

The Love of the Game, School Spirit, Brand Loyalty, and Other Ideas That Don't Belong in Politics

By Jerry Cammarata

When you come right down to it, there never really was much of a difference between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Yankees, between the Michigan Wolverines and the Ohio State Buckeyes, between Harvard and Yale, Coke and Pepsi, McDonald's and Burger King, but part of being a sports fan, part of being a kid, and part of being a salesman is indulging in the fun of mythologizing vast moral differences between my fraternity and yours, my high school and yours, so that the annual softball game or the Rose Bowl take on the thunderous implications of the battle between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness at Armageddon.

That's the fun of sports rivalries, and it's part of growing up, and I suppose it's our modern version of the cathartic experience that made the tragic dramas part of religious festivals in ancient Greece. It's also part of the chicanery and mendacity of crass marketers, whose job it is to fulfill a burning need we never knew we had.

It has no place in the politics of our republic.

The invention of artificial distinctions between candidates, the creation *ex nihilo* of an image to fit a marketing strategy in which the actual person being "sold" to voters becomes secondary, has become the norm in our campaigns. Political professionals are called upon to take candidates, who have been chosen precisely because they are otherwise nondescript, and invent fictional personalities for them or conjure up highly marketable but factually nonexistent issues to give them a rationale for running. There are

even some campaign professionals who wear their ability to “sell refrigerators to Eskimos” as some sort of badge of honor.

But campaign professionals should not be cheerleaders who build an empty myth around their hometown “team” for the sake of having said they won the game. Their job is not to take any old nostrum of water and sugar and create a desperate public thirst for it by cleverly designing the can and convincing America that a little flavoring and some carbonation will restore lost youth, lift the clouds of depression and instantly win for them a harem of admirers of the opposite sex.

Campaigns and elections are not games: they are, and ought to be treated as, deadly serious activities of a free people. Campaign professionals are not, and should not act like, Madison Avenue ad-men: they are participants in the freest process of governance in the history of mankind, and have a unique responsibility within that process to safeguard its purity.

Before the citizenry is given an opportunity to decide on the relative merits of candidates, the political professionals get to make some choices themselves, and as such are as much a part of the responsible governance of the commonwealth as is our free press or our party system. Campaign managers, consultants, and party leaders have a moral obligation to choose as their clients not the most marketable, the most malleable, the most photogenic, but the most qualified, the most imaginative, and dare I say it, the most virtuous, so that campaigns become contests of ideas and debates over capabilities, and the government of the community does not become the cola wars by other means.

I suppose it needs saying in this present climate that the virtue I’m talking about and indefectability are not synonymous. A campaign professional need not allow only boy

scouts and goody-two-shoes in his or her front door. Virtue, integrity, probity, honesty are all qualities that can exist in quite profound ways in a person whose life may have included failings: Kings David and Solomon, after all, sinned; George Washington had a number of romances on the side; Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves only when it became strategically advantageous; Winston Churchill started tanking up on whisky-and-soda for the day while he was shaving each morning; Dwight Eisenhower dropped a denunciation of McCarthyism from a speech in a moment of political timidity. None of their addictions, dalliances or weaknesses stopped them from being great men.

What made them great, though, was the fact that their dedication to high principles, their intellectual self-honesty, and their integrity of person was so full that it overwhelmed whatever faults they may have had, and that they were therefore able to give their communities the full benefits of their extraordinary perspicacity, creativity and imagination.

What would have happened to the nation, though, if Lincoln's campaign managers had rejected him because he didn't have regional strength in the South, or because he wasn't doing well with focus groups in the border states, or because the Religious Left wasn't satisfied with his commitment to Abolition but neither was the conservative coalition of Northern businessmen and Southern planters, for different reasons? Suppose George William Curtis and Horace Greeley and their ilk had decided to find somebody more pliable, or somebody more willing to "go negative" early in a campaign, or somebody whose wife wasn't quite so hysterical and who could be used as a "twofer" pitch to women? Suppose, in short, they had dropped the candidate they believed would do some *good*, for a candidate they were sure would do *well* at the polls?

So political professionals are a sort of first-line defender of democracy. They must commit their talents to candidates whom they truly believe are worthy of undertaking the people's business, at whatever level: school board, city council, state legislature or Congress. In fact, I would go so far as to say they should be proactive in this responsibility: they should not simply wait for great candidates to come to them, but should seek out the talented, the thoughtful, the upright, and encourage them to take up the burden of being a public man or woman.

After all, the cola wars produced no casualties, and nobody ever had to give his life for his alma mater.

And nobody ever impeached a quarterback.

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