

SUBJECTS YOUR MOTHER TOLD YOU NICE PEOPLE NEVER DISCUSS: POLITICS, SEX, AND RELIGION

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By
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Will Sibley has flattered me by suggesting that you may be interested in opening the October Term of the Club in this presidential year with some observations from a former practitioner of the Black Arts of Politics. While his judgment in this respect is suspect, I do welcome the chance to share with you some remarks on the "silly season" in this year of Newspeak.

My philosophical theme is drawn from that wise and popular philosopher, Lucy in the Peanuts comic strip. Lucy tells Charlie Brown that on the "ship of life" some passengers have their deck chairs facing the bow to permit them to see where they are going. Others face the stern so they can see whence they came. "On the ship of life, Charlie," she asks, "which way is your chair facing?" He replies: "I can't seem to get my deck chair unfolded." In the 1984 elections, "I can't seem to get my deck chair unfolded." (This will enable our light-hearted secretary to write: "Art Brooks took as his theme that he was confused and proceeded to prove it.")

I should advise you that as an expert on politics I rank, on the basis of my past successes, with certain more prominent and equally luckless experts of the past. Simon Newcomb, for example, who predicted that "Flight by machines heavier than air is unpractical and insignificant, if not utterly impossible." Or the expert in public taste at Decca Records who, in 1962, turned down the Beatles with the observation "Groups of guitars are on the way out." Or poor Dr. John Lightfoot, vice chancellor of Cambridge University who announced that Heaven and Earth were created all together at the same instant, on October 23, 4004 B.C., just before the publication of Darwin's Origin of the Species. I suppose in this light I should predict: There is no way a nice man like Walter Mondale could lose the election.

Because, in politics, I have found myself rather regularly on the losing side of campaigns and issues, as part of my "midlife Crisis" I have re-examined the whole concept of "success," taking my approach from the work of one Stephen Pile who claims to be head of the Not-Too-Terribly-Good-Club of London. In his seminal work *The Incomplete Book of Failures*, he writes:

"Success is overrated. Everyone craves it despite daily proof that man's real genius lies in quite the opposite direction.

Incompetence is what we are good at--it is the quality that marks us off from the animals and we should learn to revere it."

Ever since the Fifties, I have been just behind the popular movements of the times. As Russell Baker observed in Sunday's paper in describing the nuances between the traditional milquetoast and the current "wimp":

"I was slow catching up with the word 'wimp'. Why bother? That was my attitude. It was just something else that kids said."

"I'd spent too much time already trying to keep up with things that kids said. It was always time wasted. By the time I'd learned what the latest kid saying was, kids had stopped saying it. "

"Then if I said it some kid would say 'dig the old fellow in the antique socks' which was something kids said for three days in the summer of 1951."

In the Fifties, I discovered that I could be equally inoffensive to everyone with strong ideas and therefore perfectly popular and held in esteem as a leader. In the sixties, I struggled to be part of the "radical chic" and wound up thoroughly despised as a "liberal." I was getting the hang of that around 1975, when everyone was being perfectly selfish "finding" themselves and forgetting about everyone else. I supported Morris Udall when it turned out the country was ready for Jimmy Carter. And just as I'd convinced myself that problems were more complex than I figured, that ours was an economy of scarcity, that small was beautiful, and that "malaise" was the watchword, along comes Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter "with a macho twist." Forget about "complexity," "scarcity," and "malaise." (In fact, forget "problems" altogether.) The public wants to hear about Growth and Optimism, and the New Patriotism, a gentle and kind Do-it-yourself society at home and a tiger abroad with Church and Wealth "good" and Poverty and Scarcity "bad," with the "old values" of the Fifties: "family, flag, and religion" rehabilitated and restored to their proper places in the Pantheon. As George Will has observed: "Reagan is our past speaking to us, and we want to remember with him." And by some aberration of the public mood, of all the groups in our society, only the poor and voters over 65 have not signed off on this euphoric retreat to the simple virtues of another day.

