



CAESAR RODNEY INSTITUTE AMERICAN REPUBLIC ESSAY

"WHY THE BEST & BRIGHTEST RARELY RUN"

By Michael C. Maibach

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As we consider this and recent Presidential campaigns, many of our fellow citizens have expressed unhappiness with their choices. "Can't we get better people to run?" they ask. Why is it that in America, those considered as our "best and brightest" rarely run for public office? CEOs of global enterprises, Presidents of leading universities, great military leaders, Noble Prize winners, brilliant intellectuals... and ingenious inventors come to mind. A combination of factors is at play in this seemingly simple question. Key aspects of American politics are unattractive to most of us, and perhaps especially to those who have reached the top of their professions. To wit:

American politics involves constant compromise and continuous delay. Outstanding individuals are action-oriented. They love making tough, up-or-down decisions on their own, or with a few others, and then seeing their decisions put into effect. This certainly was the case when I worked with CEOs at Caterpillar and Intel. Politics is just the opposite; it is a world of inches, not miles. Incremental-ism prevails. The average bill takes almost four years to get through Congress to the President's desk! And gridlock in the past few years has become debilitating. Plus, everyone gets into the act - elected officials, news media, social media, interest groups and companies, as well as foreign governments. American politics is a messy business, one that surely leaves natural leaders frustrated and turned-off.

Politics enriches one's patience, not one's pocketbook. In our commercial republic, most exceptionally gifted people can and do earn more in business, law, or medicine than in public office. Highly paid professionals must accept substantial financial scrutiny and losses to run for public office. Many cannot or do not want to accept the financial costs.

Campaigns are superficial, undignified, and costly in time and money. With our modern market economy, mass media, and now social media, campaigns have become all about "selling" candidates. Name ID, good looks, and catchy phrases often prevail over substantive discussion of the issues. Candidates spend more time raising campaign funds than studying and then speaking on the issues. And when they do engage intellectually, too many voters are not self-prepared for such deep conversation.

Political life brings public criticism, and a loss of privacy. With public office, the higher one rises, the less privacy one has. And no one likes being criticized publicly, especially those who have earned professional leadership roles and the respect of their colleagues.

US candidates are self-actuated, self-organized, self-funded. Across Europe and Canada, politicians work their way up the Parliamentary or party ladder. Once selected to run, their party leads fundraising and organizational efforts. The candidate is the chief communicator, not the COO of his campaign. US politics is vastly different. We have a unique "entrepreneurial" political system. Ross Perot, Carly Fiorina, and Donald Trump are examples of this. Any American can run – including you. Whoever runs must develop a strategy, name recognition, campaign team, and funding. And, they must effectively communicate their political

platform. Most people simply do not have the time and/or the skills this demands. Those who do usually invest them in other ways.

The nature of our Republic itself. While the factors above each play a role, it may be that the nature of the American regime itself has a major impact. The Founders came to America to throw-off unlimited governmental tyranny. They adopted Montesquieu's idea of "checks and balances" among the three branches of government to insure inaction rather than hasty action - all to keep us free. Moreover, they dispersed power among the states with robust "Federalism". Until the enactment of a US income tax and the direct election of Senators, American Federalism kept government smaller and more effectively managed.

In our system of "checks and balances" and Federalism, the state was made the servant, not the master, of citizens. Talented people – the "best and brightest" - were freed to "pursue happiness" in a wide-range of human activities. Companies multiplied, inventions flourished, a robust private sector created opportunities for citizens to be both productive and generous. Government historically acted as the arbiter of disputes, the protector of rights – not the controller of all things. Leadership in the private sector has been wide and robust.

Considering all of this, it is a wonder anyone chooses public life. We owe a large measure of respect and appreciation to those who have placed their good names on the ballot. Again, we may ask why our country's best seldom enter public life. **It may in part be that the stakes are not yet high enough.** Perhaps we are entering an age when they are becoming so.

US politics usually lacks burning issues. Historically, Americans have agreed on the "basics." For much of our history we have argued over the means, not the ends. While countries across Latin America, Africa and the Middle East are often violently divided, American Presidents and Congress usually find a way to enact legislation – eventually! US politicians find much to haggle about, but usually the issue is tax reform or EPA regulation, not violent class struggle or attempts at religious or sectarian oppression.

A new American political reality today? While agreement on the "basics" has been the norm, **America today seems more and more divided on fundamental issues.** These include health care, income inequality, the nature of the family, First and Second Amendment rights, abortion, the role of police, national debt and failing welfare systems, foreign policy, terrorism, illegal immigration... and even religious freedom are all now on the table. We may be heading for turbulent times not seen since the 1850s - a raucous, divisive political era that led to Civil War and gave us the great Abraham Lincoln.

Across American history, it has been unusual for government to take center stage. It happens in time of significant crisis, e.g. the Civil War, WWI, the Great Depression, and WWII. In such times, our full attention is demanded. And at those times, our best leaders have historically come forward to serve. Think of America's greatest challenges aligned with our greatest leaders: Independence (Washington), American Founding (Madison, Jefferson, and Hamilton), Civil War (Lincoln), Depression and WWII (Roosevelt, Truman).

In conclusion, to those concerned about sending 'ordinary citizens' to the halls of government, take heart. As Alistair Cooke has remarked, "America is a place where ordinary people do extraordinary things." And in times of grave crisis, we must have faith that we will continue to find among ourselves our very best men and women to match the challenges and opportunities before us. Now seems to be one of those times. And perhaps great challenges are what really create the opportunity for "great leaders." We may soon find out.

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