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How Politicians Behave Counts, Too

I knew from the beginning that I wanted to set aside one session to discuss that which drives politics forward—or in some cases, backward—politicians. In a democracy, we cannot do without them, even when they are contemptuous of the office to which we have elected them; even if they deceive us or mislead us; even when they take us citizens for granted; even when they become expendable; there is always more where they come from.

This is not, however, a fair assessment, for there is likely a great deal of honor and integrity, perhaps, in many of our elected officials, just that it is always the bad apples that make the headlines. Since we seldom learn about politicians' good deeds, mostly because the news media regards it as boring, citizens are left to judge our elected leaders on the basis of much criticism by the opposition and whatever news bits the media puts out.

I tend to follow politics, not because of my academic background, which should be a good enough reason, but on account of the high expectations I have of those who represent us, precisely because they represent us. After all, elected officials act on our behalf to manage the affairs of government. Millions of citizens extend our politicians a valuable commodity—our trust—regardless of whether we have voted for them or not. Therefore, it is not only important to know how our elected officials vote on the issues. Character, how they behave while in office, seems just as vital.

Our form of government rests on a premise that is all too obvious and yet too often forgotten. Our government is structured on the basis of separation of powers with a myriad of checks and balances because, as James Madison so aptly reminded us, men are not angels.

Were the Founding Fathers so lenient of human flaws that all they thought the system required to function properly were specific safeguards? Were they so dismissive of character being one of those safeguards? Of course, I don't think that was the case. I think they thought that it would be more prudent to establish

procedural safeguards in case men either refused to become angels or found out—once elected into public office—that they could not. In their minds, what was essential to establishing a practical government was the format. Worthy character, while not necessarily anticipated, would be added value if it showed itself as a personal trait among our elected officials. Ultimately, if the safeguards were to fail, the Founding Fathers relied on the character of the citizenry (virtue) to hold politicians accountable. After all, character, although a noble quality to have in private life, is crucial in politics because politics in a democracy is about trust.

If character is about trust, then character must be closely related to ethical behavior. Shouldn't then we regard as a truism that if politicians represent us, such representation ought to reflect the basic values we adhere to? With these thoughts in mind I began the evening's discussion.

“Tonight is all about politics, more specifically it will be about political behavior, what's acceptable and unacceptable; what we ought to expect and not to expect from our elected officials.

“In order for us to evaluate those who represent us, we need to come up with realistic criteria, reasonable guidelines that may help us to hold account-able those who serve us at the time we elect them. For example, the easiest one relates to the law: we expect that any public official who breaks the law with impunity be held accountable for his behavior, not only in court, but at voting time.

“I asked several of you to develop a set of reasonable expectations that voters might accept from our elected officials without much difficulty. These expectations should stem from principles and values that for the most part are widely accepted as part of our political tradition.

“So, at this time, Ms. Bynum, please go ahead and tell us which expectations you and Mr. Dickerson have selected, and we'll take it from there.”

“You asked us to be fairly reasonable; however, we have to be mindful that we're talking about positions of public trust. We realized that there's always a certain amount of trust and responsibility placed in any employee whether in the private or public sectors. Nonetheless, the level of trust and responsibility extended to someone in public office, particularly at the national level, is simply overwhelming. Let's face it, the scope of their decisions directly affect our 300 million citizens, and indirectly hundreds of millions more around the world. Given the significance of these positions, I hope we all recognize that what's reasonable in terms of the expectations of our elected officials may now have to be *reasonably* enhanced.

“The first expectation that came to mind was *Integrity*. By this we mean incorruptible honesty in the eyes of the law and behind the law; that is, when

the law is not looking. Integrity to the point of not even giving the appearance of wrongdoing or misbehaving; not linking oneself to revolving door types of associations; keeping friendship and family at arm's length when it comes to the business of government.

“Integrity means playing by the established rules, not subverting them, even for the sake of ideological or party gain. Integrity also means leading by example, something many of our politicians don’t even consider! Yet, if we’re constantly demanding sports figures to be role models, how can we ask anything less of our elected officials?”

“Greed, as we know, has been a constant temptation of politicians, and one that requires ever personal vigilance. Money, says that old adage, is the milk of politics, and there are times when politicians behave as if they own a personal dairy business. In politics, money is like power, and both are ingredients of the political process, so it’s not as if they simply can be turned down.

“But, we thought of a rule of thumb that may guide public officials while doing the people’s work, and which ought to keep greed in check: the elected official should ask himself if the wealth, perks, privileges or vast sums of money he or she—or their relatives and friends—acquire or are planning to acquire, even through legitimate deals, would be possible had it not been for the connections they make while in office. After all, the primary mission of an elected official should be that of seeking the well-being of all citizens, nothing else. It most certainly ought not to include benefiting or making side deals on their spare time to enhance their personal wealth.”

