Only Fools Run for Office

By Emmett

The title of this brief essay is deliberately chosen to raise the hackles of many citizens of our republic who persist in their belief that this ridiculous farce of unrepresentative government we call American democracy is worth perpetuating. I provoke them to emphasize a point: Whatever constructive, humane mission there may once have been for that mythical *Mr. Smith* who *Goes to Washington*, his value as an ideal is long past, like another Santa we've outgrown. It's pure nostalgia and there's no going back. Only a fool can believe in 2010 that he enters politics to serve his fellow man and make the world a better place. That's become painfully passé.

I don't mean to call fools all those good people past and present who have held or now hold elected office in our system of self-government. That would be worse than irresponsible – it would be ignorant. A great many men and women far more capable than I have entered the lists and honorably discharged their public service. To call them fools would be absurd and simply wrong. I won't do it, can't do it. I'd have trouble sleeping if I did.

What I will do, though, is unhesitatingly discourage if possible all good, well-intended and sincere men and women from considering any run for elected office in the American system of self-government prevailing at the time of this writing. My dissuasion will focus on state and federal offices, since I am told there still remain opportunities for meaningful political engagement at more grassroots levels, although these too are growing scarce.

Please, if you are not driven by hungry-ghost ambition and blinded by visions of patriotic glory, reconsider any thought you may ever have had of declaring yourself a candidate for any state or federal political office. Doing so of course would disqualify you from ever going invisible, which itself would be unfortunate. Running for office and going invisible are mutually exclusive for obvious reasons. The attention-getting required of such candidates is repugnant to all invisibles, as is the competitive activity inherent to the process.

But you need not have any aspirations to invisibility to appreciate the great hazard that promoting yourself as a representative of the people can bring to you and your loved ones in these troubled times. Common sense should tell you that. Campaigning alone will require that you expose and commodify yourself to the voting pubic as a branded product with certain qualities called "character" and "experience" and "endorsements" and "positions on issues" and so forth that you promote as forcefully as you can to be better than your competitors' qualities. You must consistently and convincingly speak highly of yourself, praise your superior qualities to the limits of propriety and credibility, and encourage as many others as you can to do the same. This is what the convergence of political engagement and commercial enterprise looks like – egos on parade. In the end it's all about effective salesmanship. What would be boorish and offensively egotistical in ordinary human relations has become standard operating procedure in political life.

Inevitably over time you very likely start believing much of what you and your supporters have been saying and come to hold a very high opinion of yourself that you

must defend against all challengers. And challengers there will be – wealth and power is at stake, after all. You can expect competition of the most ruthless sort that will gleefully dig up any indiscretions in your past and publicly hurl them in your face and exploit to the max any error or oversight or chink in your armor. Everyone associated with you now and in the past is fair game.

This nasty business of having to continuously peddle and defend your personal wares like any other product on the political auction block takes a terrible toll on most ordinarily sensitive people. Unless you are naturally thick-skinned and combative, you will very likely not hold up long under the daily assault of invasive attention that comes with modern political office. Anything out of the ordinary draws media attention like a lame zebra draws hyenas. Nowadays even the most discrete breech of propriety is apt to get captured on someone's I-phone, shared with the world on the web, and dramatized into soap-opera hysterics at your expense. You will need to don your political-work-self diligently, flawlessly, before leaving home every day and keep it up and running all day without fail through a great many very long and trying days. You will be expected to hold that winning smile through every camera flash and spout those well-rehearsed lines consistently through every press conference and interview.

Seriously – who needs it?

Unless you happen to be privately wealthy, which brings with it its own baggage, you must accustom yourself to either courting those who are wealthy or incurring their wrath. They have been buying favor for a long time and fully expect to continue doing so. You'd best not get in their way if you know what's good for your political career. They have people in their employ who can make your life a living hell.

If you are elected, your constituents will very likely hold you in very low regard if not outright contempt. Congress's 80% disapproval rate continues to drop every year. The voters will cynically expect you to cave in to the relentless demands of lobbyists on your attention and the expectations of your largest campaign donors. And that is in fact just what you'll discover you must do to get reelected when your current term expires in a couple of years. Unless you're willing to settle for a single term, campaigning for the next election begins the day your current term begins. It's set up that way to keep you constantly currying favor. Deal with it or go home, Jimmy Stewart and Mr. Smith and all the rest of you icons of our democracy that never was.

The halls of Congress are jammed with lawyers jockeying for position, and you know what they say about lawyers. What do you call 10,000 lawyers at the bottom of the sea? A good start! What's brown and black and looks good on a lawyer? A Doberman! Sorry, couldn't resist – there are books full of lawyer jokes expressing our very great popular disdain for the profession, and yet we let them run the country. Go figure. These are the "esteemed colleagues" you'll be locking horns with as a politician, as well as the lawyer-lobbyists, many of them former elected officials themselves cashing in on their insider knowledge, now dogging you wherever you go. Aggression, ambition, cunning, plotting and scheming – such are the tools of the trade. Is that any way for a healthy human being to spend even just a few years of his/her only life?

