

Every Four Years, An Exercise in Futility

Why America's Presidential Elections Miss the Point

by Louis René Beres (June 2015)

Plato's *Republic* endures as a celebrated touchstone of classical political thought. Here, attentive to what was once known as the *Western Canon*, college freshmen read hopefully about a "philosopher king." This figure of reason and righteousness was cast to be an exemplary political leader – in Plato's own time, the chief executive of a *polity* like Athens – one who would deftly combine real learning with virtuous governance.

Could such refined leadership expectations have been any more obvious, or any less controversial?

Plato's philosopher king offered an harmonious combination of leadership traits. So, what went wrong in the "real world?" Why have there been so notably few attempts to replicate an ancient but still enviable ideal?

As Americans, we need to ask this vital question about our own country. Indeed, soon facing another quadrennial round of presidential elections, we should inquire: *Why has the United States steered so distressingly far from this commendable leadership mark?*

There are ready answers. Despite our palpable national declensions – social, economic, and political – we Americans continue to place our electoral bets upon one or another sorely unworthy presidential contender. Still captives of a quaintly enduring political mythology, we remain all too willing to wager our very lives on one or another fully invented candidate. Let us ask candidly this round: Are we really going to be saved by Hillary Clinton or Marco Rubio, by Bernie Sanders, or Scott Walker, or Chris Christie, etc., etc?

It's a silly question. Obviously.

But politics is always less about rendering intellectual judgments than about settling effortlessly for the lowest common denominator. Individual and collective self-deception may provide us with some symptomatic reassurance; nonetheless, no such psychological contortions are durably meaningful or helpful.

In essence, we Americans should finally acknowledge what must already be apparent to virtually

anyone who can think; that is, that each candidate remains, more-or-less, a flimsy shadow or caricature of any philosopher-king. To be sure, not one or another of these contrived cardboard cutouts can ever hope to move us even inches beyond our stubbornly futile wars, or beyond the prospectively corollary perils of domestic terrorism. Looking ahead, these perils could even include biological or nuclear forms of Jihadist assault against the homeland.[\[1\]](#)

At the most genuinely basic level of our national existence, no identifiable presidential aspirant can hope to slow the excruciatingly breathless rhythms of our machine-like national existence. Is this incapacity a tolerable state of affairs?

There are also pertinent ironies. While proclaiming “excellence” to the wider world, we Americans actually esteem our political candidates in direct proportion to the decipherable simplicity of their promises. Nowhere, perhaps, are these insistently vacant campaign pledges more baseless and potentially insidious than in the ritualistic calls for “victory” in one ongoing war or another. It’s not that these wars are necessarily ill-founded or unjust – on the contrary, the current struggle against *Jihadist* adversaries is both real and indispensable – but only that the historic criteria of victory and defeat no longer make any operational sense.

How shall we ever know when a war against Islamist enemies has been conclusively won or lost? We can’t. We won’t.

No honest and capable presidential contender should ever promise otherwise. What ought to be promised is a tactically realistic strategy to stave off certain expected enemy harms for as long as necessary. In the end, this means a commitment based upon substantially complex calculations, assessments that are fundamentally *intellectual*, not merely political. Can any American seriously believe that one or another of the current candidates, Democrat or Republican, would be capable of rendering such exceedingly difficult calculations?

Always, in presidential politics, it is easy to be heroic with the lives of others, especially with eager and well-intentioned young men and women who are still too young to rise above the most primal or aboriginal forms of patriotism. Whether the endlessly simplistic pleas for greater force are applied to Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan, their political origins are always the same. Inevitably, they are the product of a persistently core failure to envision modern war as a broadly *civilizational* rather than narrowly military endeavor.

Ironically, long ago, the Chinese strategist, Sun-Tzu, and, later, the Prussian military thinker, Carl von Clausewitz, had known all this. Already, their informed insights were in advance of where our core strategic thinking lies today.

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 our campaign judgments to a shamelessly crass assortment of numbing clichés, "zingers," and abundantly 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. Oddly, we Americans, we who now casually supplant Emersonian inwardness with an incessantly dreary conformance, remain proud to reject even any residual hint of individual authenticity or intellectual courage.

Somehow, prepared to do anything to avoid being left alone with ourselves, we Americans still prefer a lifetime of measureless suffering in the mass, to one of personal growth in what was once deemed a sacred *Self*. Why, then, should we expect a presidential election with a meaningfully gratifying outcome? Don't we already know, from elementary school geometry, that the whole must inevitably be the sum of its respective parts.