“Do you mean to tell me that even when the money is legally obtained because the law allows it, it should be turned down?” asked Mr. Edson. “What about if the elected official believes additional income is needed to pay for his or her children’s education or to set aside for retirement?”

“Being elected into national office is a full-time job, Michael,” said Ms. Bynum. “So, if anyone feels that the income and the perks he or she receives are not enough to afford them the standard of living they desire, they should quit office and do something else.”

“What about this, I recall that some time ago a Senate member was accused of having received perks that involved a conflict of interest,” remarked Mr. Brandon, “and he sort of attempted to justify his behavior by saying that he was not *some sort of goodie-goodie*, meaning, I think, well, actually I don’t know what he meant to say. But that phrase stuck to me. Since they are politicians, I wonder whether not being a ‘goodie-goodie’ would be an adequate standard for a politician?”

“I think it depends to what standards we want to hold our politicians,” she said. “Do we want to set our expectations lever on *Low* or on *High*. I don’t think that he meant to say that politicians cannot be expected not to make mistakes—we all makes mistakes. I think he meant to say that people should expect politicians to suffer ethical slippages from time to time, perhaps

because of their work environment. In my book, anyone who comes into public office with this view doesn't belong in public office.

“Okay, next criterion, *Civility*,” continued Ms. Bynum. “This is easier to observe than to define, I think. For us, *Civility* means showing the necessary respect toward colleagues, particularly one's opponents, on account of their personal dignity, as well as because the public trust they hold. *Civility* means gentlemanly and lady-like behavior.

“*Civility* also requires having enough fortitude to abstain from returning a sizzling comment or a put-down while truly believing that doing so is not an act of weakness on one's part. *Civility*, I will add, is not about demeaning your opponent during an election through coarse and down-right nasty advertising. We can't emphasize this point enough. An election is the equivalent of competitive sports, thus it requires an equivalently sportsmanlike conduct, which interestingly enough all politicians publicly endorse, from Little League all the way to professional sports. It is an attitude politicians themselves expect of their own children. *Civility*, in our mind, is truly one unique ingredient that separates a distinguished public servant from being just another politician.

“Also, we thought of including *Conviction* as another criterion, but we were not sure. By conviction, we mean strength of belief; it definitely doesn't mean stubbornness. Conviction means having the courage to stand by one's values while remaining open-minded enough to alter one's position on the issues if new information merits it, and further, to have enough courage and humility to do so without fear of appearing wishy-washy or a flip-flopper. The problem we noticed in our discussion was that conviction of beliefs may or may not be a relevant expectation. Ultimately, it depends on how we define the role of an elected official; whether he or she chooses simply to represent or to lead.”

“Thank you Ms. Bynum,” I said. “You mentioned something that I think is quite significant: whether an elected official ought to represent his/her constituency or lead it. Could you or Mr. Dickerson expand a bit on this?”

“Gladly,” said Mr. Dickerson. “As a rule of thumb, whatever elected officials accomplish, how they behave, how they vote on the issues will be contingent upon how much leeway their electoral base will give them to operate. We know that, all things equal, the safer one's base of support the more freedom of action the politician will have to make his own decisions. If his base of support becomes fragile, he may have to follow his constituency or change their views if he desires to be re-elected. Within these parameters, I would like to outline two traditional models of representation in order to explain the function that *Conviction* plays in the behavior of politicians.

“We believe that, regardless of how much room the electorate grants them, all candidates for public office have the choice of whether to represent or to lead their constituencies.

“One method of representation is being a trusted *emissary* for the electorate; this type of public official gathers the views from his constituency and keeps a close reading of what his support base is likely to approve or reject in future votes or political stands. While on emissary assignment, the role of conviction of political belief becomes less significant. His primary duty is to do the will of the people as interpreted by those who elect him.

“If we want to push it further, we might even say that someone who chooses the emissary style of representation doesn’t need to have much of a political conscience. If a new issue arises that didn’t come up during the election, the elected official checks with his base of support regarding how voters would lean on the issue and he would follow suit. The emissary’s primary objective for being an effective representative of the people would be to ensure his own self preservation; to stay in office. I would add that there may be two primary motives for political survival: to continue to be the voice of the electorate or to act in one’s self interest.”

“Mr. Dickerson, forgive me for interrupting,” said Ms. Vanhurst, “but what do you mean by self interest? I hear this term and, to me, it sounds as something ignoble when it applies to an elected official; actually, the words, *contemptible* and *unscrupulous*, even *pathetic*, come to mind.”

