

Nothing To Vote For:
The Futility of the American
Electoral Process

by Daniel Schwindt
daniel.schwindt@gmail.com

Dedication:

*To those patriots who believe that the
American people deserve better.*

"It comes from a very ancient democracy, you see... On its world, the people are people. The leaders are lizards. The people hate the lizards and the lizards rule the people."

"Odd," said Arthur, "I thought you said it was a democracy."

"I did," said Ford. "It is."

"So," said Arthur, hoping he wasn't sounding ridiculously obtuse, "why don't the people get rid of the lizards?"

"It honestly doesn't occur to them," said Ford. "They've all got the vote, so they all pretty much assume that the government they've voted in more or less approximates to the government they want."

"You mean they actually vote for the lizards?"

"Oh yes," said Ford with a shrug, "of course."

"But," said Arthur, going for the big one again, "why?"

"Because if they didn't vote for a lizard," said Ford, "the wrong lizard might get in."

--Douglas Adams, "So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish"

Contents

We're All Losers Now	1
The Premise	6
Young People Are Not Your Patsies.....	10
Democracy And The Founders.....	15
Voting As Superstition	18
The Non-Voters Win	22
The Example Of Henry David Thoreau	23
If You Vote, Don't Complain.....	31
Does Voting Prevent Tyranny?	34
"It's Your Christian Duty."	36
Voting As Diversion	39
The Opium Of The People.....	43
Voting Our Way Back To Barbarism	47
Effective Representation.....	50
The Founders On Political Parties.....	52
Where Freedom Goes To Die	55
Voting For Hitler.....	60
The Lesser Evil Is Still An Evil	62
You Don't Know Much, And That's Okay.....	65
The Information Age.....	71
Masses Do Not Reason	73
What's Your Sphere Of Competence?.....	75

The Myth Of Common Sense.....	78
Words Without Meaning.....	81
Economic Power Vs. Political Power	83
Investment Theory And Party Politics.....	90
Corporations And The Personification Of Money.....	93
Institutionalized Bribery	95
Eight Stages Of Voter Apathy	98
Twelve Steps To Voter Recovery	101
Rediscovering Communication.....	103
Against Gradualism.....	105
If You Must	108
After The Election	109
Roasting Marshmallows At The Apocalypse.....	113

We're All Losers Now

I've never voted in a presidential election. That may offend the sensibilities of some folks, but, unfortunately, those are the same folks who just put Donald Trump in the White House, so they'll have to excuse me if I don't really consider their opinions worthwhile.

When I first adopted this stance, it was out of general indifference. For as long as I can remember, political activity disgusted me, and I just wasn't able to see anything of value to be gained, either for myself or for others, through my participation in it. Then, at about age 21, I started caring about the state of the world and my place in it. I had turned over a new leaf, and my attitude changed.

I didn't start voting, of course. I had watched the political process unfold time and again, and I had still seen no reason to believe that elections were an effective means of bringing about positive change in the world. I also had my self-respect to consider. I had, by that time, already made more than my share of mistakes, and so, when I finally reached a point in life when I cared about my character, I knew I couldn't afford to degrade myself in the way that political participation demanded.

That is not to say I had a problem with politics in itself, only with what passed for politics today, which was more like a poorly produced reality show. And so my reason for abstaining from voting became one of principle, a reasoned conclusion based on observations about the process and my

own self-respect. In short, whether out of indifference or deliberation, I've never voted because I've never believed that it would do any good.

But at least it wasn't doing any harm, which is why I rarely expressed my position on this subject. Why disturb those around me by challenging such a basic value, one that they held so dear? Yes, from my point of view, the house was on fire, but they seemed to be all warm and cozy inside. Why should I try to drag them out into the cold? And so I just stood back and watched it burn.

Then, finally, as I watched the lead up to the 2016 election, my position began to evolve once more. The great American system--the exemplary democracy after which, we are told, the world ought to model itself--produced as its presidential candidates two characters whom I would not trust with my car keys, much less the security of a nation.

No, this was not much different than previous elections, which had always amounted to deciding which candidate would do less damage; but in terms of the general response of the nation to these candidates, something was different. The choices were not only bad, but were palpably *unpopular*. Sure, they each had a following, but I had never heard so many people in grocery stores, at work, at the bank, or at the coffee shop, expressing such dismay at how bad these choices actually were.

Then Donald Trump won, and the same people who were amazed that he had even gotten that far were, within hours, already resigning themselves to the next four years with this

man as their Commander-in-Chief. The process had run its course. The turmoil had ended. Time to go on with life. Better luck next time.

At that moment my position evolved to what was probably its inevitable conclusion, which was that political participation, in the form of the vote, is not harmless, but in fact represents a social evil.

It was not the fact that a clown got into the White House; it was not even the fact that America was now being laughed at by its neighbors for electing said clown; it was not even the thought of what this person might do during his term in office. None of that really disturbed me. What disturbed me, what moved me to a new level of disgust with the concept of the vote, was the speed with which the people around me were able to readjust to any result. It was the fact that I knew, watching this happen, that this passive acceptance of whatever comes, was in some perverse way instilled in them by the fact that they had voted.

Because my countrymen believe so firmly, almost as a religious dogma, that “voting works,” they automatically accept any result. I realized that this would remain true no matter how bad the result was, and no matter how bad the choices were. Because their belief in the vote ran so deep, they were prevented from ever seeing any alternative means of improving the state of their nation.

In democracy-culture, voting is political participation, and political participation is voting. You do it, you live with the results, and if you don't like it you try again next time. Once

a nation is convinced that this is their reality, that this is “politics,” that this is “freedom,” then they will cling to the vote. They will worship it, in fact. But they will let just about anything else slide.

As long as they are allowed to fill out that piece of paper once in a while, they will always assume that whatever happens was, in one way or another, the will of the people. No matter how bad the defeat, some part of them will say, “at least democracy won.” This is a degree of servility that no monarch in history could have hoped to achieve, because the people in this scenario are not enslaved by force of arms, they are enslaved by a false premise, the premise that voting equals power. So long as they believe this, they can be patronized, pushed around, exploited, and ignored with impunity.

Now, I no longer see the process as futile but, in the end, harmless; I no longer see it as something that does no good, but at least does no harm. No, I now see it as something far more sinister. I see it as a form of civic suicide, one that I’m not sure I can continue to silently observe while still sleeping at night. That’s why I’m comfortable talking about it now, and I don’t much care who it disturbs. After all, that’s the point.

One last thing:

This book should not be interpreted as an angry response to a Trump victory. These thoughts were formed over a period of decades, and they’d stand as they are even if Hillary had won. The only connection between this book and Trump’s

victory is opportuneness. I'm hoping that this time, just maybe, a few more people will find it impossible to acquiesce to another loss. Because we all lost. We've been losing for a long time. I'm hoping that a few people will see that. That they will not reach that 'resignation' point that seems to follow every disappointing election cycle, that point when everyone takes a deep breath and says 'maybe next time.' If just a few people find that they are unable to do that, if they find that unacceptable results really are unacceptable, then I win, and maybe there is hope after all.

The Premise

As a lifelong non-voter, I have accumulated years of experience as an observer of human behavior during election cycles. Every four years, for my entire life, I've watched the nation reach a fever pitch of pettiness and irrational hostility wherein half the nation thinks the world is going to end if the other half gets its way. And of course one half has to win, which means that no matter what happens, half the country has to undergo what they see as the apocalypse. It's pretty ugly. There is kicking and screaming. There are tears. But the world doesn't end. In fact nothing really changes, and it all starts over again as the next election approaches.

Do you know what it's like to grow up observing your elders, the ones who are supposed to be 'wise guides,' and see them speaking like children, thinking like children, acting like children, throwing tantrums on national television, and getting applauded for it, as if that were somehow courageous behavior? Clearly this does not apply to all of them. I know some people much older than myself who are compassionate, knowledgeable, far-seeing, and capable. People I look up to and hold in very high esteem. But unfortunately the others are the ones who make it onto television; the others are the ones you hear in line at the gas station; the others are the ones who set the tone for public discourse. They are the embarrassment.

In fact, the behavior of these politicians, preachers, parents, and pundits was worse than childish, because even as a child I was disturbed by it. Part of me sensed the absurdity, and

knew that these ‘adults’ wouldn’t be saying all of these crazy things if they were not so madly invested in ‘politics’ and ‘the party.’ I realized very early in life that politics makes people stupider. Or, if it doesn’t actually make people stupider, it at least makes them act stupider than they otherwise would, which amounts to the same thing in the end.

The only word I can use to describe it is disappointing. I wanted to look up to the adults around me; I wanted to admire the nation’s leaders. I gave them the benefit of the doubt until I couldn’t do it any longer. Then I picked up my toys and I went home, and I haven’t gone back to that playground since.

It bothered me that the electoral process appeared to be broken, but what bothered me even more was to see the social energies of millions of people wasted, not to mention the vast sums of money we pour into campaigns.

Elections are, in my experience, less than useless. If they were merely useless, things wouldn’t be so bad. After all, there’s no harm done in a small diversion every four years, right? But in reality, there seems to be some sort of perverse force at work, driving us lower and lower every cycle. Like the flushing of a toilet. Every trip around the bowl we lose more money and more national dignity.

If elections are less than useless, as it seems they are, then wouldn’t the nation be better served if it redirected all of the time, money, and passion usually spent on elections and instead spent it on something worthwhile? It seems to me

that we'd be better off if we completely ignored the presidency for a few decades and gave the attention that we normally heap onto that defunct office instead to our families, or to local organizations that need manpower, or to just about anything else that matters to us and has value.

Not convinced? Well then, you have a couple of options. You can keep filling in those circles on the ballot and fighting the good fight, which is fine, but you risk being thwarted at every turn, presented with new candidates every year whose only distinguishing characteristic is that they are somehow less inspiring than their predecessors. Or, you can give the following chapters a look. They will serve the purpose of confirming your doubts about the legitimacy of the electoral process, and at the same time you might even learn a few tidbits of valuable info, like what the Founding Fathers would really think about all this hoopla. If you choose the second route, good on you! You're one step closer to living in a sane world.

Edmund Burke is famous for saying: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

I agree with this, and simply respond that *good men do nothing because they are voting instead.*

That, in a nutshell, is the premise of this book.

Even those good men who do good things in between visits to the ballot box are usually doing things that revolve around future visits to the ballot box. Everything is oriented toward

the election, in a never ending movement to and from the polling place. All political activity seems to form a huge circle that begins and ends on Election Day, and which, therefore, goes nowhere but around, in an freakish equilibrium of impotence.

Young People Are Not Your Patsies

Before we move into the real heart of our argument, we need to talk about scapegoating. “We the people” tend to use the president as a scapegoat for our national failings. Sometimes I wonder if that is not the president’s main function. It turns out, however, that the president isn’t the only one who gets this treatment. It seems that public disdain aimed at an individual or group, disdain that allows us to avoid blaming ourselves for anything, is sort of an institution for us. Young people, for example, have it far worse than the president. To show you what I mean, let me describe a couple things I’ve seen in recent weeks.

On Election Day, I walked into a public restroom. Atop the toilet was a roll of toilet paper with Barack Obama’s picture printed on each square. The roll was about half empty. While this sort of thing didn’t strike me as odd, or even surprising, it did seem to be an accurate representation, in very concise form, of the general state of politics in America. “Toilet humor” is the level at which our public discourse now takes place. What made it even more interesting was the timing. I knew that in a matter of hours there would be a new face, and that the company that produced the Barack Obama toilet paper would have to change the picture. But they would continue to sell their product.

The reason I point this out is to identify what offends us, as Americans, and what does not. That is to say, I don’t think very many people would be surprised or outraged to see the

Obama toilet paper. In America, it's okay to pretend to defecate on the face of the President.

Want to know what's not okay? In the days following the election, news outlets were running a story about how some teachers had cancelled classes so that their students could have time to adjust to a Trump presidency. Various pundits immediately responded with contempt, and their listeners, as listeners do, followed suit. The students were being "a bunch of crybabies." Kids these days, right? They need to buck up and learn to accept when they don't get their way.

The takeaway? Disdain is cool. The Obama toilet paper was an expression of disdain. Calling kids crybabies is an expression of disdain. But despair at the outcome of an election? Not cool.

If the first commandment of American life is that you can think whatever you want about the people within the system, the second commandment is that you may never question the system itself. Those who refuse to accept the outcome of a vote are implying that they don't trust the system. This is not acceptable to the guardians of public opinion, even if everything else, no matter how vulgar, is just fine.

Here's the thing though:

Any person not moved almost to tears at the reality of a Trump presidency has something wrong with them. Even if you think Hillary would have been worse, it should still strike you as objectively terrible--embarrassing on a national level--that Donald Trump was the preferable alternative. But

the talking heads on television, whose primary function seems to be to guard the status quo, have a capacity for moral indignation that has been turned inside out. For them, it's not the system that has a problem. *The system can never have a problem.* It's the young people complaining about it who have the problem. *The young people are the problem.*

For the angry old zealots, maturity means accepting the status quo, no matter how stupid it is, and being grateful for whatever comes. Patriotism means casting your servile vote, no matter who for or what for, and embracing the outcome with a stiff upper lip. Any attempt to question this and you are quickly informed that the only thing wrong with this country is you.

For some reason, I don't know why, it seems like people over 40 have developed an irresistible urge to blame all social problems on the younger generation. Maybe it's human nature. Maybe it's always been that way. I don't know. I don't care. It's still disgusting.

