

Race to the Bottom

Thank goodness for the Super Bowl. For once, I stopped watching the bloodletting on MSNBC to see a real sport. Instead of throwing Christians and Jews to the lions, the way the Romans did, we now seem to be doing that with political candidates.

Let's take the Republicans first, not out of disrespect, but merely because they have more human flesh to sacrifice at the moment. First Republicans wanted a blunt foot-in-mouth candidate. Bachman and Cain burned themselves out pretty quickly, but it was fun watching the next embarrassing comment they would make. My mornings, getting dressed in front of the TV, were filled with awe and slow head-shaking. How could they be so dumb? How could they think the voters are so dumb?

Then came the rich businessman from Massachusetts, whose father had been Governor of Michigan. Out of touch is too kind a word for Mitt Romney. Most repulsive about him, to most Republicans, is that middle-of-the-roaders and some Democrats said they would vote for him! Heaven forbid that the Republicans nominate someone who could win the presidential election. Millions for extremists, not a penny for moderates. Even though Mitt Romney has tried his level best to move as far to the right as he can without falling off the podium, it simply is not enough for many primary voters.

One of my favorites is the hypocrite of Biblical proportions. Newt Gingrich would certainly win the contest based upon which candidate could violate more of the Ten Commandments before asking for voter forgiveness. Sinning and forgiveness go hand in hand. Most religious people I know appreciate that the term "repentance" is based upon the concept of return. In other words, what has a sinner done to make up for his bad behavior? In Newt's case, he apparently feels that the more he hollers at his opponents, the more he repents. Newt, the guy named for a lizard, seems to have no trouble criticizing "Washington insiders" while living a life devoted to nothing other than being a Washington insider. So who said politicians had to be examples of Biblical virtue? I wonder if the historically oriented Newt Gingrich can recite Leviticus 18 and 19 by heart?

Now the Republicans seem to be sliding towards the friendly loser. Rick Santorum could not even beat a senate candidate who lost the primary for Pennsylvania Governor to former Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell. Bob Casey easily rolled Rick Santorum, who quickly tired out his moderate Pennsylvania

constituents. As the old saying goes, "If you can't keep them happy in Pennsylvania, you ain't gonna make it in Des Moines." I made up that old saying. Cool, huh?

My favorite Rick Santorum story has not been in the press much. When Rick was in the senate, he proposed legislation to put a ceiling on the amount of pain and suffering damages that a person could obtain in a lawsuit regardless of the damages. This restriction on so-called non-economic damages was to be a federal mandate. The heck with the Tenth Amendment, state's rights, and all that sort of nonsense. Rick touted the importance of Pennsylvania citizenship in that same petulant phase of his life. The only problem is that when Rick Santorum's wife sued her chiropractor, she asked for and obtained damages in excess of the cap that Rick Santorum had suggested as U.S. Senator. Oh, and by the way, the Santorums really lived in West Virginia or somewhere else, but not Pennsylvania. Rick explained that little imbroglio based on the fact that his kids had to go to school in more friendly territory. Down went Rick Santorum in flames!

Now the Democrats, on the other hand, only have President Obama to deal with. It does not look like President Obama is going to receive any opposition. The Pres must be sitting in the White House, laughing his hide off. The Democrats are worried about the man who gave us the "Enrich the Insurance Companies Program". President Obama and his supporters will say that he had no choice since the Republicans would not support a reasonable public option. That is true, but somewhere on the road to health care reform, the eager Democratic President forgot Bill Clinton's advice that "it's about the economy, stupid." The bad state of the economy may not be the President's fault, given that he inherited a catastrophe in the making, but he certainly has not used the bully pulpit to rally the troops until recently. The President has enabled the Republicans to make jobs and the deficit an issue, traditional components of a Democratic victory lap. Who, among the candidates, will focus on social security, Medicare, veterans' benefits and the military, which are our largest expenditures? Will the Democrats dance around the issue, just as the Republican candidates have?

There is a real risk and danger that all the candidates will be driven by their super PAC donors rather than by any of the issues. Who are these super PAC donors? Well of course we really do not know, because they are protected by the United States Supreme Court. One thing the people can be sure of is that the super PAC contributors are those who have the most money in the country. The folks with all that money tend to be Wall Streeters, oil companies, the pharmaceutical industry, the military industry, the energy folks, insurance companies and national banks. In other words, the election will be paid for by those with the most to gain from government largesse. The Bigees are in favor of less regulation, not entirely a bad thing, until it exposes the consumer naked as a jaybird. Big donors with big dollars

generally want to see full employment so they can make money off the worker bees. So far, so good. However, the folks with their feet up on the hassock, paying no taxes on their municipal bonds, don't want to pay taxes. The Wall Streeters, who pay 15% capital gains tax, do not want to pay 30 or 35% like a physician assistant or a paralegal. The tax system is not going to change under an administration which has been bought and paid for by super PAC money. Fairness is out and the status quo is in, so long as we let elections be purchased by stealth interests who are only out to protect their own pocketbooks.

Until citizens get sick and tired of the current mess or are just too disgusted by scandal after scandal, there will not be any meaningful campaign finance reform. Without what Theodore Roosevelt, that great Republican, called transparency and reasonable corporate restrictions on campaign spending, fair elections are out the window. We might as well face it in America. We have slipped into a hybrid sort of government where a certain percentage of the votes are cast by John and Mary Doe, but the majority of votes are cast as a result of the dollars contributed by those who have the means to control the government. Dwight Eisenhower referred to the military-industrial complex, which he saw as a danger to the American dream of a democracy controlled by an informed Jeffersonian-style voter. Ike might update that today by referring to the "Business-PAC Complex". We need more Republicans like Roosevelt and Eisenhower to join with the likes of democrats like Truman and Kennedy to lead us away from the abyss of Russian-style oligarchy, back to our roots of a Democracy controlled by individual voters, absent the corrupting influences of monied control freaks.

Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey, Harris,
Waters & Waffenschmidt
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)

Cliff Rieders, who practices law in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.