“I understand,” he replied. “The problem is that it’s quite difficult to distinguish between the emissary role and acting in one’s own interest. The emissary would bring dishonor to his position if he were to accept the trust of his electorate and then choose to do the opposite of what his supporters expected of him. Likewise, it would be dishonorable for him to disregard the views of those who elected him in order to engage in personal activity that has little or nothing to do with the trust that was extended to him.”

“Then, why someone without a political conscience would want to be elected to a position demanding so much responsibility and expectations other than to serve the people?” she asked, again.

“I think that we may want to address your question to our elected officials,” he replied with a grin. “Frankly, if someone were to be candid enough, it wouldn’t surprise me if, deep down, he or she would admit something like, ‘*We are essential cogs of the democratic process working to keep alive the dreams and values of our forefathers; or, it’s a job that needs to be done and someone’s got to do it.*’

“You’re suggesting that the emissary style responds to the whims of the electorate. If so, what happens if during a critical foreign or domestic political situation the people demand radical action?” Ms. Vanhurst kept prodding.

“You get the Iraq invasion, I guess,” Dickerson replied. “And, in time, if voters don’t like what they initially supported, you may very easily get an opposite reaction when the collective makes its will known through their

emissaries.”

“I see,” she replied to him. “So, in this equation, the people are the true masters while their elected officials are their public servants.”

“Yes, in the truest expression of the term *servant*,” he added. “Isn’t that the way it’s supposed to be?”

“Let’s go and discuss the other style of representation: the *leadership* model,” Dickerson continued. “This is far more demanding and precarious. For one, the leader doesn’t simply ask his electorate how they want him to vote. The leader must think thoroughly of an agenda. He or she identifies what he thinks are the most significant issues affecting the electorate, proposes specific solutions, explains his pros and cons in a very straightforward manner, and then proceeds to persuade the electorate of his views. The leader may even have to identify problems that are not visible to the electorate and tell voters that their solutions to some issues might not be the most practical or the right thing to do.

“Once elected the leader would act in a manner consistent with his stand on the issues. If new issues surface between elections, the leader would hold discussions with the electorate, listen to different opinions, research all the information available, and explain to the electorate how he plans to vote and why. The leader would then follow through and vote according to his conscience, even if the electorate becomes adamantly opposed to his stand.

“As we may gather, this individual needs to have a conscience—and convictions—for that is his primary working tool. As opposed to the *emissary* who depends mainly on polls, the *leader’s* chief objective is not self-preservation but being responsive to the needs of the electorate in accordance with the dictates of his or her conscience. His main concern is not losing an election but winning it on principles.

“His reelection campaign would be based on his public record and his explanation of how he stands on new issues. He would listen, discuss, and confront the electorate on the issues, but would not change his positions unless he was firmly persuaded that it was the right thing to do. Voters would hold the fate of the leader in their hands; so in the end, the electorate would still remain the Master. The only variation is that in this scenario the Public Servant serves in a very different capacity; he or she leads.”

“Mr. Dickerson, how would each style fare with regard to, say special interests?” I asked.

“I would say that the emissary style would have a propensity to lean on special interests. The true leader, naturally, needs funds, too, to finance his campaign, except that he would be mindful that he would not exchange his conviction or his values for campaign money. This might mean that he would have to work harder at soliciting funds, but then, he realizes that his greatest asset is his incorruptibility. If he sells his values, he no longer leads; he doesn’t even

follow the voters. Instead, he's pushed forward, he's dragged into doing what otherwise he wouldn't want to do. In short, he gives up his conscience."

"I see. Well, tell us, do we know how many elected officials there are or have been who would fit these molds?" I asked.

"I don't think there are any empirical studies that address this issue, sir," Dickerson replied. "Nonetheless, based on what you read in the media, I would guess that most modern day presidents have been far less leaders than what they themselves and others will admit. As far as members of Congress go, I would have to say that there's a lot of emissary style representation going on in American politics. I read an interesting analysis in the paper indicating how closely associated members of Congress are to public opinion polls. The story alluded to members of Congress who in response to low presidential ratings are less likely to follow the party line as they scramble for political survival. The article quoted a Republican pollster who stated,

*There's a relationship between the president's approval ratings and loyalty on Capitol Hill. For the president to promote his agenda, he has to use Congress ... but it's difficult to get out of the hole [the president's low ratings] when in fact your allies are also running for the hills.*¹

"The apparent need of enforcers, those with the pugnacity to demand the discipline, money or power to control Congress,² also points to the presence of the emissary role. This behavior suggests a lack of conviction on those who are all too willing to renounce their independence and whatever values they hold by succumbing to the constant threats of the leadership in order to survive. Interestingly enough, at times, the opposite will occur. Politicians in swing areas, fearful of their reelections, may put pressure on the leadership to adopt less radical positions that would increase their chances at the polls.