They act as if young people, who basically just got here, could have somehow created the problems they were clearly born into. It's like walking into a room where a murder has just been committed, and then having all the people standing over the body point their bloody fingers at you and yell: "He did it!" It's kind of baffling, and it would be funny if it wasn't such an affront to justice and right reason.

And this isn't just about politics. Kids are blamed for all sorts of stuff. To take one example, kids get a lot of flak for being glued to their phones non-stop. But the only reason

today's 50-year-olds aren't glued to phones is because they are glued to their televisions instead. The only reason they can pretend to have a moral high ground is because, when they were teenagers, smartphones didn't exist. Judging from the way the older generation worships the television, there is not a doubt in my mind that if they'd had smartphones, they'd have been glued to them.

The point is not that we shouldn't care about this stuff. I don't like it any more than anyone else when I look at a school lunch table and see five kids staring at five phones. But guess what? It's not their problem. It's 'our' problem. It didn't start with them. It started way before them. They are just following in their parents footsteps. Do kids need to learn discipline with respect to technology? No. We need to learn discipline with respect to technology.

Until the older generations can take their share of responsibility for our social problems, they shouldn't be surprised if no one takes their condemnations seriously. This happens in every area of life, but it goes double for politics.

I am lucky enough to know a Vietnam veteran. A man who chooses not to flatter himself by using young people for a scapegoat. I mentioned some of these things to him a while back. This was his response:

“What is really necessary for a reform? For my generation to die. The ideals my cohort held are not the kind that sustain themselves and will likely be forgotten. *Après moi, le printemps.*”

That's a pretty strong statement, and while it wouldn't have been right for it to come out of my mouth, I'm comfortable sharing it without further comment, especially considering who it came from.

At any rate, I bring this up for two reasons. First, young people are less likely to vote than their elders. Rather than interpreting this as a moral failing, maybe their elders should ask themselves if there might be a valid reason for this behavior. Second, it's important to acknowledge that sometimes the only ones who can save us from ourselves are those who stand outside of our own narrow point of view. It does little good playing the generational blame-game, but at the same time, the generation who developed the problem is not going to solve it. Fresh eyes are necessary.

It's going to be the same when I get my gray hair. My generation will have its own illusions, and the best hope of salvation from those illusions will be the bright-eyed youths. I only hope I have the wisdom to be open to what they have to say.

Democracy And The Founders

I'm not going to spend much time on this idea, because frankly it has been beaten into the ground. The only reason I'm addressing it at all is because, despite the fact that it should be common knowledge, it isn't.

The Founding Fathers established a republic. They had no interest in establishing a democracy. In the words of J. Hampden Doherty in his book, *Electoral System in the United States*:

“The tendency in this democratic age is to overlook the fact that the Fathers of the Constitution were not believers in the rule of the people, and it was not until after 1800 that manhood suffrage was adopted in any of the states.”

James Madison, in *The Federalist*, no. 14, lamented “the confounding of a republic with a democracy, applying to the former reasonings drawn from the nature of the latter.”

We can also refer to John Adams, second president of the United States, who wrote in *A Defense of the Constitution of the United States of America*, volume III, that: “No democracy ever did or can exist...in reality the word democracy signifies nothing more or less than a nation or people without any government at all.”

The Founders envisioned a ruling elite, even if this ruling elite would be expected to represent the people. Whether you

like the sound of that idea or not, it is what it is, and must be acknowledged as such, so that whatever else we have wrong, at least we have our history right. This elite may not have been a hereditary aristocracy, but it was an aristocracy nonetheless. Jefferson himself was open and honest about his desires:

“The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts and government of society. And indeed, it would have been inconsistent in creation to have formed men for the social state, and not to have provided virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of society. May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides most effectually for the pure selection of the natural *aristoi* into the offices of government?”¹

This notion is not very democratic, nor is it egalitarian.

Why, then, is there so much talk of American-as-democracy and so little of America-as-republic? Why, then, have we been able to embark on wars under the very pretext of “making the world safe for democracy”? The reason seems to be that democracy is a lot more pleasing to the man in the street than the more hierarchical structure of a representative republic. It is also simpler, as a concept. The mechanisms of a republic can become complex.

¹ *Letter to John Adams*, Oct. 28, 1814.

The result, then, is that we prefer the term democracy because we like what it implies: that everything is up to us, that everything is in our hands, and that there is no higher power beyond the will of the people. I am not governed, I govern myself.

The reality is quite different, of course, and so our ideas about our social condition tend to be at variance with life as we actually find it. This results in a good deal of confusion and frustration. This incorrect worldview ends up distorting the mentality of those who hold it.

This is why I will suggest that although we don't have a democracy, we do have *democratism*, which is a very different thing.

Democratism is a mentality that results from an obsession with a principle--the principle of self-government. And it is this mentality that raises voting to the level of a sacred duty. But if democratism is a worldview that, in a sense, is not real, then the ideas about voting, which spring from democratism, will be equally unreal.

Voting As Superstition

To approach the problem in another way, we can say that voting is a superstitious act.

A superstition can be described in a couple of ways:

A) An unfounded belief that one thing causes another, when there is no real connection between the two.

Or:

B) Continued belief in something that used to be true, but isn't anymore. Etymologically the word means 'to survive,' and refers to the survival of an idea beyond its natural lifespan.

Regardless of which definition you prefer, voting fits the bill.

By definition A:

Voting implies the belief in a causal connection between the act of voting and the improved function of government. Since all actual evidence points in the opposite direction, and the more elections we have, the worse things get, it is safe to say that this causal connection does not exist. That is to say, voting is a superstition.

By definition B:

Voting may or may not have been effective at one time. We grant this, and it would be foolish not to. Nonetheless, it remains true that even if this was at one time the case, it is simply not true anymore. The belief in voting has outlived itself. Thus, again, voting is a superstition.

Having said that, we are left with a big question: “Why?” That is, “Why do people continue to cling so obstinately to a belief that disappoints them again and again and again?”

To answer that question, we should instead ask why people hold onto superstitions. The answer, in part, is fear. Fear of change. Fear of the unknown. A desire for the security provided by a simple answer. If your friend dies, there is something perversely comforting about being able to say it was due to the black cat that crossed his path the day before. At least if that is true, then we know the causes of things. We understand. We have an answer for what would otherwise be a mystery, even if the answer is stupid.

What is perhaps more significant, however, is the sense of control this knowledge gives us. If you know anyone who actually carries around a rabbit’s foot every day, or uses any of the other tools of the superstitious trade, it is pretty clear what they want: control. If I know that my friend died because a black cat crossed his path, then I can prevent my own death, to at least some degree, by not letting cats cross my path.

This hints at the real foundation of superstition, which is the desire for control over one's circumstances. That is the reason for the rabbit's foot. That is also the reason for the vote. Even if it does nothing, it gives people who are otherwise frustrated, afraid, and confused, a sense of control over their destinies.

Modern man has good reason to be frustrated. I don't blame him for that. The world we live in today is vastly more complex than it ever has been before. If, at some point in history, the average person ever did have a comprehensive understanding of all the things that affected his life, and if he ever did have some semblance of control over his affairs, that was centuries ago.

In today's world people drive cars they cannot fix, live in houses they could not build, use cell phones and computers they barely understand; they undergo medical procedures they cannot fathom, they take strange medicines that control their emotions; they live in a world that is, more than at any other point in history, completely beyond their comprehension, and certainly beyond their control.

The point, dear reader, is that modern people need a sense of control, even if it isn't real. Modern people need a superstition, and they need it far more than their ancestors. That superstition is the vote.

The act of voting reassures them that all this talk about freedom is true. They need to be reassured of this, because they cannot see it for themselves. It is not obvious to them

that they are as free as everyone says they are. It is doubtful very many people really feel free. How could anyone feel liberated while being so utterly immersed in a supercomplex system of dependencies?

And then a savior comes. His name is Democracy. He holds out to them a piece of paper and says, “Your destiny is in your hands. All you need to do is fill in these dots and liberty shall be yours. Also, be sure to use a #2 pencil.”

The problem with superstitions, however real the need for them may be, is that they do not conform to reality. Those who believe in them wind up frustrated and lost, which is what they were trying to avoid in the first place. Superstitions are self-defeating, and reality always asserts itself in the end. The problem is that the deeper the person’s need for control, the more violently reality has to assert itself before it wins, before the superstitious person finally lets go of his charms.

That is why we, as a country, might have to continue on our course a little longer. But it can’t go on forever. Every election cycle, the candidates seem to be getting weirder. The spell will be broken, for the simple reason that the spell isn’t real.

The Non-Voters Win

In 2016, about 55% of all eligible voters cast ballots. That was a 20-year low. Of the 55% that voted, Donald Trump took about 26%. In case you haven't already done the math, that means that a quarter of the population now gets to impose its preference on the rest, for at least four years. The 45% who didn't vote, who chose not to confer on this candidate the right to govern them, and who therefore are not obliged to agree to this whole charade, are ignored completely. So much for majority rule.

This isn't new. Things were worse in the 1996 election, between Clinton and Dole. In fact, the only time the government could claim to really have the support of the general population was in the mid to late 1800s, when voter turnout rose to about 80%. Aside from that, it really isn't accurate to say that we live in a nation where the people choose their leaders. We live in a nation where some of the people--never a true majority---choose leaders for the rest, and the rest have to deal with it.

It does no good to say, "Well then, those non-voters should have voted." What would that have changed? Aside from boosting voter turnout, giving the winner we didn't want more legitimacy than he already has, and condoning a corrupt system, it would have changed nothing. Like so many of those pro-voting retorts, it only makes sense if you are already drinking the Kool-Aid.

The Example Of Henry David Thoreau

Telling a patriotic American that you don't vote is a little bit like telling a fundamentalist Christian that you don't believe in God. The immediate reaction is confusion, followed by moral indignation. Should you be brave enough to venture further into the conversation, you'll be assailed with a series of arguments of an extremely common and simplistic nature, as if you just pulled your conviction out of a hat, and your decision was something you hadn't really thought about at all. It's like they think you only need a good one-liner in order to set you straight. In short, you'll be treated like an idiot. In most cases, though, it won't stop there. They will begin to accuse you, whether directly or indirectly, of negligence, or indifference, and you will get the impression that you are on trial for some perverse crime. And you are. You are on trial for not voting, and that is, to most Americans, an act of treason. Voting is, for them, something very much like a religious dogma.

The sort of encounter described above--which is not an exaggeration and faithfully describes conversations I have actually had--could have turned into a really good exchange about politics, participation, history, social issues, economics, etc. But for that to happen, the person you encounter has to respect your ideas as potentially having legitimate value, even if they disagree with you. When it comes to voting, that's the one thing that can't happen. The decision to not vote calls into question a conviction that is too precious to be laid open to criticism, and so the

conversation devolves automatically into a matter of moral offense.

I wish it wasn't like this. Non-voters aren't nihilists. Non-voters don't hate America. As a non-voter I can say that I've read more of the works of the Founding Fathers than most of the folks I know, and I've learned good things from them. I've taken this into account in my deliberations. My ideas about politics are the result of years of hard work, study, and observation. I'm not always right, but I have taken great care to make sure that, when I speak, I know what I'm talking about.

What I'm trying to convey is that, when I say I don't vote, it is not that I don't care enough to vote; *it is that I care too much to vote*. And I'm not alone. This book, therefore, is meant to be an aid to those like me and those who would be like me if they weren't subjected to the nearly insurmountable social pressure to accept the status quo, no matter how unacceptable it may be.

If that sounds like you, then please know that you are not alone. Should you ever decide that you too *care enough not to vote*, it may also help you to know that you have predecessors in American history, and highly respected ones at that. Not only in recent decades, but even as far back as the mid-1800s. Henry David Thoreau might be the most notable example. In *Civil Disobedience* he wrote:

“How does it become a man to behave toward this American government to-day? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it...

What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.”

Thoreau’s reasoning was basically that the American citizen only has direct contact with his government in two ways: voting during elections and the payment of taxes. His method of protest was to maximize the impact of his will in these two points of contact, and in his view this meant simply not doing them. When he didn’t vote, they probably took little notice. When he refused to pay his taxes, they put him in jail.

What is unfortunate for us is that government has learned since then, and has removed one of these means of protest. *Taxes can’t not be paid.* If you are a wage-earner, the government gets their portion before you get yours. By the time we first see our paychecks, it is too late, and the taxes are already paid. That means there is only one of Thoreau’s options left: refuse to vote.

It’s hard, though, isn’t it? As I suggested above, most of us were taught to view voting as a pseudo-religious act, almost like a sacrament. The completed ballot is the Eucharist of democratic life. It nourishes the soul of all freedom-loving men and women. Woe to him who does not receive it with due reverence, and let him be anathema!

Isn’t it time we changed that? What if I told you that the ballot was nothing more than another piece of bureaucratic paperwork that you had to fill out during the year, like your taxes, except that the ballot also serves the purpose of a placebo, and is ultimately more for your emotional benefit

than anything else? What if I told you that the ballot is a substitute for effective political action, and that a real assertion of your freedom--perhaps the only means of assertion you have left--involves tearing it to shreds?

To understand what I mean, consider what such an act represents. It is a refusal of participation. That may not sound like much, but allow me to quote from Theodore Lowi's book, *Incomplete Conquest: Governing America*:

“Participation is an instrument of [government] conquest because it encourages people to give their consent to being governed...Deeply embedded in people's sense of fair play is the principle that those who play the game must accept the outcome. Those who participate in politics are similarly committed, even if they are consistently on the losing side. Why do politicians plead with everyone to get out and vote? Because voting is the simplest and easiest form of participation [of supporting the state] by masses of people. Even though it is minimal participation, it is sufficient to commit all voters to being governed, regardless of who wins.”

