

America's Political Circus

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“You know something, Stu? Politics is just like show business.”

—Ronald Reagan (to Stuart Spencer, of California marketing firm, Spencer-Roberts)

If success in American politics could be boiled down to a single insight, it would be that it's all about putting on a good show. The key is to leave the audience with a positive general impression. The rest is details.

The political theater that passes for America's AGORA is, essentially, show-biz. What's a “hit” and what's not is determined more than anything by **presentation** (packaging, delivery, image, branding, stigmatization, etc.) If one can generate enough hype, and orchestrate certain conditioned associations with the right (or wrong) sorts of things, one can maximize marketshare.

It is no secret that here in the U.S., political campaigns are little other than resource wars waged between those who curry the most favor with the Machine. The outcome of each election is predicated on hefty financial backing (accrued from those representing moneyed interests) coupled with savvy “image” management (so as to ensure mass appeal). “Campaigning” ends up being more of a money-raising competition than a competition of ideas. (No American politician in the modern era has ever won an election based on how objectively good his ideas were.) Leaving people with a general impression is the key—which means savvy MARKETING.

The consequence of all this follows logically: Most of a candidate's focus must be on fund-raising. Appeasing those who offer cash becomes extremely useful. A candidate is compelled to mold his policy proposals accordingly. Whoever caters to Big Money the most effectively...well, that's who typically wins the game. After all, money buys the kinds of things that sway voters: hype, exposure, ubiquitous propaganda, etc.

Good ideas, as it happens, are FREE. However, they play only an ancillary role in the marketing contest—as marketing has virtually nothing to do with objective merit. Critical deliberation plays almost no role in which way the electorate is swayed.

The objective merit of a policy proposal can be defined as that which is most conducive to the general welfare (i.e. that which best facilitates the weal of society). Alas, the “winning” campaign almost assuredly wins NOT for offering such proposals, but rather by having curried the most favor with crucial financial backers. Having **the public good** as one's sin qua non is not the optimal way to stay in the good graces of those who will fund one's campaign. So there is no incentive to push proposals most conducive to the general welfare. In America's political theater, such motivations get a someone nowhere. (See Dennis Kucinich.)

This “default” modus operandi has tragic repercussions. Rather than formulating the objectively best policy proposals, candidates must pander to the interests of those who offer them the most campaign cash...thereby throwing elections (and any ensuing legislation) into the hands

of those with the deepest pockets. In America, influence is proportional to affluence. An egregiously flawed incentive structure is the inevitable result. Pander to those with power, and one will be handsomely rewarded. Undermine them, and one can kiss his political career goodbye. For opportunistic politicians, the choice is not difficult.

As far as appealing to the electorate goes, the electoral process degenerates into a **marketing contest**...a contest not about substance, but about engineering the most compelling “message”. This is primarily done by...you guessed it: accumulating as much money as possible. To do this, one must fill one’s campaign coffers however one can in order to “one-up” the competitors...who will, of course, be trying to do the same thing. The resource wars promptly ensue.

Invariably, policy-making becomes simply a matter of appeasing the powers that be. Undermining the incumbent power structures is no way to win an election. Standing up for the commonwealth is not how the game is played if one wants to actually win. So conflicts of interest are the rule, not the exception. And campaigns are rendered show biz...as I’ll discuss forthwith.

A SURVEY OF ELECTORAL POLITICS IN AMERICA:

Rarely do we openly acknowledge what is obvious to all of us: As elections are currently run, any candidate for political office is forced to cobble together a gigantic “war chest” if he/she wishes to be “viable”. He/she must do this so that he/she can flood the world with yard signs and TV commercials and billboards and radio advertisements and bumper-stickers and gigantic banners...and—of course—self-serving propaganda in as many media outlets as possible.

The candidate who does this the best will be victorious.

Due to the fact that support is garnered primarily from an effective marketing strategy, running for public office is almost entirely about raising cash from those who—naturally—demand a “return on their investment” for their “contributions”. The arrangement amounts to a tacit quid quo pro between private interests and those in public office. In other words, the kinds of “exchange” on which the political process is predicated is little other than a business transaction (disguised as “free speech”, of course). Some call this “corporatism”; others simply refer to it as “how the game is played”.

A PR machine costs money. Marketing costs money. A successful campaign runs on logistics, savvy messaging and lots of hype. Cash pays for all these things. Therefore a serious candidate can’t NOT court financial backing by placating those with moneyed interests. Good ideas have very little role to play in this process, because the objective merit of any policy idea is a moot point when soliciting “backing” from “special interests” who only care about their own aggrandizement. The entire charade is thereby rendered a free-for-all of legalized graft (operating under the pretense of “political participation” and “voting with one’s wallet”). Those with socio-economic status have a voice in the process; those without such status are summarily marginalized.

Rather than focusing on the nuts and bolts of foreign, economic, and social policy, any “player” in the game must concern himself with formulating **the most marketable brand** (the

probity of his agenda be damned). Why is this so? In the current political climate, most people vote for BRANDS rather than substance...in the same manner that consumers often shop for BRANDS (rather than making choices based on the objective merit of each product). When politics is treated as a marketplace, then that is precisely how things will work.

