Let Hurricane Sandy be our tipping point toward a better America.

First, we're all in this together. As the wind strengthened and the hurricane neared, the political negativity and hostility waned. There's nothing like a common adversary to unite us, even a benign atmospheric one. It wasn't just that Sandy wreaked havoc on campaign plans. It's that both presidential candidates began to act more like governors than ideological opponents beholden to a spectrum of groups. Watching them gave me more faith in America's potential than all the bickering I've been forced to hear. Apparently, when push comes to shove we can work together because we must.

Second, a picture is worth a thousand words. The satellite images showed a white, counterclockwise pinwheel of clouds just like every other hurricane I've seen -- except for its size. With what the pundits are calling a wingspan a thousand miles across, Sandy was two to three times larger than typical. Keep in mind that one of the most robust predictions of climate change theory is that extreme events will be more powerful, whether this unprecedented storm or last summer's unprecedented drought.

Let this pinwheel become a pinup to move us toward a saner, safer, smarter future. A cultural shift similar to what I remember happening after earthlings got a chance to see our spherical, cloud-gauzed, green-swathed living planet from space. I refer to the famous earthrise photo taken from the moon during the Apollo 11 landing in July 1969. It helped launch the most potent phase of the American environmental movement, which centered on pollution and wilderness. Let the new pinup energize a third phase already underway, one focused on a sane energy policy and policy adaptations to the good and bad things of climate change.

Third, some recommended reading. During the hurricane I kept thinking of a pair of books that ought to be hinged together as Part I and Part II of a larger work. The word diptych comes to mind. It's a pair of images hinged to fold inward for protection. In this case, the problem and the solution we're now facing.

My diptych consists of two books: "The Control of Nature," by John McPhee and "America the Possible," by James Gustave Speth. Read the first till you weep with relief, having realized that control of nature remains an illusion. Read the second until you smile, knowing that the planetary wisdom it promulgates can be a more important part of the future.

I've recommended "The Control of Nature" to every student I've taught since it was published in 1989. Its two main conclusions are pretty simple. First, we can't control nature. Second, we persist in believing that we can. That we can live or build directly in harm's way. That our engineers can protect us. That our emergency response systems will work and that endless quantities of government money will be there to pay for the cleanups. We delude ourselves, even when everyone is doing his or her best.

Speth's latest book is just out. He's a wounded veteran of the environmental wars. Trained as a lawyer, he spent a lifetime working within the law with a special expertise in climate change policy. His antagonist was the corporatocracy currently running the United States through high-pressure lobbying and campaign contributions to elected beholders. Having realized that working within the law got him hardly anywhere on this issue, he decided to follow Henry David Thoreau's example and break the law in an act of civil disobedience.
His book is a readable prescription for the future that's actually possible. His message is clear. A new political economy is coming, and will eventually win the day. One that is more democratic, sustainable and, in a word, better for us all.

Let me be specific. (1) Politics need not be so petty. (2) Pin Sandy up. (3) Mandate and provide incentives for a retreat from the shore. (4) Support global carbon reductions. (5) Nature rules. (6) Democracy and dollars should not be the same.