To refuse to participate is to refuse your consent, and at the same time it removes that subtle psychological pressure to accept any outcome. By abstaining from the ballot, you may not be able to stop injustice from occurring, but you are, in a very real sense, de-legitimizing it.

It is unfortunate that the notion of consent, which is found in the *Declaration of Independence* itself, gets so little real

attention in actual practice. I can only assume this isn't an accident. It sounds good in theory, but that is all it has ever been. As soon as the Revolution was over, consent could no longer have anything to do with it. The Civil War proved that much. The right of secession, which should logically follow from the principle of "government by consent," is absolutely forbidden, under pain of death. "The consent of the governed" was a piece of rhetoric that served its purpose and then was discarded.

Nonetheless, even if you cannot explicitly or officially withdraw your consent, you can do so implicitly, which, even if it does not stop the government from doing evil, will at least absolve you of the guilt that comes from having cooperated with it by voting for it. It won't stop them, but it will free you, morally and psychologically.

Of course, there is also the lingering fear that by abstaining you might fail to do some little good that might be accomplished along the way. For example, if some great social change is accomplished during a period when you did not vote, could it be said that you opted out of this effort? Well, not if we are to believe Thoreau.

Thoreau was for the abolition of slavery, but he also did not vote for or against it. This was because he believed that the vote usually followed social change rather than caused it. When society voted against slavery, it would be an 'affirmation' of a reform that had already occurred. He said:

"When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery it will be because they are

indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote.”

If a man or woman waits for issues like these to appear on the ballot. He will have waited too long. The ‘official’ mechanisms of social change are simply too slow to be taken into account when it comes to real, far-reaching change. That is why Thoreau thought that the best way to defeat slavery was not to dissolve the union but for citizens to dissolve “the union between themselves and the State--and refuse to pay their quota into its treasury.”

Ultimately, the insight we can draw from Thoreau is that we cannot, and should not, wait for the majority. Truth does not depend on the majority, and neither should the individual. In Thoreau’s words: “[Any] man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.”

This brings us to a final consideration before we move on. There are really two aspects to voting, and it is important to look at them separately in order to understand why you do what you do. First, there is the obvious external aspect: what does your vote do to the world? But second, there is the more subtle, internal aspect: what does your vote do to you?

Does casting your vote make the world a better place?

Does casting your vote make you a better person?

The answer to both these questions needs to be “yes.” If one is yes and the other is no, then something is wrong. What I

mean is, you should never have to compromise your dignity in order to make the world a better place, and you should never have to be unjust toward the world in order to protect your dignity.

The reason I say this is because the internal and the external are two sides of the same coin. If you surrender your dignity, in a very real way you have been unjust to the world of humanity; and if you are unjust to others you are truly hurting yourself, because the humanity you disrespect in others is a humanity that you have in common with them. Human dignity is a shared good, as much public as it is private.

If this is all sounding a bit wishy-washy, let me suggest a different tack. Look at people in general. What happens to them when they participate in election culture? Do they become better or worse? Do they rise to the height of human dignity, or is it more often a disgusting affair where the grossest vices are not only acted out but condoned, usually “for the sake of the greater good”?

In my experience, participation in democracy through voting degrades people. Not just the voters, but everyone. You, me, and especially the politicians who personify the system. It has always been this way, if we are to believe Alexis de Tocqueville, who observed that in America all those who participate in politics end up taking on the characteristics of the “courtier”:

“Democratic republics place the spirit of a court within the reach of a great number of citizens and

allow it to spread through all social classes at once. That is one of the most serious criticisms that can be made against them... Among the huge throng of those pursuing a political career in the United States, I saw very few men who displayed that manly openness, that male independence of thought, which has often distinguished Americans in previous times and which, wherever it is found, is virtually the most marked characteristic of great men... It is true that American courtiers never say: 'Sire,' or 'Your Majesty,' as if this difference was of great importance, but they do constantly speak of the natural enlightenment of their master. They do not seek to question which is the most admirable of the prince's virtues for they convince him that he has every virtue without his having acquired them and without, so to speak, desiring them. They do not give him their wives or daughters for him kindly to raise them to the position of his mistresses but, in sacrificing their opinions to him, they prostitute themselves."²

With that, I'll simply say again: What does voting do to you? Do you come out the other end more dignified, or do you come out degraded, frustrated, disappointed, patronized, and servile?

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 1.2.7.

If You Vote, Don't Complain

I've had a lifetime to sit and listen to the bad arguments that get hurled at people who don't vote. Usually they come in the form of pithy one-liners: "Bad Officials Are Elected By Good Citizens Who Don't Vote." Sometimes they are openly manipulative: "Vote: It's Your Children's Future!" Sometimes they are just mundane: "Make Your Vote Count!" And then, sometimes, one comes along that is downright threatening, like this one: "If You Don't Vote, You Lose Your Right To Complain!"

Yes, it sounds good on the surface, but there are some presuppositions hidden in it. For example, it only makes sense if you are already immersed in election culture and have accepted the rules of the game. If you choose not to vote, obviously you have rejected the rules and so this doesn't apply to you.

If we really stop to give it some thought, it seems that the opposite is more true. It isn't the non-voter who forfeits their right to complain--it is the voter who forfeits theirs. What I mean is, if you vote, then by voting you have implicitly agreed to the rules of the game. This includes the understanding that you will accept the outcome. Just as, in a game of basketball, by agreeing to play you have agreed that whoever scores the most points will be the winner. Morally speaking, if you accepted those rules, then you are the one who has no business complaining if the outcome is not pleasing to you. If you voted, you must live with the

outcome of the process. We, on the other hand, who rejected the process, are fully entitled to our criticisms of it.

If that still doesn't make sense, let me use an illustration:

Imagine someone asks you to play Russian Roulette. Now imagine that you say "yes." By saying "yes," you have accepted the rules of the game. You have agreed to the possibility that you might get shot. You knew what could happen, and you chose to play anyway. In the event that you do get shot, you are only going to sound like an idiot if you complain about it.

Now imagine that instead of saying "yes," you said "absolutely not." By saying this, you refused to submit yourself to the rules of the game. You, unlike the willing participants, are not obligated to accept the outcome with resignation. If you happen to get shot, you have every right in the world to complain about it.

Hopefully it makes sense now. I don't play Russian Roulette, and I don't vote, and I avoid both of these activities for almost exactly the same reason. I value my life, and those activities present a threat to it. If that sounds like an exaggeration, consider the fact that our government has the power to press its citizens into military service and then send them off to some other country in order to--you guessed it--get shot at. Still sound like an exaggeration?

Anyway, the point is this: If you accept the rules of the game and you play it, then you are the one with no business complaining about how it works out.

Does Voting Prevent Tyranny?

Here is another one you've no doubt heard a few times: "You must vote because voting is what stands in the way of tyranny."

In its many forms, this argument basically asserts that voting is the "key ingredient" for a free society, and claims that we should vote for no other reason than to keep the freedom that we have. Without it, we could slip into tyranny, like all those other countries...

To answer this, I'll mention another saying that you've probably heard: "If voting did any good, they'd make it illegal."

That's a joke, but it's also true. After all, if voting was really the buttress of freedom, and if voting was what kept tyranny at bay, then why did the former Soviet Union encourage as many voters as possible to participate in its elections? A similar thing happened in Zaire, where the system consisted of a single party and only one man was allowed to run in elections, but suffrage was universal and compulsory.

Can we take these examples into account and still claim that voting is what keeps tyranny at bay? Obviously not. These oppressive governments needed their citizens to vote, because voters give legitimacy to the regime. As Boris Yeltsin said, "You can build a throne with bayonets, but it's difficult to sit on." Ballots are much more comfortable.

As we have said already and will say again elsewhere, one of the main functions of voting is bestowing consent on whatever government is facilitating the election. Participation in itself, regardless of how one votes, is enough to confer this legitimacy. The rulers of a voting nation are, by definition, popular. Whatever they do, they can say that they did it with the consent of the governed. Voting does not scare tyrants. Tyrants love voting. The more people the tyrant can get to vote, the happier he is. It is therefore the non-voter who threatens him, because only the non-voter withholds consent.

"It's Your Christian Duty."

No. It. Is. Not.

I wish we didn't even need to go here, but, sadly, it seems we do. There is just way too much talk about 'sacred duty' and way too many Christians playing advocate for every Trump and Clinton that comes along.

As the cult of the vote has permeated American culture as a whole, it has been adopted into Christianity itself as a sort of aftermarket upgrade to make those old, outdated doctrines compatible without today's high-tech democratic way of thinking. After all, there are few ideas less compatible with "democracy" and "equality" than the notion of an all-powerful deity to whom we all owe our lives. Needless to say, drastic modifications were in order.

American Christianity, truth be told, has always had a difficult time distinguishing between what it owes to Jehovah and what it owes to Uncle Sam. The two things wind up mashed together and you're left with that ugly phenomenon called "Civil Religion," which refers to a religious attitude toward civil institutions. How else could we explain the fact that so many well-meaning Christians have no qualms whatsoever about participating in the rituals surrounding the American flag, which are clearly religious?

What you end up with is a bunch of god-fearing men and women trying to pay equal homage to Jesus and Thomas Jefferson. But as the saying goes: "No one can serve two

masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” And after all, Jesus only died for our sins. Thomas Jefferson died for our freedoms. It’s easy to see who is going to win here.

And by the way, while we’re talking Bible stuff, the only real example of democracy I can recall, at least the only one that even remotely resembles democracy in America, goes something like this:

“What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?” They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!”

As usual, we find that the Bible is an intensely realistic book. Obviously someone forgot to inform Pilate that, in accordance with the wisdom of democracy, “the truth” is nothing other than “the will of the people.” Had he known this, he wouldn’t have had to ask “What is truth?” and he wouldn’t have been so disturbed by what he was about to do. Instead, he could have basked in the rightness of having executed the will of the people. For democracy, the question “What is truth?” need not factor in.

Seriously though, great men, by nature, make average men uncomfortable. That’s why the Pharisees couldn’t stand Jesus. That’s why the people always choose Barabbas.

“Oh, but that was the Jews. They were the bad guys. It was different among the Christians.”

Yes, it was very different. When the Apostles needed to find someone to replace Judas, they didn't vote--they cast lots. They did not presume to take upon themselves the responsibility for a decision which they knew to be beyond them. In the Old Testament, the Jews used the same method.

To bring this back to the American context, I can say with all sincerity that casting lots would be a more reliable means of selecting a president. I don't say that it would be a good method, mind you. I only say that it would be better than what we are currently doing. If we cast lots and selected from the entire adult population, we'd at least have a chance, by sheer dumb luck, of choosing a normal, well-balanced person for the office. As it is, most healthy people are systematically excluded from the process. Unless you are a millionaire and a narcissist, you don't stand a chance.

Voting As Diversion

One of my early memories related to politics was the Clinton scandal. In fact, that is sort of a symbolic event for people my age. “Formational,” you might say. Think about it: My generation’s initiation into the noble project of democracy was to watch the president be put on trial for receiving fellatio from an intern at work. We got to see the leader of ‘the greatest nation on Earth’ grapple with the various possible meanings of the term ‘sexual relations.’ He did not fare well. I can draw a straight line between that moment and the ‘Obama toilet paper.’ It’s all the same.

Anyway, shortly after that, still during Clinton’s presidency, I also remember watching Iraq get bombed to hell for four days. Everybody was gathered around the television, watching things blow up. “Shock and awe” was mentioned. Ironically, I wasn’t sure who we were trying to awe. From my point of view, the enemy would have to be pretty impressed with us in order to be more impressed than we already were with ourselves. Then someone suggested that the only reason this was happening was because Clinton needed to get his sexual indiscretions out of the limelight for a while.

Now, I’m not saying I buy that explanation. Or at least, I’m certain that Clinton’s scandal wasn’t the sole motivation for the attack. Things are always complex. Nor do I really care

enough to research all the deliberations that led up to that decision. What I can say, however, is that if it was true, even partially true, it is completely ‘in character’ for the normal operation of things these days. That’s just how it works around here. Manipulation of the public is necessary due to the nature of election culture. If you agree to vote, in a very real way you are begging to be subjected to manipulations of every kind, non-stop, for as long as you agree to play the game. And, as was the case with the bombing, the most popular kind of diversion you will be subjected to is a conflict of some kind.

G.K. Chesterton said it best, even though he was talking about England:

“It is the mark of our whole modern history that the masses are kept quiet with a fight. They are kept quiet by the fight because it is a sham-fight; thus most of us know by this time that the Party System has been popular only in the sense that a football match is popular.”³

The United States has been at war for 214 of the 236 years since its birth. Say what you want about ‘making the world safe for democracy,’ that’s a bit of a problem. The reason for it might be that America is, as we are told, simply so great that she must spend all of her time defending herself from her numerous and nameless enemies. Maybe so. But there are also other explanations, which are a bit more reasonable,

³ *A Short History of England*, p.156.

and not nearly so flattering. For example, nothing draws power to the central government like perpetual war.

In the words of James Madison:

“In time of actual war, great discretionary powers are constantly given to the Executive Magistrate. Constant apprehension of War, has the same tendency to render the head too large for the body.”

And the words of Omer Talon, although older, are equally valid:

“War is a monster whom there is a conspiracy not to throttle, so that it may continue always as the opportunity of those who abuse the royal authority.”