I suppose I should feel good about America, capture the upbeat spirit of our triumphant Olympians, rejoice in the re-emergence of American Macho in the New Patriotism, learn, like George Bush, to look "flinty" so as better to be able to "arm-wrestle" with the proponents of a government of "fears and limits," riding with our President into the sunset with New Optimism. But I can't seem to get my deck chair unfolded.

You see, that is where I was in 1950, when I was elected President of South Orange Junior High School. That is where I was in 1953, when I was elected President of Columbia High School in Maplewood, New Jersey. And I ask you, where was Ronald Reagan then? I'll tell you where he was. While I was keeping law and order in the lunchroom, battling the proposals of dangerous pinko-radicals and com-sympy for a smoking room right in the school and advocating "citizenship education classes" and "inter-school assemblies" to improve our understanding about democracy, he was traveling around the country attacking the God-fearing Republican Congress, that's what he was doing. And he was doing it on behalf of the Meat cutter's Union and our unmentionable, in my town anyway, haberdasher-turned-President, Harry S. Truman. While I was campaigning for office with what our school paper called "good taste and fairness" and praying right in the school, he was

going around in a mood of petulism and pessimism complaining that "Social Security benefits have been snatched away from almost a million workers," that "tax education bills have been passed to benefit the higher brackets of income" and that "millions of children have been deprived of the milk once provided through the school lunch program." (While we never knew it was a handout, our teacher stored it on the radiator anyway.) And he tried to get us to worry--yes worry-- about someone with the phony-sounding name of "Smith L. Carpenter" who he had "read about the other day." It seems, he said, that Mr. Carpenter retired some years ago thinking he had enough money saved up so that he could live out his last years without having to worry. But he didn't figure on this Republican inflation which ate up his savings and so he's gone back to work. "Mr. Carpenter," he said, "was 91 years old." A likely story.

To this I say: "Phooey" (this word was used in 1952 for two days in July). I refuse to move away from where I have been. I have, after all, learned something in 48 years beating my brains out to keep up. Society has changed since the Fifties and sooner or later I predict the voting public will choke on the "soothing syrup" handed out so freely by our President. Just as in his party there are the young turks, "populist-conservatives," biding their time waiting for their chance, so, too, in my party there is a new generation of leaders for whom the assassination of John Kennedy, the war in Vietnam, and Watergate are the seminal, formative events, a group in both parties which knows that, in 1984, "you can't go back."

Which brings us to a few observations about the curious throw-back issue of religion in politics and the related issue of sex and politics, subjects which your mother told you, nice people should never discuss in public.

If memory serves, religion has not been an overt issue in the presidential campaigns of modern times, although it surfaced subtly in the 1960 campaign on the question of papal influence on the presidency. And in my view, politically, it is a loser in the 1984 election. Some 60% of the American people are both critical of Jerry Falwell's support of the President and opposed to the constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion. By a margin of 12 points (almost the difference between Mondale and Reagan) the American people oppose the constitutional amendment on prayer in the public schools. Even evangelicals are opposed by five points to the former and favor the latter by only three points. I just don't think there are as many Southern Christian Evangelicals who believe with Falwell that Reagan and Bush are "God's instruments for rebuilding America" (in Falwell's words at the Republican Convention) as there are those both North and South who believe that this is none of Government's business. Some 70% in fact believe that it is not fitting and proper for religious leaders to urge their church members to vote for specific candidates. I believe we are a more tolerant society and, at the same time, a society that believes even in 1984 that some things are best left alone. Most Americans would be surprised, with Walter Mondale, to find that God is a Republican. I can assure you that the best Republican politician of my lifetime, with whose boosterism and chicanery I heartily disagreed while I served in Columbus, would surely have "gone to the weeds" on these issues. To paraphrase Jim Rhodes: "That dog don't hunt."