"Take the issue of Congressional corruption. The media indicated that following the Jack Abramoff revelations in 2005, House Republicans, fearing a backlash from voters, panicked and called for immediate reforms to do *what is ethically acceptable*, as then Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert said. However, once both Republicans and Democrats realized that the issue was not in the voters' radar, there was a change of attitude in Congress and lobbying reforms fell by the wayside, at least temporarily. Fear of political retribution by voters had passed.³

"In July 2006, however, following the defeat of former Christian Coalition director Ralph Reed on account of his relationship with Abramoff, House GOP leaders began once again to discuss the possibility of coming to terms with the Senate, particularly if other Republicans were indicted--as it happened in the case of Congressman Bob Ney from Ohio. Well, like magic Congress passed the lobbying reform bill, largely to provide political cover to candidates.⁴"

"Very interesting. Any other examples of the emissary style?" I asked.

“Actually, yes. There was this member of Congress from Arizona who felt that President Bush’s position on immigration policy would not favor him in his reelection, so he chose not to ask his president to campaign for him.⁵ Also, a senatorial candidate in Maryland who felt the same way and let it be known that he did not wish the president to campaign on his behalf. The motive in both cases was the same; to secure their re-election they hid from their leader without denouncing him in order to keep the best of two worlds, party affiliation and a semblance of independence.

“Let’s see, what else . . . Oh yes, a very candid admission of the emissary role comes from a first term senator from South Dakota: *This is partly a function of approval rating*, he said. *People [meaning politicians] pay attention [to polls] and start saying, ‘Let’s take a more independent tack.’ It is frankly self-interest, self-preservation.*⁶ Another article suggests, as one Republican from a swing district said, that, *Republicans, especially those in swing states, had no choice but to shift the emphasis of their war talk. ‘The Iraq issue is the lens through which people are looking at the federal government.’*⁷”

“Still another very visible example of emissary’s role was seen by the Democrats’ behavior on Iraq. We recall that a great number of Democrats in Congress, guided by the 9/11 turmoil, supported the invasion of Iraq. As events began to show that victory was becoming an elusive goal, the Democratic leadership began to oppose the Republican leadership and the war effort in preparation for Congressional elections in 2006. Many Democratic candidates running in 2006 were basically running against George W. Bush and the war rather than on their views of the issues. And then, one reads in the paper that, once they gained power in the House, Democrats began to put pressure on President Bush’s policies in Iraq in order to appease powerful anti-war lobbying groups.⁸

“And talk about the emissary lacking conscience, another story indicated that in 2007 the Democratic majority in the House had been seeking to induce members to support an ‘end-the-Iraq war’ funding bill by offering them pet projects they could carry back to their districts.⁹”

“What I see in all of these examples is a fear of losing their jobs,” expressed Mr. Brandon.

“And that’s precisely what the emissary should fear the most, losing his job, or becoming politically emasculated for not towing party line, in which case he no longer would be able to fulfill his most important function,” replied Mr. Dickerson.

“I think that the leadership style is far more dignified than the emissary style,” I claimed. “But, is the leadership style perhaps too idealistic? Is that why there are not too many true leaders?”

“Sir, I think that one significant reason lies in our political ethos; party politics,” said Mr. Dickerson. “Take Tim Kaine; when he was the governor of Virginia, gave us a sound answer as to why politicians are not allowed to

have strong convictions. *Politics is a team sport*, he said, as he urged Democratic colleague Joe Lieberman not to run as an independent, despite the fact that Kaine himself disagreed with Lieberman's opponent on important moral issues such as the war in Iraq!¹⁰

"But surrendering your convictions to the party sounds like selling your soul to the devil," exclaimed Mr. Edson.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Dickerson. "Let's face it, if by any chance members of Congress or presidents dare to go against the party because they happen to believe they should, they pay dearly. In the case of members of Congress, they might as well retire if their consciences take them far away from party positions because their initiatives will receive little if any support. Again, barring the exaggeration, it's like joining a gang; you plead loyalty to the gang, and better not commit treason."

"Okay, are there any other issues that you would like to present to us at this time?" I asked.

"Yes," said Mr. Dickerson. "I think we have to mention a most unusual practice: members of Congress treating the taxpayers' money as some sort of private foundation, except that the practice is not undertaken for philanthropic motives but out of self-interest, in most cases. I'm talking about pork, which, ironically, is an insulting term for the practice of earmarking specific funds for often insignificant home projects that members of Congress deliver to their constituency. It's not only a matter of the insignificance of the projects but the fact that they do it for the purpose of enhancing their political value, as a means to raise campaign contributions and to seek votes from grateful constituents.

"While there's nothing wrong with a member of Congress seeking to benefit his or her district or state, it's interesting that the method itself brings dishonor to those who practice it, along with admiration, tribute, esteem, and other accolades to the same individuals.