It is an interesting contradiction that the Conservative Party, which seems to be far more inclined to warfare in its policies, is also the party which professes to be the enemy of big government. You can have war, or you can have small government, but you cannot have both. Republicans have chosen war, and the reason they have chosen it is because they, like their opponents, are concerned primarily with the acquisition of power. The small government thing is just a prop. For a political party, small government can never be a real goal. It can only be a fantasy idea employed to garner support.

In short, war is a great diversion, and elections are simply wars on the small scale. Every time the White House shifts from one party to the other, it has the appearance of a hostile takeover, and it feels like one from the point of view of the

voters. Just as, during war, the people identify themselves with the conflict, even if it is halfway across the world, so also they identify with the victories and defeats of their party.

An election is the ultimate sham fight, the ultimate diversion, and through it the American people are allowed to wage a publicly sanctioned war on one another, to say things about their fellows that under any other circumstances would be considered cruel or inappropriate, to openly hate. It is a discharge of pent up emotions that demand release, and the election format ensures that this discharge does not actually harm any of the powers that be. It is a 'controlled' release of frustration and violence, like the ancient festivals of Saturnalia.

Each election is a grand project, to be sure, and insanely expensive. But it is worth it, because it ensures that everything continues just as it is, and that those who rule will not be disturbed.

The Opium Of The People

We can also look at the issue from another point of view. Elections agitate, but they also pacify.

Voting calms the people, and it calms them by satisfying their desire for control. Elections not only act as a diversion, they act as a collective sedative.

This is what H.L. Mencken was getting at when he said: “Democracy is a sort of laughing gas. It will not cure anything, perhaps, but it unquestionably stops the pain.”

Karl Marx is famous for describing religion as “the opium of the people”—but it is far more true today that elections are the opium of the people. In fact, I think Karl Marx would have agreed. To understand this, let’s look at his famous statement about religion, this time with some context:

“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”⁴

Marx was criticizing society more than he was criticizing religion. He believed that in the face of ‘soulless conditions,’ people would look for a comfort of some kind. He concluded that religion was this comfort, and that it had come to be adopted as a warm blanket in the face of a cold reality. An

⁴ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*.

illusory warmth, to be sure, but the important point is that Marx's condemnation in this instance was not of religion as such, but of religion-as-escape-from-reality.

For Marx the problem with religion was that he thought it was being used to hide from social evils, which meant that these evils would never be seen, much less fixed. He didn't think it was right to ignore our problems, and so he thought that the security blanket should be taken away:

“The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.”⁵

Those who know me know that I do not share Marx's view of religion. I believe that although religion can be used to hide from reality and to avoid dealing with life's problems, this is not its real purpose. Using religion as a security blanket is an abuse of religion, and I think Marx judged it on the basis of its abused form, which is unjust. Having said that, I am with Marx when he says that anything which allows society to avoid dealing with its problems is, in this respect, an evil itself.

What does this have to do with us? We are clearly not a religious nation. Religion has been systematically excluded

⁵ Ibid.

from public life in America. Even the Christians among us like to praise the ‘separation of church and state,’ although their reasons for praising it are opposite those of the non-religious. Therefore, Marx’s words apply to us, but they apply in a different way. We still have an opium, an ‘illusory happiness’ that allows us to hide from the realities of our situation, but that opium is not religion. It is democracy.

In order to ‘dope up,’ we don’t go into a church, we go into a ballot box. There we pick up a fresh ballot, and this is our new security blanket that ensures us once again that we are in control, and that it’s all going to be okay.

To quote Hemingway:

“Religion is the opium of the people...Yes, and music is the opium of the people...And now economics is the opium of the people; along with patriotism...What about sexual intercourse; was that an opium of the people? Of some of the people. Of some of the best of the people. But drink was a sovereign opium of the people, oh, an excellent opium. Although some prefer the radio, another opium of the people, a cheap one...Ambition was another, an opium of the people along with a belief in any new form of government. What you wanted was the minimum of government, always less government.”⁶

⁶ *The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio.*

He goes on at length. Basically, there are a lot of opiums out there to choose from, but it's clear that we Americans have chosen ours. It's too bad, really. At least the religion Marx picked on, even when abused, could offer a healthy form of itself as an alternative. I'm not sure there is such a thing as a healthy form of election culture.

Voting Our Way Back To Barbarism

To vote is to express an opinion, but that is not all. Behind the vote is the intent to impose this opinion on the rest of the nation as well, with or without their consent. In a way, your vote is the ante in a winner-takes-all gamble for the direction of national policy.

Such a process is clearly unjust. No one has the right to impose his opinions on anyone else, even if he has a majority on his side. It doesn't matter whether he has 25% of the vote or 95% of the vote, he has no right. There is only one thing that can rightfully coerce the members of any society, and that is justice itself.

Justice is not an opinion. Justice can be searched out and objectively known. There is no reason to vote on it. That is why the traditional theory of law stated that it was the role of those responsible for legislation to "realize the law," which means to make known what the law already is. No one can "make law." In the old view, there were no such things as "lawmakers."

That is why I did not say that no force can ever be brought to bear on society at large. I do not say that there should be no coercion whatsoever. I only say that a collection of opinions, even a very large collection, is not equivalent to law. Coercion under certain circumstances is permissible, but it takes a lot more than a mob to justify it.

The idea that a majority should determine the direction of the country, and should determine what is and what is not justice, is a bizarre principle indeed, but it is not a new one. It is an expression of the age old doctrine that might makes right. To enforce the will of the greater number, for no other reason than that they are the greater number, is to give oneself back to the most primitive ways of doing things. It is the rule, not of reason, but of brute force.

As Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn put it:

“One could well imagine that if seven out of ten cavemen wanted to do a thing collectively in one way and the three others decided differently, the majority of these cavemen (assuming that they are of about equal bodily strength) could force the rest to accept their decision. The rule of majorities, in combination with the employment of brutal force, is likely to be the most primitive form of government in the development of mankind.”⁷

If truth were of primary concern for society, an entirely different method of arriving at political decisions would have to be adopted. I won't go into my notions about what that method should be, since that would require lengthy explanations which would be out of place here. Suffice it say, with Hippolyte Taine, that: “The combined ignorance of ten millions is not the equivalent of one man's wisdom.”⁸

⁷ *Menace of the Herd* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1943), p. 103.

⁸ *Origins of Contemporary France*, v. 1.

And with Fulton Sheen that, “Wrong is wrong, even if everybody is wrong. Right is right, even if nobody is right.”

Effective Representation

One of the guiding aspirations of American founders was that the government they instituted be “representative.” By this it is meant that those who make the laws are doing so as faithful representatives of the people, since it is the people who must live under the laws that are made. Now this is an understandable principle, but in practice things start to get complicated. In order to be “representative” it is not enough for a government to simply have representatives. A legislature may be filled with representatives and yet not represent the people in any meaningful way.

Thus, we should not simply demand representation, but should add that it must be effective representation. How is this achieved? First and foremost, by appropriate apportionment. Apportionment refers to the ratio of inhabitants to representatives. Turning once again to the ideas of the Founding Fathers, the Federalist Papers no. 55 and no. 56 explicitly promised, without qualification, that there would be one representative for every 30,000 Americans. The authors of the Federalist, at least, seemed to think that this ratio represented the maximum number of people one man could represent. Any larger, and the representative will become unable to represent his constituency and will either become disconnected from them or be forced to represent only a portion.

Right now this number stands closer to 700,000 inhabitants per representative. That’s twenty-three times the size of the ideal identified by the Founders.

If one measures “effective representation” as the amount of participative opportunity for the people in their government, we find that the United States, when compared to other first-world nations, comes in dead last, ranking behind Japan, Germany, Canada, France, the UK, and Finland. And we are not just behind. We are way behind.

This is a problem, obviously, and the solution is complicated. Since it would not really be feasible to up the number of representatives in order to bring down ratio, we immediately come up against the question of size. If our nation is so large that it cannot be effectively represented, then would it not be more appropriate to break it up?

Democracy becomes impossible beyond the size of a village. The larger the population governed, the less feasible the representative model becomes. America has long-since outgrown the governmental structures that were built for it when it was young. In order to retain the representative effectiveness that was originally intended under the Constitution, the union would have to be broken up, no just in two, but into quite a few pieces. The end result would probably look more like Europe, each state its own nation. Perhaps this is what needs to happen. Perhaps it might. Then, perhaps, voting might once again become an effective form of political participation.

The Founders On Political Parties

The Republicans and the Democrats are husband and wife. They feud, but only in the way that a hateful husband and wife might feud, despising the other while needing them, and without ever having any intention of leaving them. Their dual offspring are Big Business and Big Government. These two children fight just as violently, but in the end they are equally dependent on one another, so much so that you get the feeling they might actually have been twins. Whichever way you slice it, it's all in the family.

With that in mind, I'm happy to say that the two reigning political parties in America appear to be withering under the influence of their own diseases; and so, for the first time, I don't feel compelled to offer a lengthy critique of their respective positions. I think their inner contradictions and their blatant hypocrisies are becoming too obvious for even life-long members to deny, and everyone is beginning to perceive their internal similarities, once you get beyond the veneer of opposition.

To keep things brief, then, I will limit myself to a few words about political parties from the Founding Fathers, which can serve as an appropriate epitaph for the shared tombstone of the Democrats and Republicans.

George Washington lamented that political party wrangling "agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another."

He then continued to describe with precision the situation of our own day:

“The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism.”⁹

John Adams also had his two cents to add:

“There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution.”¹⁰

Thomas Jefferson wrote that political parties were an “addiction.” He called them “the last degradation of a free and moral agent,” stating further in his letters that, “If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all.”

It is typical of history books to say that Jefferson was a member of a party called the ‘Democratic Republicans,’ but we should be very careful not to project the present into the past. The other name for this party was the ‘Jeffersonians,’ which goes to show the stark difference between their idea

⁹ *Farewell Address*, 1796.

¹⁰ *Letter to Jonathan Jackson*, October 2, 1780.

of a party and ours. They did not have anything like the massive apparatus of impersonal machinery that existed for its own sake and which subordinated the personalities of all to itself.

Jefferson's party was formed on the basis of Jefferson himself, and it included people who believed in his way of thinking. Today's parties are the opposite. In order to be a candidate for them, you can't have ideas, a way of thinking, or even a personality. You just have to adhere to some abstract 'platform.' In fact, the less personality you have the better you are able to reflect the aspirations of those around you.

Suffice it to say that Jefferson did not have to compromise himself in order to gain entrance to 'the party,' but it was in fact the reverse: the party formed around him. The closest thing we've seen to that in recent history was the campaign of Bernie Sanders, who really operated 'out of bounds' and whose fans really did follow him as a person and not as a party hood ornament. But we all saw how that worked out.

Take advantage of this tumultuous time. Walk off the party platform. Swan dive, if you feel like it, into the ocean of alternative viewpoints that you were never before allowed to acknowledge as worthwhile.

Where Freedom Goes To Die

Freedom is a catchphrase for Americans. We are the freest nation in the world, the freest people in history!

Well...are we? It depends a lot on what criteria you use as the measure of freedom. If you mean simply the ability to cast a vote, then I suppose we are free. If you take just about any other standard besides that one, then it becomes a questionable premise.

For example, what about economic freedom? Freedom from worry about whether or not you'll be able to make ends meet this month, and the month after? Did you know that a peasant of the Middle Ages could provision his family for the year with only 150 days labor? Did you know that, thanks to the liturgical calendar and a healthy social life, a peasant in medieval England had four months off every year? Travelers in Spain from the same time period put that figure at five months. In France laborers were guaranteed fifty-two Sundays, ninety rest days, and thirty-eight holidays.

Did you know you pay a larger proportion in taxes than this peasant paid to his lord? And I'm not talking "these darn liberal tax rates." I'm talking Reagan levels here. You paid more to Reagan than the poor pitiful peasant that you are so much better off than paid in dues.

Oh, and another thing. When those guys you voted for get into some conflict over in who-knows-where, and it is

decided that, in order to 'make the world safe for democracy,' some people in some other country need to get shot, guess who has to shoot them? You do.

That is yet another form of servitude that the peasant we are discussing would never stand for, but which you accept as your noble duty. Conscription, or "the draft," would have gotten kings killed. That's why pre-modern armies were small, and campaigns short-lived. If the king had personal ambitions that required violence, and he wanted to bring in the peasantry, he paid for it out of his pocket. Guess who pays for the ambitions of America's leaders? You do.

The whole concept of conscription is a modern thing. It is a kind of servitude that only modern men have somehow been convinced to accept without a fight.

What makes it worse is that here again you'll hear something about "freedom isn't free," or about "what this country was founded on." But you know better than that by now.

To refer again to Thomas Jefferson:

"In this country [conscription] ever was the most unpopular and impracticable thing that could be attempted. Our people, even under the monarchical government, had learnt to consider it as the last of all oppressions."

And during the War of 1812, Daniel Webster had said:

“Where is it written in the Constitution, in what article or section is it contained, that you may take children from their parents, and parents from their children, and compel them to fight the battles of any war, in which the folly or the wickedness of Government may engage it?”

The new power of conscription led almost immediately to the rise of “standing armies,” which, like conscription itself, we take for granted. And yet the standing army was considered by them to be a social evil. Montesquieu, who observed the transition with horror, wrote of it as a sickness:

"A new disease has broken out in Europe: it has infected our rulers and caused them to maintain armies which are out of all proportion. It has its recurrences and soon becomes contagious; inevitably, because as soon as one State increases the number of its troops, as they are called, the others at once increase theirs, so that the general ruin is all that comes out of it. Every monarch keeps permanently on foot armies which are as large as would be needed if his people were in imminent danger of extermination; and this struggle of all against all is called peace."