Religion as an overt issue in the campaign, then, in my judgment is a loser. But is it totally irrelevant? Religion of all kinds is on the rise in America. It reflects the pluralism of our society not its orthodoxy. Its judgments do and should affect the question of who you vote for. It is, rather, the singling out of Abortion and School Prayer, the former, too private, too controversial, and too

important and the latter too inconsequential to risk offending sincerely held opposing views. These religious issues have become code words for Sexism and Intolerance. And the use of the spirited support for these issues by the Republicans in particular offends our sense of fairness; it seems to be a kind of moral McCarthyism," a sense that a "determined band" as John Bucananan of Alabama is raising doubts about people's faith. "They are reaching for Government power to impose their own beliefs on other people."

Finally, I want to talk about "sex" as a factor in the campaign in a little different sense, returning to Russell Baker's confusion over "wimps" and "milquetoasts." Popular writers, among them Barbara Ehrenreich and Jane O'Reilly writing in the Plain Dealer, have noted that the blatant macho of the Reagan-Bush ticket (Reagan offering to arm-wrestle and Bush describing his debate with Ms. Ferraro as his attempt "to kick some ass") really marks a shift in public values to the "right (i.e., away from "wimp" toward "macho") and is an expression of growing private feelings that the Women's movement has "gone too far." In this view of the public mores, Mondale is left home washing the dishes, a sincere wimp victimized by self-actualization of the liberated woman. And in this scenario, Ms. Ferraro as the "first" is carrying a huge societal burden, to prove she is a woman who can handle the job, prepared, as she was, essentially during the recent past as a product of at least a symbol of the women's movement. I believe that there is a danger here that, as with school prayer and abortion, the President's advisors may again have miscalculated the depth and breadth of the changes that have taken place in the past twenty years, changes that led to the disappearance of the nuclear family, the emergence of the two-career family, and the increasing presence of the women in various roles formerly male dominated. Witness the local elections here where, especially in judicial and legislative races, women have fared extremely well as women, and have now moved into the mainstream of public life, with the help of an emerging Women's vote.

I suggest to you that every thoughtful observer of the political scene and every public figure these days should have at least a loose understanding of six basic (to use a fairly sexy Newspeak term) "restructurings" going on in our society of the Eighties, which in most cases take us light years away from the Norman Rockwell Saturday Evening Post America of the Fifties, from the days when TV showed Wally and Beaver goofing around all day instead of mowing the lawn; trends which will form or shape the course of American history, no matter who is President. (These formulations come from John Naisbitt of the Yankleovitch organization but are more or less confirmed by most trend watchers.) (My advisors have "drenched me" in statistics.)

1. The change from a National economy to an integrated Global economy--a basic re-division about who will make what. Electronics will become the number one industry in the world, replacing the autos--already we have lost the edge to others in steel, autos, machinery, and apparel.
2. The change from an industrial to an "information" society. In 1950, 65% of our work force was industrial, now 27%; the information/knowledge component then was 17%, now almost 60%. The number one occupation now is "clerk," replacing laborer and farmer. Union strength in 1950 was

32%, now 19% and in an "irreversible decline." Access to the economy by new firms is much easier, less capital intensive. In 1950, there were 93,000 new firms; today, some 500,000.

3. From a centralized to a decentralized society. Just as depression/industrialization led to centralization in business Life Magazine disappeared, but in the same year 300 special purpose publications appear (now some 4,000) Network TV declines as cable increases.
4. From a nuclear family oriented society to a working household society. The nuclear family, as celebrated by Reagan rhetoric represents about 7% of all households.
5. From the North to the South, some 85% of the growth in the country however measured, occurred in the South in the seventies--more people now live there than in the North and low fertility rates and an aging population in the North accentuate the trend.

This is the real world of 1984. It is a more complicated society, a little painful and uncertain around the edges and surely a richer society, a more creative society and a, more interesting society.

