

How Far We Have Fallen

It has been a long and sad evolution. Once upon a time, especially in the earliest days of our republic, presidents were at least presumptively learned. Arguably, Thomas Jefferson, who had based his Declaration of Independence on a genuinely intimate familiarity with Locke, Vattel, Hobbes, Grotius, Rousseau and Montesquieu, was the most learned of all.

Today, not a single candidate for the presidency, Democrat or Republican, would dare to identify a single one of these principal philosophic founders of American political thought. One of the announced candidates, Donald Trump, even takes an evident pride in his deep historical illiteracy. After all, Trump chastises us daily, he is very rich, and knows how to make enviably lucrative deals in real estate.

That should be evidence enough. Nothing else needs to be asked, we are warned. After all, no billionaire could be a buffoon. And any billionaire will viscerally understand world politics. So: *Just shut up and sit down.*

Why do we accept this crude and injurious public behavior? Why do we now expect so very little from a major presidential aspirant? How have we managed to stray so completely from maintaining even embarrassingly low intellectual standards for our presidential candidates?

We may return to Plato for guidance. In principle, at least, Plato's "Republic" endures as a touchstone of college freshman classes in Western civilization. Here, beginning students first read hopefully about a "philosopher king." This lofty figure of reason and righteousness was cast as an exemplary political leader – one who could deftly combine real learning with commendably virtuous governance.

What has happened to this potentially helpful model of

political leadership? To be sure, myriad promises notwithstanding, not one of the current candidates could ever hope to move us even inches beyond our insistently futile wars, or beyond the corollary perils of domestic terrorism. Looking ahead, moreover, these relentless perils could plausibly include biological or even nuclear forms of Jihadist assault against the American homeland.

There is also hypocrisy. Oddly, perhaps, while loudly proclaiming “exceptionalism” to the wider world, we Americans actually esteem our political candidates in direct proportion to the decipherable simplicity of their campaign promises. Nowhere, perhaps, are these brazenly vacant pledges more baseless and insidious than in the incessantly ritualistic calls for “victory” in one ongoing war or another, or in calls for “making America great again.” Always, such sordidly meaningless pledges are concocted entirely for exploitation. Always, they lack even a shred of serious insight or credible hope.

Every four years, *We the people* – we, who had once been nurtured by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s clarion call for *high thinking*, and by Henry David Thoreau’s complementary plea to “consider the way in which we spend our lives” – obediently reduce campaign judgments to a crass assortment of numbing clichés and empty witticisms. Whatever else one might say about the rapidly-approaching election, choosing a president will once again be fraught with starkly delusionary expectations and humiliating self-parodies.

Credo quia absurdum, intoned the Latin authors. “I believe because it is absurd.” Again and again, in our national elections, the celebrity politician draws huge audiences and generous donors in spite of (or because of?) an ineffable absence of substance. Always, in our childish national politics, less is more. The ideal candidate? He or she is the one with visibly less intellect, less stature, and, most assuredly of all, less courage.

In our sullied national politics of abundantly veneered résumés and blatant half-truths, whenever a popular candidate's spoken words seethe with an evident worthlessness, the crowd rushes to applaud. Mixing desperation with a self-imposed absence of memory, it generally nods approvingly, en masse, and then, after indelicately consuming even more chili, more hot dogs, and more chicken wings, solemnly swears to celebrate American exceptionalism. A bit later, in what would seem a largely involuntary obeisance to contemporary America's most deeply-rooted political beliefs, the people begin to anesthetize themselves yet again, ingloriously, this time with huge mountains of drugs, and with vast oceans of alcohol.

Is this any way to choose an American president? Is this a suitable American electorate from which to draw upon? Once upon a time, Jefferson had argued that democracy must rest upon an informed and responsible citizenry. Shall we now simply discount such clear advice altogether?

Once, many of our national heroes, including those who could read books, *by themselves* (not pre-digested by aides), were created by tangible achievement. Today, the successful American politician is fashioned almost entirely by manipulation and contrivance. Here, via glaringly complex and closely-intersecting systems of advertisement, an industry for profit effectively preempts any promising public choice. Now, beyond any reasonable doubt, our presidential aspirants are created by an openly shabby process, one that is intentionally refractory to both intelligence and virtue.

In electing a president, when will we Americans learn to look behind the news? When will we learn to acknowledge that our pitifully flimsy political world has been constructed upon ashes, and that ashes can mean something significant? Here is an answer.

Not until we learn to take ourselves seriously as persons.

Not until we begin to read and think seriously, with clarity and sincerity.

Not until we stop amusing ourselves to death, with grotesque, dehumanizing and corrupting entertainments.

Not until we begin to seek rapport with genuine and universal feelings of mutuality and caring.

Not until we can restore all levels of education to the dignified grace of real learning. For now, the life of the mind in America reveals a short and skeletal existence, even in our universities.

In principle, all this can happen, but only after personal meanings in America are firmly detached from a ubiquitously vulgar commerce. Paradoxically, in the very midst of our cherished democratic freedoms, we Americans are still held captive, not by any physical chains, but rather by utterly consuming fears of exclusion or not fitting in.

Unsurprisingly, Plato's conspicuously high standard of political leadership remains out of America's reach. Still, it may serve to remind us just how far we have managed to descend from original national expectations and just how far we now need to advance in order to meaningfully rescue and restore the imperiled American republic. To be certain, no one can reasonably expect that Donald Trump or any other candidate could become another Thomas Jefferson, but we ought still hold these current presidential aspirants to at least some minimal standards of historical acquaintance and general learning.

This shouldn't really be too much to expect.

First published in