And so it goes: In elections, just as in peddling consumer products, ***branding is the key***. As a result, we hear things like “Make America Strong Again” instead of “Ascertain which proposal involves policies that have been conclusively shown to most benefit the typical civilian.” Candidates proclaim, “Positive vision for America!” and “Let’s restore America’s greatness” and “Let’s take back our country” and “America is awesome, so vote for me!”

Ah, politics.

THE CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN:

In America, the electorate is expected to “participate”...something that happens only insofar as support can be mobilized once every couple years by the impresarios of the charade. Consequently, electioneering is driven primarily by ***pomp***. The key for the impresarios, then, is to keep it all very, very simple; to stay “on message”; to formulate a scheme for generating as much hype as possible.

In a mentally lethargic nation, well-choreographed spectacle is necessary if one wants to mobilize a following. In order to maximize “market-share”, a campaign is forced to cater to the most fatuous sensibilities of the target audience...thus bringing the rest of the electorate down to the lowest common denominator. (This is what happens in an intellectually impoverished society.)

Elections are rendered little other than a choreographed farce—a melodrama that keeps the electorate chronically preoccupied with superficial cares and petty fixations. Rather than a process by which policy proposals are meticulously articulated and then critically analyzed (in a patient, methodical way), elections are reduced to insipid histrionics—replete with a cast of anointed performers. Like movie stars, each candidate vies for the biggest fan-base. It comes as little surprise, then, that many Americans are more concerned with what an official is doing with his penis than what he’s doing with his mind. In such a vapid scheme, marketable platitude trumps substance any day of the week—and every irrelevant development is sensationalized to the point of distraction.

The media is complicit in promulgating the political circus. Indeed, most programming treats the electoral process as nothing other than captivating dramaturgy—focusing on even the most irrelevant matter so as to provide the most riveting narrative thread for a drama-hungry audience. As a matter of course, campaigns are compelled to play along. (To refuse to play along is to forfeit one’s role in the on-going melodrama.)

Following the twists and turns of an election, then, is no different than following a soap opera. “What’s gonna happen next? Who’s gonna out-manuever who? Which strategy with this person employ to one-up the other person? And how will that person retaliate? What will be the next juicy scoop? Stay tuned!”

The entire process is essentially a parody of itself. But farce is more enthralling than edification; and pedagogic enterprises are no way to attract large audiences.

On the road, candidate appearances aren't really about making informative speeches so much as putting on carefully scripted **rhetoric pageants**. Such events are usually conducted on a well-decorated stage in front of a plethora of American flags—the more flags the better. The productions are prefaced by an “opening act” of some kind (in order to stir excitement)...and usually book-ended by thumping pop music to get everyone all revved up. In other words, appearances are conducted like pep rallies—replete with chants and cheering crowds.

All appearances are performances for audiences that crave memorable applause lines. The time-honored “stump speech” is has become an oration of well-delivered platitudes—each catch-phrase crafted to resonate emotionally with the listeners. (Penetrating analysis of policies has no role to play in this charade...any more than a lecture on political theory would have been welcomed at a high-school pep rally.) Catering to the short attention spans endemic to American culture is a “must” for any savvy campaign, and delivering edifying disquisition is no way to galvanize a crowd.

THE TELEVISED Q&A SESSION:

In the contemporary American political campaign, almost everything is a PR stunt—the product of calculated contrivance; very little of it is genuine. When it comes to savvy marketing schemes, authenticity is a moot point (and too much nuance is a liability). In the United States today, few people make voting choices based on careful, critical reflection...or by way of conclusions yielded by a patient process of sound reasoning. (Who has the time?!) The marketing contest that is the American political campaign is basically a rhetorical pissing contest. Nothing illustrates the nature of electoral politics better than the so-called political “DEBATES” broadcast to the nation.

The “DEBATE” is a kind of “special feature”. It is touted by mainstream media outlets as a way to demonstrate each candidate’s alleged “qualifications” for office. Alas, such “debates” are nothing more than stage-managed Q&A sessions—broadcast to a TV audience that is more acclimated to Reality TV than to critical deliberation.

Of course, “Q&A session” doesn’t sound provocative. So the marquee advertises the production as if it were some sort of battle of the minds: a “DEBATE”. These vaunted media events are designed to do one thing: showcase a set of personalities. They are NOT conducted in order to elucidate the cogency of any political argument. After all, the audience isn’t accustomed to cognitive exertion while watching prime-time television. Naturally, then, media outlets will offer programming that requires absolutely no cognitive exertion.

Supply meets demand.

Each of these televised Q&A sessions is conducted on iridescent, fiberglass sets made to look like the bridge of a spaceship from Star Trek. Except that they’re all **red-white-and-blue** spaceships...that have a studio audience...and include what essentially amounts to a game-show host (or two or three).