And Thomas Jefferson seems to have agreed with his assessment:

"There are instruments so dangerous to the rights of the nation and which place them so totally at the mercy of their governors that those governors,

whether legislative or executive, should be restrained from keeping such instruments on foot but in well-defined cases. Such an instrument is a standing army."

Over and above all of these remarks about the conditions of our supposed freedom, there is still the mental aspect of the problem. There is an old saying: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." The implication is that it is our knowledge of the truth that sets us free, with also carries the contrary implication that ignorance that enslaves us.

If this is correct, then it follows that a person must "know the truth" before they can exercise freedom authentically. If a person makes a choice without knowledge of the truth, perhaps out of habit or social pressure to "exercise your freedom," then he is not exercising anything but his own ignorance. He is not free—he is a slave of his own ignorant choices.

Even if he knows what he wants, deep down, it does not follow that he will know how to vote in a way that realizes that desire. An ignorant vote may undermine his desires, and quite often this is precisely what happens.

Therefore, if someone accuses you of "not exercising your freedom," you can simply respond that voting, for you, is a sacrifice of your freedom, and so you refuse to do it. You can also point out to this person that if voting really were an exercise of freedom, then isn't it a bit of a contradiction that it requires so many enforcers going around pressuring people to do it? You almost get the impression that voting is

compulsory, at least culturally, but “compulsory freedom” is an oxymoron.

Voting For Hitler

There's another objection to voter abstinence that goes something like this: "What if you could cast the deciding vote against Hitler? Would you vote then?"

This is one of those "Gotcha!" scenarios people love to use, but the scenario itself makes little sense. First, it seems to imply that we, in this imaginary situation, already know what Hitler is going to do once he has power, which is impossible. But let's play along anyway...

If I found myself in a situation where Hitler was about to be voted into power, and where I also knew what was going to come of it, I would not vote for him. I would shoot him. In the head. There's certainly no moral problem with that course of action, and it actually seems to me like the safest bet. Why risk half-measures at a time like that? Moreover, shooting him would not require that I sacrifice my principles in any way.

Then the person will probably say something like, "Okay, but what if you couldn't get to him?" and bla bla bla, and things may continue on in this way forever, because there is, as they say, no limit to the imagination.

The problem with these scenarios is that they are designed to limit your possible actions to one option only. But in real life, there are always choices. Usually there are a lot of them, as long as you aren't so stuck in a specific mental paradigm that you can't see them.

Additionally, it would be very easy to turn this whole thing back on the other person. After all, the scenario as presented is actually the best possible refutation of voting that anyone could ask for. I mean, come on. *Hitler is about to be voted in*. A system that allows Hitler to be voted in is already a refutation of itself. This isn't a proof that voting is necessary; it's a proof that voting is dangerous.

The frightening part is that this never seems to occur to the voting advocate. They never make the connection between their regime and Hitler's. They aren't identical, granted, but there are distinct similarities.

Voting advocates always take the legitimacy of the voting system for granted, regardless of what sort of monster it is capable of producing. It doesn't matter that the system can create--and in fact has created--an Adolf Hitler. The only real way to prevent dictator-maniacs getting into power is not to vote against them. It is to undermine the very system that is capable of producing them.

The Lesser Evil Is Still An Evil

The argument that you should always pick “the lesser of two evils” is, without a doubt, the most common and most specious piece of reasoning in the whole circus. This lethal piece of illogic is popular for a very obvious reason: it justifies voting under any circumstances and for any candidate. If you accept it, then you never have an excuse for not voting. End of story.

For example, if a guy suggests that both candidates in a particular race are unsatisfactory, he will receive the following retort:

All men are flawed, and so it is unreasonable to demand all your expectations to be personified in the candidates before you. And so, although you cannot have what you want, you can at least measure the two and pick the one you don't want the least. You must choose the lesser evil. In fact, my dear boy, you are morally bound to do this. Otherwise, you will be responsible if the “greater evil” wins instead.

Infallible bit of reasoning, eh?

Now, if you happen to be Christian, this is really easy to answer. Christians are forbidden under any circumstances to choose evil, even if good may come of it (Romans 3:8). End of story. No rhetoric, no sob stories about the greater good. A Christian may not choose evil, because to choose evil is to orient the will toward it in such a way that even if good comes in the long run, the will was still oriented toward an

evil, and this is unacceptable. For a Christian, that is. And this remains true even if Christians, during election season, are running around spouting off about “the lesser of two evils,” just like everyone else. Their ignorance of Christian morality does not render it false. It isn’t Christ’s fault if so many Christians are stupid.

I mention the Christian aspect of the problem because so many Americans are in fact Christian, or at least that is the label they have appropriated for themselves. But even outside the Christian context, this argument fails miserably.

Practically speaking, “the lesser evil” argument would have us voting for Hitler himself if Stalin or Mao were the alternatives. In the end, the “lesser evil” argument is fallacious, and is only popular because it allows voters to justify themselves, and it enables them to bring moral pressure to bear on their neighbors who refuse to participate in evil.

In the end, all the argument does is guarantee that no desirable candidates will ever be produced by either party. The parties will not produce them because they will not have to. All they need to produce in order to win is a “lesser evil.” The candidate they offer will not be judged based on his virtues, by the standard of what is good, but on his opponent’s vices, by the standard of what is most evil. Within this structure, party candidates will slowly become less and less good, more and more evil, and the people will be morally obligated to continue voting for one of them. They will become so accustomed to weighing vices and

choosing an evil that they will forget what it means to choose a good. Maybe they already have.

This is why, even though we are not dealing exclusively with the Christian point of view here, we would do well to hear the words of the Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, who explained how one ought to face a choice between two evils:

“I feel a strong desire to tell you – and I expect you feel a strong desire to tell me – which of these two errors is the worse. That is the devil getting at us. He always sends errors into the world in pairs – pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is the worse. You see why, of course? He relies upon your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one. But do not let us be fooled. We have to keep our eyes on the goal and go straight through between both errors. We have no other concern than that with either of them.”¹¹

¹¹ *Mere Christianity*, p. 186.

You Don't Know Much, And That's Okay

Now we come to an issue which is so intertwined with our current problems that we cannot avoid mentioning it. It may, however, be the most unpleasant and the most difficult to accept.

What I mean is, we need to talk about knowledge. Or, more precisely, the lack thereof. Okay fine: we need to talk about ignorance. Your ignorance. And mine.

Democracy asks much of the men and women within it; so much, in fact, that it is difficult to imagine anyone answering the call with success. It is no insult to admit that a single person is not capable of achieving a level of knowledge we would term “competent” in very many areas. Some of us can fix any small motor problem that is put in front of them; some of us can code an operating system that is intuitive and powerful; some of us can perform heart transplants. Very few of us, if any, can do all of these things. We are limited. Our brains are limited. This is a fact. We can't know everything.

Now, the names on a ballot really represent a number of very complex questions. These are questions pertaining to regulatory difficulties, infrastructure, foreign policy, etc. Very, very, very few people have the time, resources, energy, and aptitudes necessary to study those questions properly. It would take almost a lifetime, in fact, to give

them the attention they deserve--to really understand them. Yet this is the expectation when one fills out a ballot. One should "be informed" about "the issues." Whatever that means...

In a democracy, during a national election, it is suggested to each and every voter that they must take a stance on all of these things, even if only indirectly through the choice of one name over another. They must do this whether or not they are properly equipped to do so and despite the fact that many of them may have never even cared to think about such things. And as we've already mentioned, democratic civilization goes even to the point of imputing a sort of negligence to those who, perhaps out of simple honesty, choose not to pronounce on these far-reaching issues by filling out a ballot.

Every voter is under immense pressure to make a choice, regardless of mental preparation or any intellectual qualification whatsoever. If you do not know, it does not matter. You must guess.

Can you sense the peril of such a situation? Masses of men being crowded into ballot boxes and asked to fill out questionnaires about men they do not know and who, ironically, may be as ill-equipped for the task of governance as themselves? Such conditions leave society ripe for exploitation. Deprived of knowledge, pressured into an act of irresponsible hypocrisy, the voter is just as likely to answer one way as another. The modern election, carried out in this fashion, becomes a large-scale expression of incompetence.

But now we must ask an ever more frightening question. What, if not knowledge, determines which way a person votes? He has to get an opinion from somewhere, and since he cannot properly formulate one himself, he turns to what he hears around him. He cannot help it, and he should not be expected to help it. He is helpless.

Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote the famous *Democracy in America*, explained how even though Americans proclaimed an adamant belief in “freedom of thought,” they almost immediately became slaves to the opinions of the crowd. His explanation is insightful:

“In democratic nations, the general public possesses an unusual power which aristocracies could not imagine. It does not impose its beliefs by persuasion but inserts them in men’s souls by the immense pressure of corporate thinking upon the intelligence of each single man.

“This very equality which makes him independent of each of his fellow men delivers him alone and defenseless into the hands of the majority.

“In the United States, the majority takes upon itself the task of supplying to the individual a mass of ready-made opinions, thus relieving him of the necessity to take the proper responsibility of arriving at his own.”¹²

¹² *Democracy in America*, 2.1.2.

This is why Thomas Jefferson himself lamented that “the inquisition of public opinion overwhelms, in practice, the freedom asserted by the law in theory.”

Of course, in Tocqueville’s time there was no television and no internet. Today we do not have to turn to the general public: we can turn to the media.

Considering the fact that American homes today have more televisions inside them than human beings, it is clear that the media has probably overwhelmed the power of the general public. In our world, we only encounter the general public in small doses, at work or at the gym, but the radio can talk at us all day long, and the faces on the television speak at us late into the night. Add to this the fact that whatever appears on television is imbued with an appearance of authority, and it is no surprise that most people simply adopt whatever they here on the news as their personal opinion on things.

The educator, Mortimer Adler, once observed how the media is able to give a man the satisfying feeling of having made up his own mind when, in actuality, he “does not make up his own mind at all. Instead, he inserts a packaged opinion into his mind, somewhat like inserting a cassette into a cassette player. He then pushes a button and ‘plays back’ the opinion whenever it seems appropriate to do so.”

Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic, observed the same thing, saying that this situation creates an unthinking man: “He does not talk, he produces conventional sounds when

stimulated by the appropriate noises. He does not think, he secretes clichés.”

The point of all this is simply to illustrate that if you place undue moral pressure on a person to “know” something, and if this person has neither the time nor opportunity to study and understand what you have told him he must “know,” then he will wind up picking up a ready-made opinion from somewhere else. It’s just human nature. It isn’t because he is dishonest. In most cases, he will actually believe that he arrived at his opinion all on his own. He isn’t a liar. He is simply a victim of the unrealistic demands of a system that ignores the limits of humanity.

We’ve already mentioned a couple of times how this plays out with the ideas of the Founding Fathers. Americans everywhere talk as if they had spent years studying the writings of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington, when in reality most of them have never read a single page. Yet they persistently refer to “what this country was founded on,” and “what the founders wanted,” all without blinking an eye. *They really think they know.*

If you want to see how far this has progressed, and how real the problem actually is, just consider the following observations about the average American voter:

He thinks he knows what’s going on with global warming, whether the science is valid or not.

He thinks he knows what sort of effect a tax adjustment will have on the national economy.

He thinks he knows how immunizations work.

*He thinks he knows what 'organic' means.
He thinks he knows what should be done about the
conflict in the Middle East.*

The list could go on—from Benghazi to the Big Bang—but that shouldn't be necessary.

It's obvious that the number of people alive in the world who are truly competent on any one of the issues listed above is undoubtedly very small. And it also certainly true that no one on earth has the time, experience, intelligence, and information necessary to become truly competent on all of these issues at once. So what gives? How can a man believe he knows so much about something when in fact he knows almost nothing?

In short, how could we be so ignorant?—for ignorance, according to St. Augustine of Hippo, is what occurs when a man “believes himself to know that which he does not know.”

You are already ignorant. So am I. But it's okay. Ignorance is mostly benign, so long as we acknowledge it. As long as I do not burst into an operating room and try my hand at a heart transplant, it isn't really a big deal that I don't know how to do one. But in American politics, especially when it comes to voting, our ignorance becomes malignant, and one of these days it might prove fatal. From a certain point of view, it already has.

The Information Age

The problem of human ignorance is exacerbated by the myth of the “information age.”

We do indeed live in an age where we are immersed in unprecedented amounts of raw information. But we must acknowledge an important distinction: that there is a difference between the availability of information and the ability of the individual to assimilate it and turn it into knowledge. That is to say, human nature is somewhat static: the human mind can process so much at a time, and no more. Throwing more data at it, or immersing the same human mind in oceans of data does not change the nature of that mind. In fact, by drowning it in information, its ability to function properly might actually be hindered.

What I mean to say is that the sheer availability of information may or may not have any impact on whether or not that information can be effectively utilized.

Just look at the internet, which epitomizes the information age. There is an unprecedented amount of information available there, and this gives the impression that everyone with access to the internet, because they have such a limitless resource at their disposal, should be able to use this resource to evaluate and decide on just about any problem they face. But is this realistic?

No. Of course not. The opportunity to sit in front of a computer does not in any way guarantee that the right bits of

information will be discovered by the right people at the right time. The internet holds an incomprehensible amount of data, and sifting through it to find information that is both timely and true can turn into an equally incomprehensible enterprise. If you are a voter trying to get to the bottom of a conflict in the Middle East, for example, are you really going to have the stamina to wade through the mountains of partial statistics, slanted reports, bad history, adware, and porn that will interfere with your search?