"Ms. Bynum and I have come to the conclusion that pork is shameful because it is self interested behavior masqueraded as political leadership and sensitivity. In most cases, funds are not appropriated on account of the projects' social significance or because of the politician's leadership skills in persuading his peers; pork is not even approved by the majority or the minority; it's simply introduced into an appropriations bill by those with the power to do so or as exchanges for political favors.

"The practice is extensive and has become a sort of *you-scratch-my-back, I'll-scratch-yours* deals, usually undertaken by emissaries when they can't show much in terms of leadership. We remember the infamous bridge to nowhere in Alaska or the \$700 million proposed railroad track in Mississippi after a new \$250 million track had been recently built. Or, the \$200 million earmarked by the former Speaker of the House to advance a road project in his home state

that, according to the media, led to a *fast \$2 million profit from dealing in land situated several miles from the proposed roadway.*¹¹ I can go on, but there were 13,012 of these deals by various members of Congress in one year alone, and it would take a long time to expose.”

“Hang on a second,” alerted Mr. Edson. “Could you at least tell us how it is possible for these members of Congress to get away with this practice? Don’t elected officials believe the projects themselves are significant? Why not present them to the entire body for approval?”

“One would think because, in part, some of the projects are so outrageous that what little shame there might be left in these individuals is enough to want the projects not to be exposed until after they have been approved,” replied Mr. Dickerson.

“That might be true,” said Mr. Radusky, “but the problem I see with this argument is that it ignores that such publicity of federal funds coming into a district is a bonanza in public relations for the member of Congress. What district or state would feel insulted after receiving millions of dollars in federal funds? I’d say, not too many, which is another reason why it’s so difficult to eliminate the practice and get rid of the incumbent who brings home the bacon. The dishonor lies in the emissary fully understanding the process and milking it for all he can. Along these lines, don’t you find the attitude of senators like Tom Coburn who are fighting against enormous odds to gain transparency in earmarks quite commendable?”

“I do,” said Mr. Dickerson. “Actually, these efforts are badly needed because although one would think that constantly being in the limelight would make politicians more cautious, but it doesn’t seem to help. These men and women flaunt their actions in public with some sort of daring political bravado that seems to say, *so what?*”

“Doesn’t that suggest that voters condone it?” asked Ms. Williamson.

“Well, yes, of course,” replied Mr. Dickerson, “but what can they do? Vote for an opponent who criticizes the incumbent for bringing home plenty of self-serving funds?”

“In that case, such behavior is reflected upon the voters as well,” exclaimed Ms. Williamson.

“Not necessarily,” he replied. “I’ll bet you that most of those voters who benefit from all that pork don’t know about the process; they only see the results.”

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“Thank you, Mr. Dickerson. That was quite informative.” I said. “At this time, I’d like to switch tracks. What would you say, how would you all react, if someone were to propose to make football a much rougher game? You know, make it dirtier; spitting, helmet to helmet contact, throw in nasty words about

one's mother, low-back blows, stepping on someone's face, kicking the guy who's down."

"Why?" asked Mr. Edson.

"To create more interest in the sport, to increase the number of spectators," I answered.

"But, I would think the opposite might happen," said Mr. Hunt. "I think that such behavior would detract from the athleticism of the sport itself. I don't know where you're going with this, sir, but if I want to see such spectacle, I would tune in those wrestling matches in which wrestlers hit their opponents with chairs and talk trash to each other. These are incredible athletes, but their wrestling skills quite often take a back seat to their antics."

"Wouldn't such antics increase the viewing audience, though?" I asked.

"It all depends on what type of spectators we're talking about. This type of wrestling match has its own following, but if such behavior were to happen in football, I think it would lead to a considerable decline in fans. Or, I would think that spectators would end up coming to see not the game of football but constant brawls. The fighting and the nasty behavior would become the centerpiece and the game itself would become secondary."

"What if we were to educate spectators to enjoy such behavior; instruct them into accepting it because they might be rewarded in some other ways?" I inquired.

"I don't get it, sir, may I ask what your point is this time?" asked Ms. Vanhurst.

"My point is, suppose we were to educate voters into becoming fond of, actually enjoying, political infighting, negative criticism that includes rudeness, deception, insensitivity, all on the assumption that, as the author of a book on political advertising states, [it] *would enrich the prospects for democratic governance*.¹² That's his main thesis regarding the advantages of negativity in political campaigns: *To stem this tide of disgust and help to forge a reevaluation of the merits of negativity in political campaigns*."¹³

"Why wouldn't Mr. Hunt's observations on football and wrestling be valid, too, in this case?" asked Ms. Bynum.

"I agree, one should think so," I replied. "However, the author provides empirical data to support much of his argument, and I think we ought to consider his proposition. He finds support for his view in a quotation from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, which he cites at the beginning of his book: *Truth ... has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners*, he writes.