Again, the point is to bedazzle, not to edify. The audience is seeking titillation, not erudition. (In fact, people watch these events for many of the same reasons people attend church: to react to something profound that is staged before them, to see how they FEEL about things, and to come away with the impression that they've somehow been enlightened.)

The Q&A sessions are even filmed with sweeping camera angles so as to create the impression of soaring profundity. Dramatic music is played to ensure the show seems urgent, regal, and dignified. The key is to be riveting, not didactic. (In other words, it's indistinguishable from Reality TV.) It is during these productions that the election's melodrama achieves its greatest heights.

The typical "DEBATE" is closer to an awkward, joint press conference than to an actual debate. There is no mutual exchange of ideas...no articulation of specific policy proposals...no in-depth critical analysis. The format allows for no thorough, methodical argumentation...nor for meticulous scrutiny...nor for any well-thought-out rebuttals...nor for the theoretical background of the claims being made...nor for an extensive survey of documented facts. (The typical audience member's abbreviated attention-span simply wouldn't tolerate such arcane things.)

The entire production, therefore, is designed for maximum titillation and minimum mental effort...while providing the illusion that each candidate is being assessed for the merit of his ideas. At the end of the "show", the audience is left with the impression that they now have a better understanding of who is most qualified for public office. The key is to maintain this illusion, thereby ensuring that nobody actually takes the time to learn anything.

Here's how it works:

During a typical Q&A session, inane questions are posed so as to prompt the regurgitation of pre-scripted sound-bites. It's an opportunity for each candidate (i.e. performer) to recite whatever talking points he has memorized, deliver the one-liners he has rehearsed, and hopefully—god willing—have a moment of apparent brilliance. The exhibition focuses on certain abilities (delivery, demeanor, affability, poise, assertiveness, quick-witted-ness, confidence, charisma)—qualities that are typically the province of demagogues, slick car salesmen, pick-up artists, and con men.

The format affords each participant a (very) brief window of time to make his sales pitch to an anxious television audience...while standing next to his adversaries (as if he were actually engaging them). The only interaction between the candidates exists as brief "in the moment" reactions to one another's comments (in the form of snappy come-backs). The point here is to see which performer is "best on his feet". The result: bromide follows bromide.

The tacky set-design and the glowing, plastic lecterns notify the audience that, whatever happens, it's going to be very important. Before the show starts, the world wonders: Who will rack up the most zingers tonight? And who's gonna get zinged? Will there be any "gotcha" moments? What captivating drama will unfold? Film at 11. Of course, the victor will be the guy with the most pointed retorts, not necessarily with the best ideas.

The point is for the viewer to experience the full force of the drama, not to glean any insight into which policies have the most credence. The audience reacts based on how it feels "in the moment", not on what it knows. Erudition has nothing to do with it. The production is basically

adolescent political theater passed off as serious discourse. It is staged for entertainment purposes more than for anything else—replete with pre-game and post-game analyses from well-groomed, professional commentators—a la ESPN. (After all, politics is just another sport.)

The commentators provide a simple-minded recap of the play-by-play action: Who had the catchiest slogans? Who offered the best made-for-TV moment? Who gave the best performance? Who seemed the most “presidential”? Who **sounded like** he knew what the heck he was talking about? And, of course: Who’s presentation was the snazziest? At the end of the day, THESE are the things that matter. THESE are the things that voters will remember. THESE are the things that determine who is elected. The Q&A session, then, is an exercise in theatrics—replete with flashy, patriotic backdrop for full dramatic effect.

To reiterate: During the course of the Q&A session, there is no room for any scrutiny of the objective merit of a candidate’s policy ideas. Such things just don’t make for good theater, so why bother? (Besides, there’s just not enough time in between commercial breaks for time-consuming analysis.) Politics, we’re reminded, is show biz. The savvy politician is a scheming businessman behind closed doors, and a performer while on stage. Neither intellect nor probity is required for either role.

The corporate-run media understands this very well. The impresarios know that most Americans don’t care about the objective merit of, say, supply-side vs. demand-side economic policy; they only care about which one SOUNDS better. Whatever emotionally resonates most with the audience will command the most support. So that’s how the game is played: “It’s morning in America, you say? Gosh-golly, that sounds marvelous. I’ll go with that guy.” And so it goes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The televised spectacles commonly touted as “DEBATES” are not debates. Nevertheless, the mainstream media insists on calling such them “DEBATES” because—well—“debate” just sounds like it might be substantive and worthwhile. Nobody really learns anything during these media events, but that doesn’t really matter—to the candidates or to the electorate. That nothing remotely resembling a **genuine debate** ever actually transpires seems not to pose a problem for anyone involved. And so the charade continues...and the electorate continues to watch.

And after this goes on and on for a few months, Americans eventually go to the voting booth and select their favorite performer. They pick a brand. Their decision is presumably based on one petty criterion or another. It’s no different than picking someone on *American Idol*...except that the outcomes of *American Idol* are sometimes roughly based on merit. (Well, that...and a rigged tally isn’t allowed on *American Idol*. Other than that, it’s pretty much the same thing.) Woe is the day that our democracy aspires to meet the same standards as a TV game-show.