Credo quia absurdum, said 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 an utterly ineffable absence of substance. Always, in our childish national politics, less is more...less intellect; less stature; and less courage.

Still, we exclaim in chorus, "all is good." We have a winner. All hail to the chief.

Exeunt omnes?

What has gone wrong? In our sullied national politics of veneered résumés and blatant half-truths, whenever a popular candidate's spoken words seethe with an evident hollowness, the crowd rushes to applaud. Mixing desperation with a self-imposed absence of memory, it nods approvingly, *en masse*, and then, after indelicately consuming more chili, hot dogs, and chicken wings, solemnly swears to celebrate "American Exceptionalism." A bit later, in what seems a largely involuntary obeisance to America's most deeply-rooted addictions, the people begin to anesthetize themselves yet again, ingloriously, with huge mountains of drugs and vast oceans of alcohol.

The historian, Daniel J. Boorstin, once wrote insightfully about the "celebrity," of the person who is known simply for being well-known. Offered as an ostensibly valuable commodity, this plainly manufactured American idol usually triumphs because of the synthetic but successful alchemy of "public relations." It doesn't really matter that a vaunted public figure may sally forth without even a scintilla of intellect, manners, or "Platonic"

integrity. Rather, in the all-important “big picture,” these are minor deficiencies.

Once, many of our national heroes, including those who could read real books, *by themselves*, were created by tangible achievement. Today, however, the successful American politician is fashioned exclusively by manipulation and invention. Here, via glaringly sophisticated and closely-intersecting systems of advertisement, an industry for profit effectively preempts any promising public choice. Now, in short, our national leaders are created by an openly shabby process that is *intentionally* refractory to both intelligence and judgment.

In the end, a degrading fusion of raw commerce and visceral conformance is what we truly mean by “American Democracy.” Now, more than ever, this demeaning pattern of personal surrender is sustained by ready slogans and empty chatter. It is not an hospitable pattern for a “philosopher king.”

In electing a president, when will we Americans finally 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 mean something significant? The answer is not all that difficult to grasp.

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 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 universities.

In principle, all this can change, but only after personal meanings in America are firmly detached from a ubiquitously vulgar commerce, and from correspondingly frenetic marketing. Paradoxically, in the very midst of our cherished democratic freedoms, we Americans are still held captive, not by physical chains, of course, but by consciously consuming fears of not “fitting-in.” To a significant extent, the “team,” both corporate and athletic, has become the true author of suffering.

What we require, in our young people especially, is not more chief executive officers,

marketing managers, venture capitalists, social networking entrepreneurs, or rocket scientists. Desperately, instead, we need more *high-thinking individuals*, not high net worth members.

Across our battered cities, the now moribund *Occupy Wall Street* movement was not entirely wrongheaded. Yes, they were frankly naive to subscribe to any original Edenic myth of American "equality," but they were also correct to understand that our increasingly stratified American democracy would eventually bring forth unsustainable inequities, and corresponding explosions of national violence.

Plato's high standard of political leadership remains far out of reach. Still, shuddering with a reasonable human foreknowledge of perils that might still lie ahead, we may yet be able to think imaginatively beyond the visibly expanding limitations of "democracy." At a minimum, even without a philosopher-king, we Americans have a right to expect better than the conspicuously barren choices offered to us every four years.

Otherwise, the grim results can readily be anticipated. "Where there were once great military actions," observed the French poet, Saint-John Perse (1887-1975), "there lies whitening now, the jawbone of an ass."

Thomas Jefferson, an American president who sat down long enough to actually read Plato (not to mention Grotius, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Locke, Hobbes, Vattel, and Pufendorf), would have affirmed the right to leadership excellence as "unalienable." For Jefferson, whose deep understanding of political philosophy eventually found its way into the *Declaration of Independence*, any entitlement to a high-thinking American leadership would have been utterly "natural" and "self-evident." Above all, he might have concurred, it would have revealed conditions wherein the country's presidential elections could offer more than predictable error and endless infelicity.

[\[1\]](#) Professor Beres is the author of some of the very earliest major books on nuclear terrorism, including *Terrorism and Global Security: The Nuclear Threat* (1979), and *Apocalypse: Nuclear Catastrophe in World Politics* (1980).

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