If all this is not enough to destroy your spirit, then unless you've an adamantine heart it is certain to be crushed under the moral weight of multiple heart-rending crises all demanding your attention right now without delay at risk of lives and livelihoods lost. You'll be buried under thousands of pages of bills written in tedious legalese no healthy

human being should be forced to endure and then subject to persistent constituent grilling over their contents. You'll be condemned to hundreds of tedious hours in tendentious meetings and hundreds more pretending to like boors and blowhards because you need their votes or their money.

You'll be expected to go along to get along with your colleagues, choose sides and allies through more or less continuous jockeying for power, and patiently await your opportunity to actually make a meaningful contribution until seniority and favors win you desirable committee appointments from tyrannical leaders whose authority derives from calculated wheeling-and-dealing over lengthy time served. You will grow progressively more phony, clever, calculating and scheming yourself as you become resigned to legislative business as usual. It's just too hard for all but the most combative to buck tradition and face the relentless opposition day after day after day. Few possess the Stalinesque steel for such sustained political combat over the long haul.

Yes, I'm advising all prospective Mr./Ms. Smiths of 2010 to stay in Mayberry and do your politicking there if you just have to. You're simply not the kind of people best suited to higher elected office in these troubled times. Unless your values are wholly consistent with those of econoculture and you can in good conscience run on a solid econoculture platform (our definition of a fool), then this is not the right time for you to put your democratic convictions to the voting-booth test.

What has happened, you see, is that under the sway of the laissez-faire neoliberals, with plenty of help from the libertarian and reactionary right and their think tanks, our nation's political life has been dragged with our economy into neo-Social Darwinist take-no-prisoners survival-of-the-fittest raw combat for dominance and treasure. Unharnessed markets unrestrained by democratic controls will degenerate into chaos – this is virtually guaranteed. We are currently privileged to see just such entropy in progress. My advice to you, Mr./Ms. Smith, is to get out of the way for now and stand by until further notice. We don't want you standing too close when it all comes tumbling down. Whatever you do, don't tinker. Don't patch things up with tepid reforms. That just draws out the pain and delays the inevitable zero hour.

The survival-of-the-fittest political style best suits mean-spirited types who enjoy kicking ass and taking names. As more and more good, kind, sensible people see the light and decline political careers, which I am recommending, more and more thuggish fools are certain to run and get elected. As more and more such fools take office and do their characteristic foolish things, the common people will grow increasingly frustrated. Finally in their desperation they will elect the biggest fool of all as their Clown in Chief. Where will we go next, when the Clown in Chief inevitably only makes things worse? There's the $64,000 Question!

As an invisible committed to absolute nonparticipation, I see what comes next as the critical crux of the matter, our national moment of truth. It's what we've been waiting for. After all, political nonparticipation seems to me justified only when the system in which we are expected to participate is clearly illegitimate, when to participate in it even as a voter would violate my conscience. This happens to be the case at present, but things could change, yes, in fact change is all but certain – it's just a matter of time. We invisibles do what we can to influence the direction of that great shift to the left or right when it does come. The money's on the right, but where is public sentiment? Abe Lincoln said public sentiment is what matters most, more so than legislators and their

laws. Tipping the scales of public sentiment in the direction of persons rather than things is our invisibility mission, as I see it.

One grim possibility is that the country will drift further to the right into some kind of neo-fascist strongman rule based on authoritarian enforcement of thing-centered econoculture corporate values. This would be a frightening turn of events that would likely drive invisibles still deeper underground and out of sight. Our revolution would then have to assume a more traditional guerilla function than we find necessary at present.

More optimistically, we invisibles hope for a left turn to a democratic progressivism that prioritizes person-oriented values such as those we advocate in opposition to thing-centered econoculture. This would entail freeing our democracy from the dominant influence of corporations and plutocrats. It would necessitate overturning *Citizens United* and ruthlessly stripping money influence out of politics at all levels right up to and including presidential elections – only this can restore lost legitimacy. It would mean putting the financial industry back in service to the country as a whole rather than manipulating a rigged system on behalf of wealthy elites. It would mean undoing the partisan gerrymandering that has warped our electoral system out of true. It would enable all this and much more, a thoroughgoing revolution of values and subsequent politics that could rejuvenate America into a republic of persons instead of a market circus of things and thrills.

At that point, when such revolutionary change appears viable, you can be sure we nonparticipants will return to the fold with great enthusiasm and cast our votes with our fellow citizens and proudly display our I VOTED stickers. That's when we can send Mr. *and* Ms. Smith back to Washington to do the right thing and make America great again.

Until then we absolute nonparticipants are laying low and biding our time, watching the signs, keeping our guard up and our fingers crossed, waiting for our chance.

November 2009