It is much more likely that you'll get stupefied in the process and wind up looking at cat memes for three hours. Trust me, I've been there.

Masses Do Not Reason

Next, since we're being honest with ourselves, we need to admit that just because "two heads are better than one," it does not follow that two million heads are better than one. Again, due to human nature, it tends to work in the opposite direction, and too many individuals in a group tends to move things in the direction of hysteria and irrationality.

While large groups can never "think" together as one, social psychology has demonstrated that they are capable of "feeling" together as one. This is the explanation for group hysteria and herd instincts and so on, where people act out in bizarre ways under the influence of the pressures of the group. The same does not go for thought, however, and in fact, the tendency of the group to go by feel works directly against the capacity of the individual to engage his reason.

The takeaway is that when you group people into a huge mass, you actually decrease your chances of getting a rational response. What you'll get is an emotional reaction, although it may come in the form of a phrase or a talking point, if the group in question has been adequately exposed to the television set.

Two heads are better than one...but what about two million?

What has been said so far has concerned the individual voter; but there is another difficulty which should be mentioned because it rears its head every election, and could

explain many of our political frustrations if we would only acknowledge it. The problem is related to group psychology.

No one will deny that men working together can almost always accomplish more than one man in isolation. It is true that the “cord of three strands is not easily broken.” But there is another piece of ancient wisdom which says that a truth, stretched to the extreme, will become its opposite.

So what happens when we stretch the proverb “two heads are better than one” to the extreme, and pretend that because two are better, then two hundred million must be even better still? It is here that we make a frightening discovery about human nature:

The mental level of the crowd is not the “average intelligence” of all the individuals combined. On the contrary it, the crowd drops to the level of the lowest elements present. The most foolish individuals form a “ceiling” above which the group does not rise. This is why we speak of “herd mentality.” Unfortunately, we are unwilling to see this truth in the political sphere.

What's Your Sphere Of Competence?

I've been trying to develop the concept of 'competence' in order to illustrate where ignorance ends and knowledge begins. It is an important subject because I would hate to give the impression that I see people as stupid, good-for-nothings who shouldn't be trusted with a stapler. On the contrary, the human mind is capable of incredible feats of understanding. All I wish to emphasize is that his mind is still a human one, which is to say it is limited. In order for us to make the most of what we have, we must focus our powers where they will actually be effective.

A good method I've found of illustrating this is the sphere of competence. The sphere of competence is simply a visualization of the area covered by your knowledge, and the circumference is placed at that point where your knowledge begins to fade out and where, as a result, you become incompetent.

Everybody has a sphere of competence. Some may stretch further than others, and everyone's sphere is bound to be a bit different, but the important point is that everyone's sphere ends, and it usually ends a lot sooner than we like to think.

This truth--that the sphere of competence exists and must be respected--has profound implications for political theory. It is the reason why serious political philosophers through the

age have acknowledged democracy, but dismissed it as inappropriate for large-scale government. For example, Sir Robert Filmer said in 1680 that “no Democracy can extend further than One City. It is impossible to Govern a Kingdom, much less many Kingdoms by the whole People, or by the Greatest Part of them.”

It was not that democracy was not feasible in any way. It was simply that it required all its participants to have a sphere of competence that encompassed the whole of the system. This is doable, perhaps, in a small city--a very small city. But anything beyond that begins to put impossible expectations on the participants by expecting them to address, through voting, a number of problems that are well beyond their spheres.

Each one of us has a few things which we are good at, a few tasks which we understand and can accomplish with proficiency. We may go beyond these and experiment with other tasks if the consequences are trivial, or if we find ourselves in a training environment where that sort of thing is appropriate; but I should not be diagnosing my friends with heart conditions, nor should I attempt to give them root canals, nor should I, personally, try to fix their engines, since I know nothing about that. In short, we all know enough not to go beyond our “sphere of competence” in daily life.

One might respond that, in voting, we are selecting a person, and this is based on our judgement of his character, and does not imply that we think we know how to make decisions on the national scale. Setting aside the fact that you must understand the issues in order to judge another’s competence

to solve them, we can still place the process of ‘character judgement’ within the context of the sphere of competence.

The same reasoning applies as before. We all have a group of people whom we know something about because they are our neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family. We know that beyond these people, whom we have encountered on a personal level, the world is full of strangers—people whose experiences, strengths, faults, or beliefs we do not understand. And it would be foolish to pretend we did. So while I admit that you might be competent to select a person you trust from within your family or neighborhood or hometown, I must also insist that you are only able to do this because that is your sphere of competence. You actually know these people. So my question is: has your sphere ever included a presidential candidate?

The Myth Of Common Sense

Finally, I need to address a popular myth that seems to persist in democratic societies. It is the belief in a thing called ‘common sense.’ Now, I call it a myth not because common sense does not exist. It does. But the very particular way it is used in American society is a myth. Common sense--real common sense--is what keeps you from spitting into the wind. That’s legitimate. But common sense does not tell you what appropriate tax policy should be on a national level; it doesn’t tell you when it is legitimate to use military force. These things are not within the purview of common sense, and so when I talk about the myth of common sense, what I am referring to is the ridiculous idea that common sense is able to provide anyone and everyone the ability to answer every complex question that comes along.

When we encounter that sort of thinking, we’ve encountered the myth of common sense. Then we are right to say with H.L. Mencken: “Explanations exist; they have existed for all time; there is always a well-known solution to every human problem — neat, plausible, and wrong.”

‘Common sense explanations’ are popular for a simple reason. They have the appearance of obviousness. That’s why the talking heads on the news try to put forward their explanations as ‘common sense,’ because things that are common sense are so obvious that you shouldn’t even have to think about them in order to see that they are true. So of course the folks on television want you to adopt their explanations as that kind of an idea. It is safe to assume,

then, that anytime a politician or a pundit offers a common sense solution, he is really just begging you not to think too much about what he just said.

Unfortunately, the pundit often gets his way, and the general population winds up with a collection of ‘obvious’ explanations which they are told they can apply to pretty much anything. For example, if you happen to have free-market leanings, you will hear the word ‘competition’ thrown around in almost every context as a positive force for progress. Whether it’s survival of the species or education or business, competition becomes synonymous with justice itself. That’s just one example.

When a particular collection of these oversimplified notions grows enough in popularity to become a movement or a ‘school of thought,’ we call it an ‘ideology.’

Ideologies are a kind of systematized common sense offered as a worldview. Instead of the single pre-packaged explanation sometimes offered by the news, an ideology is a whole ‘worldview.’ It is not meant to solve one problem, but to solve any problem the person happens to encounter.

An ideology is adhered to not because it is logically coherent. Often it results in outright contradiction. For example, the conservative ideology offers the belief in free markets side by side with ‘family values.’ Anyone even loosely acquainted with family life during the rise of capitalism, with children working seven days a week in sub-slavery conditions, will be able to see that capitalism and family values do not meld. Yet it works, and the

conservative ideology is very popular, not because it is effective, and not because it accurately describes reality; it is adhered to because it offers a simple explanation that sounds good to people with a certain temperament. And what is simple and sounds good will always be adopted before what is impossibly complex and often unpleasant. That is to say, ideology will always win against reality.

So, what does this have to do with voting? Well, if you understand your competence and accept your limits, you will have no need for ideology. It is the voter who needs a simple explanation for all problems. If he didn't have all the answers, how would he know what to vote for?

Words Without Meaning

Part and parcel with ideology is the use of words that give the impression of deep meaning but which actually have no meaning at all. I'm talking about words like: Freedom, Equality, Progress, Competition, Democracy, Patriotism, Rights.

These are slogans, not ideas. They are invoked, as a sorcerer would invoke a spell in order to counter some invisible spirit. They give the impression of thought while not necessarily requiring any thought at all. If you want see what I mean for yourself, just wait until the next time someone uses one of these words, and then try to discern exactly what they mean. Usually these slogans are pronounced more for emotional effect, or to convey a feeling, than to convey a reasoned argument. Try it.

Take, for example, the saying that "all men are created equal." This sounds good. Heck, it sounds really good. Very humanitarian. But what does it mean? It would require a treatise to really get specific about it, and no one wants to read a treatise, much less think one out inside their heads. This means that most people just take it as it stands: "all men are created equal." Which is to say, they take it to mean whatever they want it to mean. They adopt the phrase and fill it with whatever validates their particular point of view. This phrase in particular is so pleasing and so vague that Christians and atheists can both use it with equal vigor. Sometimes they may even use it in unison, as if they finally found some common ground, thinking that they each mean

the same thing when they say it. Until they find out that they don't.

The same thing goes for freedom. Everyone loves to talk about protecting our freedoms, but once you get down to it everyone means something different. Do you mean the freedom of a man to marry a man? No? Well then maybe you should stop going on and on about 'freedom' and start being more specific. What you probably meant, in the end, was that you believe in moral goodness, which may or may not involve the exercise of personal freedom. I'm good with that. I like moral goodness. I just wish people would say that. I wish people would say what they really mean, and stop saying things they don't. But this is a result of ideology. Ideology is already an oversimplification of reality, a set of explanations that are popular not because they explain but because they sound good. And words like Freedom, Equality, Progress--these are the same. They are used not because they are filled with thought but because they are filled with feeling, and in the absence of understanding, feeling reigns.

Don't let feeling reign. Don't use ideologies. Don't vote.

Economic Power Vs. Political Power

Enough about knowledge. Let's talk about money.

I've said repeatedly that the problem with voting is that it obscures things that need to be acknowledged, and can act as a smokescreen for corruption. One thing this smokescreen has thoroughly hidden from American political awareness is the distinction between economic power and political power, and how the two can influence one another.

I do not have a problem with money, in itself, nor do I have a problem with people who have lots of it. It seems necessary to say this only because the reaction, whenever someone dares criticize the wealthy, is usually to accuse that person of desiring the wealth for himself. It is as if the only conceivable reason that someone would criticize wealth is if they coveted it for themselves. If that is the way you think--if you are truly unable to imagine any other motive for criticizing wealth than the simple desire for it--then you might be the one with the greed problem. So again, I do not have a problem with the existence of wealth or wealthy people.

What I do have a problem with, however--and what everyone should have a problem with--is the ability of one social group to bend political activity in favor of their interests in such a way that the interests of all other social groups are undermined. And this is precisely what happens when the wealth of the nation concentrates into the hands of a few. Those few begin to wield a disproportionate influence

on political activity, for no other reason than that they have large quantities of money while other people do not. Such a situation is not democracy, but plutocracy.

In order to head off an objection, I would also like to say that, if what I have just said is true, then it does no good to launch into hysterics about, “What do you want to do, take all their hard-earned wealth and divide it up amongst everyone? That’s unjust!” I didn’t say what I would do to fix the problem, and what I would do really has no bearing on the truth of the analysis just made. If the situation we currently have is unjust, then let’s at least acknowledge that before we go spiraling off on some tirade about how people like me just want the wealth for ourselves. That sort of reaction is, I find, really just an attempt to ignore the problem by short-circuiting the conversation with straw men and hyperbole. Let’s not go there.

Returning now to what I said above: if money can influence politics, and some people have massive amounts of it while some have very little, then it follows that the political influence will be divided out accordingly, in which case we do not have democracy but plutocracy. Votes may still be counted, but it will become apparent that what we are voting about, and who we are voting for, was decided by money, and so the ‘democracy’ element only kicked in after the ‘plutocracy’ element was finished.

But there is another problem with this. Seeing things as they are, we might ask how they could be any different. After all, unless everyone has equal quantities of money, this problem will be almost unavoidable. And we will eventually be led to

the possibility that democracy and plutocracy are not different things, but the same thing from different points of view. Or, to say it another way, the theory of democracy seems to lead irrevocably to the practice of plutocracy. Turning to historian Oswald Spengler:

“...it must be concluded that democracy and plutocracy are the same thing under the two aspects of wish and actuality, theory and practice, knowing and doing. It is the tragic comedy of the world-improvers' and freedom-teachers' desperate fight against money that they are ipso facto assisting money to be effective. Respect for the big number—expressed in the principles of equality for all, natural rights, and universal suffrage—is just as much a class-ideal of the unclassed as freedom of public opinion (and more particularly freedom of the press) is so. These are ideals, but in actuality the freedom of public opinion involves the preparation of public opinion, which costs money; and the freedom of the press brings with it the question of possession of the press, which again is a matter of money; and with the franchise comes electioneering, in which he who pays the piper calls the tune. The representatives of the ideas look at one side only, while the representatives of money operate with the other.”¹³

The truth, then, is this: political power follows economic power wherever it goes. It doesn't matter how adamant you

¹³ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West: Perspectives of World History* (New York: Knopf, 1928), pp. 401-402.

are about everyone being created equal, or how often you say “every vote counts,” the practice is always the same. Greater economic status carries with it greater political influence. This does not have to be considered on the large scale either. We can all perceive it if we take a step back and look at our circumstances.

The vast majority of Americans are wage-earners. That means they work for someone else. They don't “own” the business they work at, they are simply paid for their time. It is also true that most of these people do not hold much wealth and are, in a very real way, economically dependent on the employer. Due to this situation alone, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the wage-earner's judgment is compromised. He does not vote for interests that are “his,” but instead votes in the interest of his employer. Or, if he happens to be on welfare of some kind, he would vote in the interest of the state. In either case, he does not have his own independent interest. Instead, due to his dependence, his interests are subsumed into the interests of another, someone higher on the economic food chain, because these provide his livelihood. In short, he never votes for himself, because he can't. Such a man is politically servile for the simple reason that he is economically servile. And that is the situation of most Americans. That is reality in a plutocracy.

