

## **Okay, Okay, So I Was Wrong**

I owe one of my doctor friends a fancy dinner, and I owe at least one apology to a politician. "See son, this is why you should never bet." Perhaps I have learned my lesson.

I bet my doctor friend that Governor Romney would not only win, but win by a large margin against President Obama. That bet, witnessed by a mutual friend, will cost me who knows how much at a nice restaurant in Williamsport.

My other bet was that Representative Rick Mirabito would just barely beat his opponent, Harry Rogers, because Republicans would not be willing to split their tickets.

On the national level, I goofed because I did not have sufficient awareness for America's diversity or willingness to overcome adversity. On the local level, the reason for my error was the lack of appreciation for the fact that voters in the 83<sup>rd</sup> House District very carefully consider who they vote for and will make the necessary effort to assure that the best candidates win.

I apologize to you, American voter and House District 83 voter.

The Republican response to the Obama win is to *kvetch*. I am not sure what the correct translation is of this *word*, but it is close to "whine." Some pundits have accused the Obama campaign of tricksterism in their advertising. Other comments have taken on a very divisive and racial tone, suggesting that Barack Obama was elected because of the number of people in this country whose skin is a darker color or because of their place of origin.

I choose to believe that President Obama was elected because people wanted to preserve the *status quo*. If there is any message in this election, it is that \$6 billion or so did not move the electorate at all. People want to stay the course. It is not unusual, in connection with the human psyche, that when things are tough the tough do not necessarily get going, to paraphrase President Nixon's words. Many times when the going gets tough, the tough dig a foxhole and put their heads down. I remember my father once saying to me, "When things get tough, just work harder."

It is possible that the American electorate decided to stay with Barack Obama because they see that he is working hard. Most Americans believe that President Obama lost his direction as to his priorities, but that he is an honorable man who is desperately committed to helping America recover from the Great Recession. Coming together as one nation to solve our problems will not be easy. There is almost an evangelical fervor on the part of some partisans to believe that the word of the divine

comes only out of their own lips. "Compromise" has become a dirty word to the extremists in both parties.

If the recent election proves anything, it is that the great middle of this country controls. The 10 percent who decided this election want to give President Obama a chance. That means that all the rest of us should also give the President a chance and should demand that Congress and the President work together to make compromises. Compromise is not a bad thing. It is what we teach every kindergartner. It makes no sense that we have evolved into a political structure that is incapable of showing flexibility.

The United States Supreme Court has done us a great disservice in the *Citizens United* case. Equating money with free speech is nothing our Founders could possibly have contemplated. The conservatives on the Court should be crazed over the liberal construction given to the Constitution which would suggest that money and speech are one and the same. Unfortunately, it is the conservatives on the Court who made up the majority in the *Citizens United* case.

The other component of our society which has created polarization, in addition to the "free speech equals money" connection, is the rise of secrecy. We know that tons of money flows into the electoral system, but on the federal level it is almost impossible to know where it comes from and what the motives are of the donors.

Our political environment will not improve, and our nation will continue to slide into the abyss of dissention until and unless we get a handle on how electoral campaigns should be financed. When the time comes that the American people are disgusted enough to demand campaign finance reform and knowledge about who gives money to whom, nothing will change. Politics will only get worse, more divisive, and it will be less possible to govern our nation.

Most politicians I know work hard. However, what they work hard at a great deal of the time is fundraising. On a 2 or 4 year cycle, where special interest groups are able to generate huge sums of money for their favorite cause, the incumbent or challenger must spend most of their time raising money. Make no mistake about it; people give money in order to buy legislative votes. A local Williamsport businessman told The New York Times that he gives a lot of money so that the politicians would "return my phone calls." Those phone calls to the politicians are to demand action that benefits, usually financially, the donor. The donors, even on the local level, are looking for tax breaks for their investments, favors for their friends or legislative enactments which benefit their businesses. Most of the tens of thousands and millions of dollars that are given to politicians are nothing more than a business investment. As a politician from Philadelphia once said to me on the balcony of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, "Cliff, the railroads have been doing this since the early 1800's." This is true. The railroads, the oil companies, and now virtually every other major industry is used to buying and selling politicians like so many bars of soap. Adlai Stevenson, in his

first race against Dwight Eisenhower, refused television advertising because he did not want to relegate the political process to rote salesmanship. Stevenson probably would have lost against the popular former General no matter what he did, but he recognized at an early time that the packaging of politicians would become the norm.

Now that the elections are over, people will simply complain about the dysfunctionality of government rather than their feeling of being repulsed at political campaigning. We swing back and forth like the pendulum on an old grandfather clock between horror over campaign tactics on the one hand and the lack of progress in governing our country on the other.

I have sat in Harrisburg in many meetings, attempting to mediate different viewpoints on a legislative proposal. I always look around the table at all of the lawyers, legislators and special interest groups, and I ask the same question every time; "What is this bill attempting to accomplish?" It is interesting to hear the answers I get. Some of the so-called "stakeholders" do not want to answer. Others give reasons that make little or no sense. Typically, legislation is not intended to solve a problem but rather to benefit a private interest.

Every Shabbat we say a special prayer for government and our leaders. This is said in every Synagogue around the world, and basically the same prayer everywhere. We pray for freedom and justice. We pray for the good health, wisdom and moral integrity of our leaders. If we take the money out of the process and shine the light openness on political campaigns, there is some hope for the next generation of citizens who we call our children and grandchildren.

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