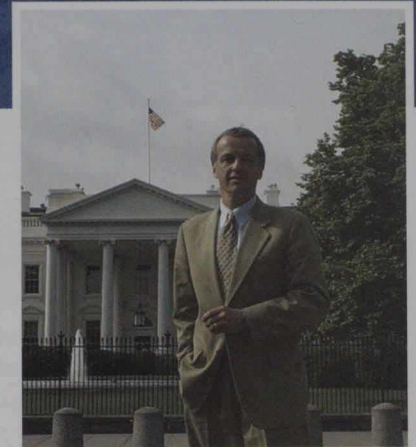


# AMERICA'S CHANGING FABRIC

Frank Koller is U.S. correspondent for CBC Radio News, based in Washington, D.C. From 1985 to 1998 he covered Asia, reporting for the CBC from nearly every country in the region. In the U.S., Koller has covered everything from the 2000 voting recount crisis and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City, to the recent election, which he provides perspective on here.



photos: courtesy of Frank Koller

Two poets.

Two hundred miles apart.

Two different worlds?

Dennis Williams lives in Neosho, Missouri, a small town in the Ozark Mountains. When he's not writing poetry for the Missouri Cowboy Poets Association, he builds antique chuckwagons with his wife, Donna.

Two hundred miles north, Michelle Boisseau teaches poetry at the University of Missouri in Kansas City. Boisseau is an established figure in the U.S. literary world, with dozens of national awards as evidence.

As I spent a year travelling across the United States covering the battle for the presidency, my meetings with these two poets encapsulated what the election was about—and foretold its outcome.

Relaxing in a lawn chair behind his farm workshop, Dennis Williams spoke of his support for President George W. Bush, using words like sincerity, trust and faith. Williams was far from happy with everything Bush was doing—at home or in Iraq—but overall, he felt the President was “handling ticklish situations quite well.”

Sitting on a kitchen chair in a house under renovation, Michelle Boisseau said she was “trying hard” not to be so angry about Bush. “Like a lot of people who read a lot

... I'm extremely unhappy about where the country's going ... among my friends, people who've read history, we think of Nazi Germany.” She never uttered John Kerry's name until I did.

Since the controversial 2000 election, much has been written about a so-called “divided America.” Red versus Blue states. Values in collision.

John Kenneth White, of Catholic University in Washington, D.C., put it nicely for me: the U.S. is divided between “those who like their morality absolute ... and those who like their morality writ small.”

But something else I saw at play in my two poets and across the country led me to believe early on that Bush would win again. (Canadian friends and colleagues worried I'd been drinking Republican Kool-Aid.)

Since September 11, the U.S. has been a country at war. Sons and daughters are dying in a conflict with no clear end in sight, a fear shared by both Republicans and Democrats. But even as Americans fiercely debated what should be done, there was a widespread yearning for more “normal” times. That most-human yearning can co-exist alongside and, I believe, even override passionate feelings about policies and philosophies. And Bush satisfied that yearning more than Kerry did.

One can argue that both campaigns exploited and distorted important public issues. But given U.S. society in 2004, Bush—not Kerry—had more “normal” on his side: opposition to gay marriage, support for troops under fire, support for “giving people back their money” (i.e. tax cuts).

And normal is comfortable. Of course, normal can change—and be changed. Sometimes for the better. Sometimes, as Bruce Cockburn wrote, “the trouble with normal is it always gets worse.”

The key to this election was that George W. Bush—and not John Kerry—provided a majority of Americans with a sense of comfort in uncertain times, even though many blamed Bush for the uncertainty!

Canadians need to accept that this seeming contradiction is now, post-9/11, stitched into the warp and woof of the U.S. psyche.

Michelle Boisseau's anger at Bush echoed loudly across the country. So did her lack of passion for Kerry.

Echoing louder (51 percent to 48 percent—just enough, as it turned out) were the comments of Dennis Williams's wife Donna in Neosho: “I think George Bush is the kind of guy I could invite over for coffee and chew the fat with...with John Kerry, I never get that feeling.”

Comfort. 🍁

CBC Radio correspondent Frank Koller: George W. Bush provided a majority of Americans with a sense of comfort in uncertain times