Let's face it: like Ronald Reagan, Palin is effective in using the concepts of family, faith, flag, and freedom to frame the issues.

Liberals can -- and should -- take a few pages from her playbook. Obama, for example, might have personalized the health care debate, by appearing with terminally-ill patients denied coverage because of pre-existing conditions, instead of standing on the sidelines while right-wingers denounced "death panels," and playing Hamlet about an abstraction, "the public option." He might have visited the home of a single mom, thrown out of work through no fault of her own, to dramatize the impact of Republican resistance to extending unemployment benefits. To quash rumors that he's a closet Muslim, the president might speak out about how prayer and faith sustain him - and see to it that cameras capture him emerging from church services, with his family in tow.

As Drew Westen, a frequent contributor to the *Huffington Post*, has suggested, if liberals want to spur Americans to act they must first stir them to feel, by constructing "master narratives" grounded less in the language of rational utility than in appeals to positive and negative emotions, including anger, anxiety, fear, survival, strength, and connection to kin. If liberals don't win the hearts of Americans, they're not at all likely to win their minds.