"At the same time, the author believes that criticism of negativity is unfounded. He debunks a quotation by Tom Daschle in which the former senator attests that *Negative advertising is the crack cocaine of politics*.

"The way I see it, if *Civility* is something reasonable that we might want to expect from our politicians, it can't be only because we want them to be nice to

each other; there's got to be more profound reasons. Maybe not, but I think it's important to explore the question. Who would like to go first? Mr. Brandon."

"May I ask how the author defines negativity? Does he set any limits to this behavior?"

"Good question, Mr. Brandon," I said. "Always begin by defining the terms. By negativity, the author means any type of negative criticism, as opposed to positive or constructive criticism of one's opponent. Such criticism would focus on the issues or they could be personal. Normally, these criticisms would come in the form of attacks. In other words, we're not talking nice, sweet comments about one's opponent, but the equivalent of verbal assaults accompanied by supportive visual techniques geared to focus on the negative outcome of an opponent's policies or, as I said, in some cases, on the candidate himself.

"As to whether the author sets limits on negativity, that doesn't seem to be the case. Negative criticism, he says, could be spirited, mean, and vicious; could be entirely or partially truthful, or not. And, since he believes that there are no easy guidelines to suggest what type of behavior crosses the line, he issues no constraints whatsoever.

"He points out, for example, that during one campaign in the 1800s, one of the candidates referred to his opponent's wife as a *whore*.¹⁴ Since the author doesn't tell us whether the term was used to indicate the true profession of the candidate's wife so as to condemn such depraved conduct, or merely as an insulting remark, I have to assume that this is acceptable political behavior. As a matter of fact, the author justifies the use of negativity in this manner,

*Campaigns are not feel-good exercises.... The real issue should be whether or not candidates present the information in campaigns that is useful to voters. The tone of that information should be a secondary issue, at best.*¹⁵

"You said that the author provides empirical data, sir, but somehow I doubt that it's in support of his own personal view on the matter, correct?" asked Mr. Brandon. "One thing would be to provide evidence that negativity is alive and well or that it's effective; another would be to prescribe such behavior and suggest that there's nothing wrong with it, relying indirectly on empirical data. I mean, no amount of empirical evidence could ever validate normative behavior."

"Understood," I replied. "That's correct."

"Then, allow me, if I may, to take issue with the author's criticism of Senator Daschle's quotation first," said Mr. Brandon. "I'll admit that negativity can become the crack cocaine of politics, particularly when campaigns engage in distortions, name-calling, false innuendos and the like. However, I don't see any-thing wrong with more moderate, more civil type of negativity.

"As a matter of fact I see plenty that is right. An election is not only a matter

of competitive politics, of me winning a contest. The significance of what's at stake in an election merits that I as candidate inform citizens of what I consider the possible harmful consequences of my opponent's policies. Further, if my opponent has done something that is morally wrong, that should come out into the open, if it's relevant to the position one aspires to. In this regard, the author does bring out a good point, that negativity plays, and should play, an important role in political campaigns."

"Yes, but only insofar as we avoid making the mistake of confusing an empirical proposition with a normative one, which is what I think the author attempts to do," said Mr. Wasserman." In other words, negative campaigning may be quite effective, yet, we cannot conclude that it *ought to be* made the practice of politics."

"Agreed. Now, getting back to Mill's statement, it's possible that Mills' own characterization of what politics should be was the outcome of him being conditioned by what his experience had been at the time. The author, nonetheless, concludes that negative campaigning *ought and should* be accepted in our political system because it's effective, or because John Stuart Mill said so. That's where I think he errs."

"I agree," said Mr. Wasserman.

"Since you're both in agreement, tell us why, and tell us what you regard as being the proper way, and why." I said.

"I think the proper way, ultimately, will depend on one's values," replied Mr. Brandon. "But first, it's important that we distinguish between *how things are and how they should be*. It's quite possible that, at times, truth will only come out as the result of a rough process between combatants, which is to suggest that truth may involve something akin to war. Truth—ideological truth—we like to think, emerged out of World War II. But that doesn't mean that we have to go to war every time over issues; it doesn't mean that during an election I have to regard my opponent as a combatant fighting under a hostile banner. That's ridiculous!

"Aside of the set of criteria that Ms. Bynum presented, civility being one of them, there are human dynamics operating whenever we communicate with each other. Quite often, the more hostile I treat my opponent the more irrational I'm likely to become; the more likely I will attempt to smear my opponent or distort the facts, which may come back to haunt me, and the more liable I am to develop a mind-set that prevents me from seeing and thinking clearly. Further, candidates may not notice that hostility could end up breeding a sort of *I'm always right, you're always wrong* attitude. Is this the demeanor I want an elected official to assume once in office? Personally, No.