On the other end of the spectrum, we see the opposite. If a man has vast economic resources at his disposal, he will be capable of sponsoring candidates and lobbying in his own interest in such a way that no man with merely average economic means can stand against him in the political

sphere. The rich man's vote, regardless of what the law says about equality, is worth more than the poor man's. This is because the poor man just has his vote, while the rich man has a vote and the economic power to determine what is being voted about. They both fill out the ballot, but one of them wrote it.

You, if you are of average means, cannot lobby in Washington, fund campaigns, or influence which names appear on the ballot sheet. You do not own a television station or a newspaper, and so your "free speech" is reduced to nothing in comparison to the ceaseless propaganda of the major media outlets, which themselves are controlled by the economic power of only a handful of people. Because you cannot choose who you vote for, it does not really matter which choice you make when you fill out the form. By that time, you are merely being flattered and patronized.

If you still have your doubts, consider the fact that in the 2012 cycle there were 435 House elections. Of those, the big spender won 95% of the time. And consider also the sums of money put into each presidential campaign. Who is providing that money, and for what purpose? Patriotism, or power? And do you think they'd be doing it if it was a waste of time? Would all these millions be poured into the process if millions were not able to determine the result? It is done this way because it works.

Many people, thankfully, are beginning to see this, and it is this, and not indifference, that leads to the mass exodus from the polling places. Here again we can refer to Spengler, who observed that under these circumstances,

“...the vote ceases to possess anything more than the significance of a censure applied by the multitude to the individual organizations, over whose structure it possesses in the end not the slightest positive influence. So also with the ideal thesis of Western constitutions, the fundamental right of the mass to choose its own representatives--it remains pure theory, for in actuality every developed organization recruits itself. Finally the feeling emerges that the universal franchise contains no effective rights at all, not even that of choosing between parties. For the powerful figures that have grown up on their soil control, through money, all the intellectual machinery of speech and script, and are able, on the one hand, to guide the individual's opinions as they please above the parties, and, on the other, through their patronage, influence, and legislation, to create a firm body of whole-hearted supporters...which excludes the rest and induces in it a vote-apathy which at the last it cannot shake off even for the great crises.” (p. 456)

This indifference to the hard-won rights is simply the result of a simple realization: "One can make use of the constitutional rights only when one has money.”

As a final note, I should tell you that Spengler prophesied about what would come next. He said that, as a result of this disillusionment, the nation would stumble toward what he called the “Age of Caesarism,” when a man of "instinct" and “personality” would draw to himself a large number of

frustrated men and women, not because he upholds any traditional values, but simply because he represents something violently different than the dull, tasteless leaders that preceded him. Sound familiar?

This should provide a rough outline of the problem of political vs. economic power, and will allow us to move on into specific issues related to that problem.

Investment Theory And Party Politics

Political parties are sometimes envisioned as organizations constructed on the basis of popular opinion and which aid the people in making their will felt in a more effective manner. Actually, I'm not really sure who still envisions them in this way, but I can only assume that since they continue to exist, someone must. At any rate, in practice they are nothing more than machines which concentrate and organize investment dollars in such a way as to make sure that these investors receive a maximum return for their trouble. The best description of how this actually works is found in a book by Thomas Ferguson called *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems*. He explains his theory as follows:

"[Political parties] are organizations composed of blocs of major investors who come together to advance favored candidates in order to control the state. They do this through direct cash contributions and by providing organizational support through the making available of sources of contacts, fundraisers and institutional legitimization. Candidates are invested in like stocks. For them electoral success is dependent on establishing the broadest base of elite support. Candidates who have best internalized investor values see their 'portfolios' grow exponentially at the expense of candidates who have not internalized these values. So what you have is a

filtering system in which only the most indoctrinated and business friendly of the intellectual class advance to state power. The higher you go up the ladder the more you've appealed to elite interests. Representatives of the major investors are also often chosen to fill political appointments after a favored candidate has achieved office. This political-economic model helps explain why the state largely functions to serve elite business interests on the domestic and international stages.”

This should, in large part, explain the phenomenon of ‘revolving door’ politics, where government agencies tasked with the regulation of certain industries wind up being managed by former employees of the business they are tasked with regulating. For example, an FDA appointment may go to the ex-CEO of a major dairy collective, and this ex-CEO will then be the one responsible for enforcing the law against the company which he just left, and which no doubt funded his campaign and got him the appointment. Needless to say, this turns government agencies into nothing more than another branch of the industry. And this is why food legislation, if it hurts anyone in the industry, usually hurts the smallest members and helps the largest. For example, the laws requiring the pasteurization of milk, and deeming raw milk ‘inherently dangerous,’ despite its unpasteurized use since the beginning of time. Pasteurization equipment is a product of large-scale industry. It is necessary only in this context due to the unsanitary conditions of machine-production, and was invented by these industries as a result of their need. Thus, when it a law comes into force that says that this immensely expensive technology must be

used by everyone, it only affects the small producers do not need pasteurization and cannot afford it. They cannot survive, and are bought out. The FDA turns out to be little more than a form of legal muscle for the benefit of big business. Yes, government agencies of this kind have legitimate purposes, and it wouldn't be wise to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but this "regulatory capture" is a very real problem and ought not to be allowed to fly under the radar any longer.

In addition to what has been said above, Ferguson's investment model explains other problems as well, such as why those issues which should be center stage in public debates are so often prevented from ever seeing the light of day:

"So what would we expect from a system like this? One thing we would expect is that on issues which the public cares about but on which there is cross-party investor agreement no party competition will take place. That means that the issues the public is most interested in will not appear on the agenda."

When you own the theatre, and you pay the actors, you get to write the script. If you allow the audience to vote on the ending, they may thrill at the sense of involvement it brings them, but the climax will have already been arranged.

Corporations And The Personification Of Money

Given what has already been said about the primacy of money in the American political system, we cannot avoid mentioning the role of corporations.

To begin with, we can again refer to the Founders, whose works are so rarely read by those who so frequently invoke them. What would the Founders say about corporations in their republic?

First, Thomas Jefferson:

“I hope we shall take warning... and crush in it’s birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial of strength, and to bid defiance to the laws of their country.”¹⁴

Second, James Madison:

“There is an evil which ought to be guarded against in the indefinite accumulation of property... The power of all corporations ought to be limited in this respect. The growing wealth acquired by them never fails to be a source of abuse.”¹⁵

¹⁴ *Letter to George Logan*, 12 November 1816.

¹⁵ *Detached Memoranda*, 1817.

It seems pretty clear from the attitudes expressed above that the Founders may not have been keen on the idea of “monied corporations” using their “accumulation of property” to influence and determine political decisions, and the Tillman Act of 1907 made this explicit. Nonetheless, various legal battles continued to be brought before the court until finally, in the 2010 case of *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the campaign contributions of corporations could not be prohibited, on the grounds that, at least in this respect, corporations qualified as persons under the First Amendment.

The implications here are vast, and we cannot explore them all. Suffice to say that we now live in a nation where a piece of legal paperwork--the corporation--is considered a person, while a human fetus is not. Regardless of your stance on abortion, this speaks profoundly about the mentality underlying our legal system.

Spengler said that in order to make use of constitutional rights, one must first have money. If we compare the corporation and the fetus, the first of which has limitless funds, the second of which has none whatsoever, it seems he was right.

Institutionalized Bribery

Before we move away from topics relating to money, I wanted to add a note about bribery. Have you ever wondered why bribery, that heinous crime once punishable by death, is something you never really hear about anymore? I can tell you.

During certain periods in history, a society's moral compass will shift in such a way that it will begin to allow certain behaviors that, until that moment, it had always considered illegal, unpleasant, immoral, or taboo. When this happens, it faces a serious problem. It now accepts something that it knows is a crime. Going back is not an option, or at least not an acceptable one. By this time it has become unthinkable to simply stop doing it. This being the case, I have found that the solution which society turns to is just to rename the behavior. Simple, effective, and best of all, requires no actual changes in behavior.

As an example of what I mean, let's take the term 'individualism,' as in 'the rugged individualism of the pioneers.' In America this term is used as if it were a virtue. We take the goodness of individualism for granted. However, there was a time when that term was not in use. Instead, there was a term called 'egoism,' and it did not refer to a virtue. It referred to a vice. But we never hear of 'egoism' anymore, do we? Why not?

Let's turn to Alexis de Tocqueville for an answer:

“Individualism is a recently coined expression prompted by a new idea, for our forefathers knew only of egoism.

“Egoism is an ardent and excessive love of oneself which leads man to relate everything back to himself and to prefer himself above everything.

“Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which persuades each citizen to cut himself off from his fellows and to withdraw into the circle of his family and friends in such a way that he thus creates a small group of his own and willingly abandons society at large to its own devices. Egoism springs from a blind instinct; individualism from wrong-headed thinking rather than from depraved feelings. It originates as much from defects of intelligence as from the mistakes of the heart.

“Egoism blights the seeds of every virtue; individualism at first dries up only the source of public virtue. In the longer term it attacks and destroys all the others and will finally merge with egoism.”¹⁶

I call this process ‘renaming our vices,’ and it happens a lot. It helps us live with ourselves while at the same time acting against our better judgement.

¹⁶ *Democracy in America* (London, 2003), p. 587-588.

Now you are probably wondering what this has to do with bribery. Well, the reason you don't hear about bribery anymore is because we got rid of it by replacing it with a new term that means essentially the same thing. We called it 'lobbying.'

It would be a lot of fun to reanimate George Washington and show him how lobbying works. You would no doubt explain how this activity is an integral part of the American political process. And then he would probably challenge you to a duel, which, lucky for you, we don't allow any longer. He would see lobbying for what it is: the institutionalization of bribery.

What this really says about us, though, is that we've become so comfortable with money running our politics that it no longer even strikes us as odd.

Eight Stages Of Voter Apathy

Even if you haven't quite reached the point where you're ready to give up voting completely, you have probably at least begun to question its effectiveness. In that case, we're already a lot closer to one another than you think. Most people, in fact, seem to go through a series of phases or disappointments on their way to the position of voter abstinence. Where are you on this spectrum?

In order to help you find out, I've created a simple tool called the Eight Stages of Voter Apathy. Take a look:

Stage 1. You believe in the system. Every election cycle you dutifully and enthusiastically research the career history and positions of each candidate. You enthusiastically discuss these things with friends and family, and when the big day comes you vote for the candidate whose position was most in line with your own.

Stage 2. Despite your best efforts, it seems that the government is broken. You blame the politicians, since they are the government. When their terms come to an end, you go through the arduous research process again, and vote to replace the old officials with new ones.

Stage 3. It becomes clear to you that, generally speaking, the candidates are part of the problem. Yet you hold out for a hero, for the true statesman, to come along and really put the house back together.

Finally he comes, and you make it your personal mission to see that he is successful. By now you have discerned that the system is a problem, and the candidates are also mostly a problem, but you think that the right guy can still fix it all.

Stage 4. Nothing has changed. You finally decide that it's a system problem. Not the whole system, of course. But the "party system." Disillusioned with both sides, you make a clean break and vote for a third party candidate. Your candidate loses bigtime.

Stage 5. You return to the two party fold, regretting your earlier idealism. You've got to be a realist, you tell yourself. You need to work within the two-party system as it is. You pick the party that you think is most capable of reform and hope for the best.

Stage 6. The next cycle comes, and you can't stand either candidate. Finally accepting the fact that neither party represents your interests, you take the final step of the 'realist': you vote for the lesser of two evils.

Stage 7. Despairing, you go to the polling place and submit an empty ballot in a last ditch effort. You hope someone will notice, which doesn't really make any sense considering the ballots are confidential.

Stage 8. Election Day comes and goes. You don't leave the house. You don't talk about the issues with people you meet. You turn on the television and flip through the debates and speeches like you would flip through an episode of the Jerry Springer Show.

Did any of that sound familiar? Maybe you are at stage 4 and you just finished casting your first ballot for a third party.

Maybe you are at stage eight, and that's why you bought this book. Great! Welcome to the bottom of the trough. You've tried approaching it from every angle. Now there's only one option left: don't approach it at all. It's time to stop looking at the tv screen and start taking steps toward the recovery of your dignity as a citizen.

Twelve Steps To Voter Recovery

It's time to be honest with ourselves, to see voting for what it is--a facade. It's time to make a clean break and start rebuilding our understanding of civil society and our roles within it. It's a tough road but here are some steps to guide you.

Step 1. Admit you have a problem. Your problem is that you are in an abusive relationship with your political party. Your party does not love you. Your party does not deserve you. You deserve better than your party.

Step 2. Break up with your party. Sure, your party might say nice things to you sometimes. It might make you feel special. But that is only because it needs you in order to get what it wants.

Step 3. Develop your own point of view. You don't need a party to tell you what matters to you. You decide what is important, what is good, what is evil. Deny the false dichotomy that has been foisted upon you, that tells you that you must choose either Right or Left.

Step 4. Don't settle. You do not have to choose between two evils. You can save yourself for the right candidate. You can hold out for the good.

Step 5. Make it official. Change your voter registration to unaffiliated.

