

The GOP's Misplaced Glee Over Biden's Document Debacle



by Theodore Dalrymple

The glee with which the Republicans learned of President Biden's unauthorized possession of classified documents is all too understandable. Mr. Biden seems now to be in a [position](#) not very dissimilar from that of his predecessor, President Trump.

Tu quoque – you also – has always been a favorite rhetorical device of those who are not quite certain of their own innocence or moral probity. It boils down to this: I may have done something wrong, but you have done the same thing, so my wrongdoing was not quite so bad after all. This is an inglorious argument, but often rhetorically effective.

Increasingly, politics seems to be not so much a beauty contest as a contest of ugliness. Which candidate or acting politician has behaved worse? Who has lied or stolen more? In

the kingdom of the villain, the least bad is king.

Digging dirt on opponents is, of course, fun – much more fun than serious analysis of policy. However much we may claim to dislike or disapprove of gossip, we indulge in it all the same: man, after all, is the gossiping animal.

Few of us have absolutely nothing to hide in our lives, things about ourselves or our history that we would not like other people to know. This means that brazenness and a rhinoceros hide are almost requisites of a successful political career in an age of information, when nothing can be hidden forever.

Nevertheless, I think many politicians and would-be politicians start out with some kind of idealism. I knew a successful American businessman who, naively no doubt, decided that he wanted to do some good for his country and tried to run for high office. First, though, he had to be chosen as the candidate for the party he favored.

He was running against the incumbent, known to be ignorant, ruthless, none too bright, and thoroughly corrupt. To the delight of the opposing party, his own party, whose machine was in the grip of the incumbent, began to libel and slander him mercilessly.

He discovered that to answer the libels and slanders was to give them credence, as did not answering them. Moreover, by the time he answered them, the libels and slanders had moved on to new inventions. His wife likened the process to waking every morning and being doused with a bucket of excrement. And *this* was by the party of which he was a member and supporter.

Naturally, the opposing party was delighted. The last thing it wanted was an opposing candidate of obvious intelligence, decency, and probity who might attract undecided voters. Its only chance of winning the forthcoming election was to confront the incumbent with his incompetence and manifold

failings as a person.

The upshot was that the incumbent was re-elected, and the whole process seemed to have been like Darwin's natural selection, except that survival of the fittest was replaced by survival of the worst.

Bismarck said that one should not ask how sausages or politics are made; it has always been a dirty business. In the past, though, it was easier to conceal the crimes and misdemeanors of the rulers: sources of information were fewer and those that existed exercised discretion – or were obsequious towards the powerful.

We were therefore able to have some trust in the authorities, but now that we know more, universal suspicion reigns.

The discontent with the political class as a whole is all but universal in the Western world, in which the main political question has become "Who are the worse scoundrels?"

Sensitive people are obliged to vote for candidates while holding their nose: since there is always a better and worse (though the difference may be marginal), not voting is irresponsible.

Yet the person elected, often a narcissist, takes his victory, however narrow, as a ringing endorsement and believes himself mandated to do whatever he pleases.

Yet he soon finds that he is but grist to a mill much larger than himself. That is why politicians who are against budget deficits always increase them when in office. Idealism proposes but realism disposes.

The remedy of the political malady afflicting Western democracies is not obvious. A moratorium on dirt-digging and name-calling might be helpful, insofar as it would encourage thinner-skinned and better people to put themselves forward.

Yet how is such a moratorium to be called? Censorship is *a priori* ruled out, while self-control is hardly the ruling virtue of our age. We are stuck with what we have, which, all things considered, could be worse.

Switzerland is the only country known to me that has escaped the malady: it is in the happy position of being a country in which politicians are of supreme unimportance and no one can even name the head of state. But Switzerland is small, and if it is true what the residents whom I know have told me, it is boring.

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