"In politics as well as in all instances of human communications the medium is not only the message; the medium may even alter the message! To say, to suggest, that the tone should be secondary to the message is equivalent to saying that it doesn't matter how one dresses for a job interview or how one

treats his peers or his relatives. Tone can project arrogance, humility, leadership; it can make a normal person sound like a weirdo—example, remember Howard Dean's public tirade during the primaries some years ago? Or it can make bravado look pretty silly, as when President George W. Bush thought he had accomplished the mission in Iraq.

"Well, it's no different in political campaigns" Mr. Brandon went on. "I definitely would pay as close attention to the tone of the information as to the issues themselves."

"But what about if a vicious and mean-spirited tone wins you the elections?" asked Mr. Edson.

"Sure, it can happen," interjected Mr. Dickerson. "The question is, why would we want to do that? It would be like allowing steroids and other illicit drugs in competitive sports. Toward what ends? No one is saying that there shouldn't be negative criticism of opposition candidates. As Mr. Brandon said, it's one's moral duty to alert citizens of the potential negative outcomes of the opponent's policies or even about his or her character, if done within acceptable boundaries of human decorum, as difficult as some may find it to define what these boundaries are. This, by the way, is one heck of an unfortunate statement to make about our society.

"Those who argue in favor of the 'anything is fair' rule in political campaigns likely don't see the potential negative outcome of this rule. They lose sight of the fact of how the media influences culture; the media not only conditions behavior, it creates new modes of behavior.

"Along with athletes and entertainment celebrities, politicians are the most highly profiled people in our culture. Are we suggesting that our politicians shouldn't be role model to citizens?"

"If meanness and truth distortions become acceptable in political campaigns, why wouldn't citizens to behave in the same manner as politicians? We have to be careful not to adopt the ethics of the jungle as our own."

"You bring forward an interesting point Mr. Dickerson," I said. "We all know that in sports there have been coaches who throw chairs, manhandle their players, cuss at them or ask their players to become hit-men against the opposition. And these have been very successful coaches, some of whom have won championships.

"At the same time, you have others who have also won championships while being role models for their players and the game. These coaches played the game as tough as anyone else, and they won; they are very honorable persons."

"If I may, sir," said Mr. Hunt. "All this sports talk makes me think about the Stalinist method of industrialization; it was very ruthless, but also very effective. However, Western style democracies were even more effective without being as ruthless. So, my question is, why choose the Stalinist method when you can rely on a more humane political system? Why choose to be a

ruthless coach when you can be John Wooden and still win?”

“Another question, what about the author’s view with regard to political campaigns,” I said. “According to the author, negativity without any limits ends up being favorable to voters because of the amount of information the process provides that other-wise might not have been made public.”

“Well, yes, the amount of information may increase,” argued Mr. Dickerson, “however, half of that information will be in the form of exaggerations, distortions, spins, one-sided points of view, and even deceptions. In the end, the public will need the assistance of some sort of FactCheck entity to sift through the information in order to see what truthful, what’s accurate and what’s not. One of these entities reviewed the 2006 mid-term elections had this to say about what they found:

An unprecedented barrage of advertising containing much that is false or misleading. We found examples of disregard for facts and honesty—on both sides—that would get a reporter fired in a heartbeat from any decent news organization. Candidates, parties and independent groups have faked quotes, twisted words, misrepresented votes and positions, and engaged in rank fear-mongering and outright fabrication.

Much of what we found went well beyond the bounds of honest advocacy, and would warrant dismissal for any reporter who tried to pass it off as an accurate news story. We believe reasonable citizens will also find these distortions to be unacceptable even in political advertising, where a certain amount of puffery is expected and tolerated. It’s one thing to present your own case in the best light and to point out the flaws in your opponent. But a lot of what we encountered was far from the truth.¹⁶

“I think that the example set by politicians themselves has contributed to the culture of political debate having degenerated the way it has,” replied Ms. Vanhurst. “It’s my impression that political activist organizations along with campaign managers and their candidates view voters as very simple-minded, highly emotional people who respond to sound bites and disturbing visual aids. Many of us are like that, preferring compressed, undemanding information because we are too laid-back to put up with lengthy interviews, or we are too ignorant of the political system to be able to understand more profound discussions of the issues.

“Look at how candidates manipulate voters. While candidates prefer to appeal to our emotions, they would never characterize themselves as emotional or as giving in to irrationality. They argue that presidents or members of Congress need to be mature, rational, compassionate, and emotionally stable; always in control, never allowing their decisions to be overtaken by passion. And yet, their ads are the opposite; they appeal to our most basic

instincts and emotions, including a great deal of dubious factuality and sleaze, because it seems to work, as if they were expecting human beings to be like deadwood.”