- Step 6.** Take a fearless look at the political landscape. Accept that much of what you have been told about politics is simply not true.
- Step 7.** Accept that voting has never allowed you to make a positive difference in the world. That it has, on the contrary, caused you to spend valuable time and energy in a futile way.
- Step 8.** Develop a new code of conduct. Voting is not a moral obligation. The only obligation is to work for the common good. Voting for lesser evils does not work for the common good, but against it.
- Step 9.** Stop voting. If anything is going to change the system, it isn't the vote.
- Step 10.** Educate yourself. Start reading books about the issues that are most important to you.
- Step 11.** Do what you can, when you can. Take all of the energy you ever spent on political activity and spend it on something else, something worthwhile.
- Step 12.** Help others. You are not alone. There are many like you. They too have been abused by their political party. They need you to show them how a sane, self-respecting citizen can continue to exist without voting.

Rediscovering Communication

“We do not talk - we bludgeon one another with facts and theories gleaned from cursory readings of newspapers, magazines and digests.”

Those are the words of Henry Miller, a man who loved humanity more than most, even if he could never find a comfortable place within it. He was describing his return back to the United States from Paris, lamenting the lack of real communication among his countrymen.

And is this not what it feel like, whenever we try to talk to some new person we meet about an idea that is important to us? Everything that comes up is seamlessly translated into another language on the fly, the language of headlines and talking points. Into the language of propaganda.

I'd like to talk about the difficulties involved with healthcare, for example, without the person opposite me regurgitating the latest headline about Obamacare. I'd like to talk about family life, or the difficulty faced by either gender in the modern world, without things devolving directly into feminist talking points or, on the other hand, anti-feminist talking points.

The range of human discourse has been reduced to its narrowest limits in America, because everything winds up politicized. It is not addressed as it stands, or in the human context in which we actually find it, but in the form of a political platform. I cannot talk to Democrats without them

drawing the conclusion almost immediately that I am a Republican, and I cannot talk to Republicans without them assuming that I am a liberal-Democrat (why Republicans insist on using this compound term, I do not know). I am neither and I would truly love to talk to someone without having to spend most of the conversation performing mental gymnastics so as to avoid being pigeon-holed into some category that does not in any way fit my actual point of view. I know quite a few people who feel the same.

Election culture destroys real conversation by politicizing everything in its path. With that being the case, it's no wonder no one wants to talk to each other. The abolition of this stifling culture would go a long way toward mutual understanding. Until then, we'll just keep bludgeoning away.

Against Gradualism

Sooner or later, if you insist on some kind of change long enough and loud enough, you'll run into the argument for gradualism. This argument basically suggests that even if you have a legitimate demand, you shouldn't expect it to happen all at once. You should be realistic and accept that if the change is going to come it will have to come gradually, a little bit at a time. You must have patience.

In answer to this, I'll quote Wendy McElroy, a Canadian writer and anarchist:

It is 1858 and you are living in a Northern town. A man has arrived at your door with papers documenting his ownership of a runaway slave whom you are sheltering. The slave throws himself at your feet begging to stay while the slave-owner reasons with you. Being philosophically inclined, he comments on the political and social necessity of preserving slavery for the time being. He assures you he is opposed to the institution, but that without it the economy of the South would shrivel and crimes of passion by blacks against whites would abound. Slavery must be phased out. When the black man is educated and able to support himself, then he will be freed.

If you reply, "There is no moral or practical consideration that overrides this man's right to his own body," you are an abolitionist.

If you reply, "I am opposed to slavery, but the consequences of immediately ending it are disastrous; therefore, I return your slave for the transition period," you are a gradualist.¹⁷

Now this is an extreme case, but it gets right to the point, which is that most of the time when you hear a person insisting on a "gradual" approach to a problem, it is usually because they are not very concerned about solving it in the first place. You get the impression that they, like the slaveholder in McElroy's example, wouldn't mind if the problem never got fixed at all.

The gradualist may take another approach as well. They may not simply suggest that the problem must be fixed gradually—they may insist that it already is being fixed gradually. This is easier to deal with, because the evidence is usually ready at hand. For example, if you say that you will not vote because the party candidates are awful, or because some other system problem is not being addressed, and you bump into a gradualist who says that this is just how things work, and that candidates will improve over time, and that the party will address these issues little by little, and if you'll just stick with them, your desires will be met eventually.

This one, as I said, is much easier to deal with, because you can usually see plainly if things are getting better, or if they are just staying the same, or if they are even getting worse. When it comes to the demand for a good candidate, for

¹⁷ <http://www.wendymcelroy.com/grad.htm>

example, it is blatantly obvious that the options are not getting better, gradually or otherwise. We started with George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. We are ending with Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

Candidates aside, the same thing goes for specific issues. The Republican Party, for example, seems to be able to convince Christians over and over again that they are going to do something about abortion. They just need time and opportunity. But they've had both time and opportunity, and they've done nothing.

Gradualism is a form of escapism. It is an excuse for ignoring the problem. It is almost always bad advice. If the system is the problem, then "working within the system" is not the answer. If your car has a flat tire, you don't just continue driving on it, expecting it to spontaneously fill back up with air.

If there were a slogan for gradualism, it would go something like this: "What do we want? CHANGE! When do we want it? IN DUE TIME!"

That is not our slogan.

If You Must

The argument of this small piece of literature is that your country would best be served if you and I abstained from the ballot box. Perhaps not forever, but at least for now.

However, if I cannot convince you of the wisdom of such an idea, then I'll offer at least one alternative, which will hopefully make good sense, even if you cannot follow me all the way.

My alternative is that, if you must vote, at least don't "over-vote." Focus first on those things closest to your own experience, and if anything does not touch your own competence, leave it blank.

I also call this "turning the ballot upside-down" or filling it out in reverse, because it leaves the presidential candidates for last. Local offices should be your top priority.

But the important point is to be honest. Only vote where you are competent. If you never leave blank spots on the ballot, then you are probably over-voting. Vote what you know, and not what you wish you knew. Do not vote for caricatures you've seen on television, but whom you do not know and cannot know. If there is a spot you always leave blank on the ballot sheet, let it be the section marked "president."

After The Election

At this point someone is bound to be asking, “Okay, if you don’t want us to vote you need to tell us what we should be doing instead!” The answer to that, of course, is “No, I don’t.”

If smoking is bad for you, which is clearly is, and I tell you so, it does not follow that I then have to tell you what you should be doing instead of smoking. That’s entirely up to you, and if you can’t think of anything, then I really can’t help you. All I can say is that smoking will kill you, and that voting is a waste of time and energy. If that is true, then the rest is up to you.

I will, however, suggest that you not worry too much about it. Like the smoking analogy, just ceasing the destructive behavior is, in itself, a step in the right direction.

Voting is the discharge of potentially productive energies in an unproductive way. If you cease to engage in voting, then these energies will spontaneously express themselves in other ways, and I have a hard time envisioning a scenario where they express themselves in a worse way than than at present. In short, we’ve got nothing to lose. Maybe the energies express themselves in the form of new community organizations, or maybe fathers and husbands can be at peace with their families in the evenings instead of in a white hot, fearful rage; or maybe those same men just stop being such pricks to one another. I don’t know what’ll happen, but I’m also not real worried about it.

“But,” you retort, “if we abstain from voting we will surrender the choice of leaders, and we might wind up with an incompetent tyrant in office!” Oh, you mean someone like, I don’t know, Donald Trump? Yeah that would be horrible.

However, we do need to talk about solutions. Simply choosing not to vote is no solution at all. It is just the beginning. I urge you not to vote, not so that you’ll do nothing, but so that you’ll do something else instead.

The problems we’ve identified so far with voting were many: it alters little, rarely serves the interests of the voter, and cannot be done with any real knowledge of the issues, much less the candidates. Yet there is a final issue which is perhaps worse than all these.

Healthy people desire to make a positive impact on the world around them. We wish for potency in our actions. If what we’ve said so far is true, then what voting offers is an empty promise of potency and positive impact. It takes our healthy desires and our constructive energies and short-circuits them. We walk away from the booth with the impression that we have done good, when in reality we have done little or nothing. We’ve been robbed.

Our alternative must overcome all of these problems. It must be action that is truly effective in a concrete way; it must hinge on real knowledge; and it must be capable of meeting real needs: those of our community, our family, our faith, etc. This requires a new approach to political activity.

It is time to admit that congress, parties, and distant politicians have become largely irrelevant. It means, therefore, you must worry about changing yourself more than about changing the president. It means turning off the TV and giving up your career as “armchair politician.” It means action.

Are you pro-life? Have a child. Have two. Take an unwed mother into your home and show that you are willing to prevent abortions with more than just your vote.

Do you complain about how the government shouldn't adopt “one-size-fits all” policies that ignore the differences of person, place, and specific need? Then why send your child every day to the most rigid one-size-fits-all institution ever conceived—the public school? Teach your children at home and at their own pace and according to their own aptitudes.

Take up a healthy, productive activity. Trade your lawn for a garden. Lawns are an obsession of the affluent, a hobby of people disconnected from a lifestyle of real needs. You'll learn that vegetables covered with blemishes but grown at home taste far better than the immaculate yet bland specimens you find at the store.

Educate yourself. Study logic and propaganda. Instead of passively absorbing your political opinions from the radio and the television, take an active part in formulating them yourself through history and literature.

Do you speak of family values?—be at home as much as possible. Live at home. If you can, work at home. Give birth at home. Die at home.

Do just about anything, but leave the ballot alone. The power of this first step, this vital first step, is that it is very realistic. Unlike most revolutions, it requires neither organization, nor violence, nor funding. It doesn't even require a leader, which is to say, no one can sell it out. It takes place in the conscience of the citizen, and in that sense I can adopt Robert Frost's words as my own:

You see the beauty of my proposal is
it needn't wait on general revolution.
I bid you to the one-man revolution —
The only revolution that is coming.¹⁸

¹⁸ Robert Frost, *Build Soil*.

Roasting Marshmallows At The Apocalypse

Yes, life in America seems to be going off the rails. Has it ever not been? Here's the deal. It doesn't matter near as much as you probably think it matters. The emotional intensity of the whole atmosphere is always contagious, but if you can ever manage to step outside of it, you realize all of a sudden that it was an illusion. Sure, it's a disaster, but in a way it is a sham disaster. The apocalypse is not coming (sorry Glenn Beck). In fact, if we look at it from the right angle, we can see all of this as an opportunity, and this for at least three reasons:

First, the Republican Party is dying. Yes, Trump won, and he was "a Republican," but his win had nothing to do with the party. This is wonderful news. The Republicans, who typically manufacture their candidates according to multi-national moneyed interests, finally saw the process break down in front of their eyes as the monstrosity that is Donald Trump became "their" candidate even though they didn't want him. That's quite a thing, since the conservative candidate has, for as long as I have been alive, been chosen not by the party. Trump is the first person in a long time to have bucked the party with some degree of success. Even if Trump is a clown, he could be the clown that rips the veneer from the Right's facade. Trump might, in the long run, get the train on track by derailing it.

Second, the Democratic Party is dying. This is also wonderful news. The Democrats are destroying themselves

in a different way though: They are becoming like the Republicans. What I mean is that they are now manufacturing their candidates according to multi-national moneyed interests. Hillary epitomizes this. The DNC even went so far as to suppress their own constituency in order to make sure “their” candidate got in and Bernie Sanders didn’t. It worked, sort of. But it probably cost the Democrats the presidency. Regardless, the final outcome will show the suppressed Democratic voters, who have until now seen their candidates as, if nothing else, at least a little less susceptible to corporate money than the Republicans. But it is now clear that this distinction was actually a false one. Democratic voters are now forced to wonder. That’s a good thing, even if it’s a disaster, because just like the Republican train wreck the end result will be an unveiling. For both parties, “the man behind the curtain” will be brought to light, and that’s a huge step in the right direction.

Finally, we need to talk about the presidency. The presidency, and the individual who holds this office, have been used for too long as scapegoats for the failings of the rest of the government apparatus, as well as the American people at large. When something goes wrong, it’s “the Obama administration,” or “the Bush administration,” or whatever. Now it’ll be the “Trump administration.” In reality, the president is not really all that powerful, at least in the present context. Yes, he’s certainly more powerful than the monarchs of old, but he’s connected to hundreds of other monarchs whose powers exceed his own, if not individually then certainly as a collective. Taken together, we as Americans have really traded the ancient tyrant for a few hundred tyrants constantly at odds with one another. And so

the popular idea that everything that happens in the world is something that Obama either “made happen,” through his omnipotence, or “let happen,” through his negligence, is an absurd exaggeration of both his office and his human powers. To call him a devil or a saint is in both cases the result of a grandiose view of the office.

So...what does this have to do with the present situation? Well, if someone like Trump should win, and if our normal assumptions about the Presidency were actually true, then we're all going to die, and fast. However, in the same way and for the same reasons that we didn't all die when Obama became president (despite how many times Fox News promised we would), we aren't all going to die now that Trump has won. Things will, by and large, carry on much like they always have. Terrorist attacks will continue. Immigration will increase. The family will decay. The economy will ride its roller coaster. A new flu virus with a scary new name will appear on the scene. This will all continue. And that will, or at least it should, lead to a valuable revelation for the American people. And that revelation will be that the president does not hold the world in his hands. If the system is falling apart, it might be (and probably is) Congress's fault. It might be (and probably is) the Judiciary's fault. It might be (and it certainly is) your fault, my dear reader. And so I say that the greatest gift offered to us by the oncoming catastrophe is knowledge: knowledge about our political arrangement—with respect to what matters and how much it matters—and knowledge about ourselves, so that we can be empowered by taking our share of the blame for our problems.

So there you have it. That's "the positive." It isn't much, granted, but anyone who offers you more is selling something.