Add to these more or less prosaic descriptions of 1984, the observations of serious men and women contrasted by George Orwell's vision with the world as it is. With great license I summarize several acute observations this way. The irony of Oceania's tyranny was its acceptance by the "Proles" who at any time could have risen in righteous indignation to destroy the system; but, instead, there was an acquiescence in the destruction of their "private worlds." This is why "1984" still presents, in the words of Francis Allen, the former dean of my law school, "an urgent message" for the public policy of modern pluralistic states, the message that people "must act to preserve and protect these private worlds in the face of growing technological intrusion. Government is regarded as an active antagonist to the preservation of the private world. But we see in pornography, the role of religion, especially the Christian religion, in public life, and the current debates over abortion, the protection of society from criminal intrusion by strengthening the hands of law enforcement, a disquieting spirit of compromise in the struggle to preserve private worlds against the intrusions of public orthodoxy. We have the aggressive campaigns from the "fight," not seeking to change peoples view, but seeking to isolate themselves from the contaminations of abhorrent ideas, no matter how destructive their agenda may be "to the autonomy and privacy of persons committed to different values and perceptions." And there is some discouraging evidence that there is not a fundamental difference between the society in which the "telescreen" can be dimmed but never turned off and one in which persons who, because of "cultural constraints, loneliness, apathy, and a diminished sense of personhood," can never bring themselves to turn off the television. And perhaps there is not a fundamental difference between a society having government NEWSPEAK and one in which a good portion of the population has not been inculcated with language skills of

any sort, rendering them incapable of "autonomy" and of defending themselves "against the inroads of political propaganda and cultural imperatives into their private worlds."

CONCLUSION

It was little known and not long remembered that in December 1978, I addressed the city Club of Cleveland on the topic "Penury and Public Policy," which was both a modest defense of the \$5,000 pay raise the legislature had voted itself after the 1978 elections and my swan song as an elected member of the Ohio Assembly after two terms. It now seems fitting that I should have left office defending a thoroughly unpopular vote at a time when politicians ranked just below used car dealers and (God forbid) lawyers in public esteem.

I believed then and I believe now that service in public life is a high, if not distinguished, calling. I suspect that part of the reason that only 20% or so of the public have confidence in the work of the legislature and 80% or so of high school seniors believe that public officials lack integrity is that they are constantly fed the bizarre, the tawdry, and the incompetent doings of the politician and the legislature. In the clamor of the rivalry to compete with the shallow stupidity of the TV news, newspapers rush toward the simple-minded and farcical. The legislator from Fremont who made national news by proposing to sterilize a welfare mother, the legislator from Maumee who proposed to solve the energy problem by moving January and February to June and July. The straight news, it seems, is not news at all since "news" must apparently be played like a TV soap opera, in which good relentlessly struggles with evil through one-dimensional characters much larger or smaller than life, and generally loses. In the course of my service in Columbus, we sincerely contended with some of the larger issues of the day in an atmosphere of relative silence from the public and the media. And when the public apprehended that we were going to raise our pay from \$17,500 to \$22,500 a deep reservoir of venom and bile was tapped. "Giving a legislator a pay raise is like giving a thief a tip." "Legislators should be paid to stay home rather than spend time in Columbus, wreaking havoc." "Legislators are motor-mouth jerks who are extremely fortunate not to be boiling soap at Proctor and Gamble," and so on.

Without an interested, informed, and voting electorate, it seems to me that we will be much closer to surrendering in 1984, to "1984" and the loss of the pluralism and individual identity that has been so characteristic of our society.

Fortunately, through all the smoke and mirrors of the 1984 political season, it looks as if, as a result of "for" and "against" campaigns for voter registration, there is an upheaval of interest which may produce a turnout of 15 million voters more than in 1980. More than any time I can remember, except possibly 1960, voters are thoroughly persuaded that the election is about something and have taken a personal interest for or against one or another of the candidates. If I do get my "deck chair unfolded," I'm going to vote for the candidate who cares whether God is on his side but has the good taste not to tell us that she has told him who she is voting for.