Mr. Radusky spoke. “I think that, perhaps, the worst part of all this is to say that it is been done in the name of democracy and for its sake.”

“We have two main issues here,” said Mr. Hunt, “purposeful distortion of information and rather disturbing attacks upon individuals. I presume that is not the example that we would like to teach our children, and that is not how we wish to interrelate with one another at work. So, what accounts for such behavior in politics?”

“According to the author, it’s a high level of polarization among voters over the issues that leads to these incidents of incivility and sleaze in negative attacks,” I said.

“What does *incivility* stand for?” asked Ms. Williamson.

“Let’s see,” I said, checking the dictionary, “Here, the dictionary defines incivility as deliberate discourtesy and rudeness.”

“But this goes beyond rudeness; I mean, there is a great deal of deceit,” replied Ms. Williamson.

“If I may, I would like to confront the author’s explanation,” replied Mr. Dickerson. “Differences of opinion occur because as free, though imperfect, human beings we seldom see things in the same manner. Also, each of us choose different values and ways of life that some time takes us into conflict with one another.

“Social or political polarization, however, indicates a relatively high level of divisiveness in which differences are accentuated to the point where voters tend to concentrate along the extreme ends, right? Well, as a way of illustration, let’s say that consensus on the issues represents the middle between extreme agreement on one end and violence on the other. Then, let’s use a rough behavioral scale outlining different types of behavior according to how they are defined in the dictionary, meaning that we’re going to move from consensus to its most extreme opposite, violence.

“So, we have, in descending order, consensus, then disagreement, which suggests mild division, then dissension, bickering, opposition, discord, and animosity. Then, we arrive to and go through POLARIZATION, into feuding and quarreling, then altercation, strife, conflict, until we reach hostility and violence.

“In other words, we may say that things start getting pretty bad once we start feuding, which indicates mutual enmity. After that, it’s pretty much your proverbial slippery slope. This is what wars are, extreme differences over the same issues. In other words, down-hill behavior doesn’t necessarily stop at polarization; it can go on toward increased levels of animosity, up to and including violence.

“The question I would ask is, how can we simply blame polarization for incivility without noticing the inbreeding that occurs between the two types of behavior? If polarization breeds incivility, and incivility likely will breed increased polarization, I think that what we have here is a vicious cycle!”

“Does that mean that we are close to physical violence,” asked Mr. Edson.

“Perhaps,” replied Mr. Dickerson. “This cycle I have outlined works itself in ways we cannot foresee. Incivility in politics might begin with exaggerations, which leads the opposition to distort and deceive in order to get the upper hand in controlling the issue. Then, the PACs representing both political parties begin to inflame public opinion through put downs, innuendos, smears, and from then on, well, there goes the neighborhood. So, if this is officially sanctioned behavior on the part of our political leaders, why shouldn’t the rest of society behave in the same manner?”

“We have to remember that once we were politically violent toward each other. Fortunately, we haven’t had another Civil War, and our politicians haven’t engaged in physically violent behavior over politics, yet. Still, even if we don’t revert to that mode of behavior again, all we’re going to get from a lack of civility in politics is a lot of misleading information and very poor role modeling on the part of our politicians. How is that helpful in a democracy? I don’t know.”

“Is this avoidable?” I asked.

“Very much so, I think,” replied Mr. Dickerson, “except that it’s we, the public at large, who have to demand those in office to become more civilized, and it’s up to the politicians to rely on whatever shame they have left in themselves to start setting the example to the rest of society.”

“I think it would be a most worthy objective,” interrupted Ms. Vanhurst, “but how do you turn the politicians around?”

“I don’t think we can,” said Mr. Dickerson. “I say, let them continue on with the mudslinging, the polarization, the incivility, and to tear each others to pieces. We can’t deny that it’s a wonderful political circus.”

“You’re suggesting that cynicism is the adequate alternative to incivility and to the politicians’ attempts to treat us as naïve spectators who want a good political contest,” I said.

“I’m not saying that cynicism is the adequate alternative, sir, only that it’s the only alternative, short of agreeing with them and making their behavior ours.”

“Very well, on that optimistic note we shall end this session. As for next week, I expect that the entire class will meet on its own accord several times in order to come up with the last portion of the exercise. You are to elaborate an agenda consisting of what you consider to be the most significant issues demanding leadership today, other than the ones we have discussed already. But remember, I want you all to strive toward consensus as much as you can. I don’t want those 5-4 ideological divisions the American public is so accustomed to see coming out of the Supreme Court nowadays. That’s the challenge. I will see you all next week.”

Endnotes

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- ¹² John G. Geer, *In Defense of Negativity*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. xiii.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 3.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 9.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 3. (emphasis added)
- ¹⁶ FactCheck.org.
- ¹⁷ Geer, See Chapter Seven.