

The Need For A New Ethic In America Presidential Campaigns

America's love for a display of might and power, of triumph over the adversary, and of a 'winning strategy', is not only evident in her foreign policy and conduct of war, but also in her presidential campaigns. Here, aggression, while disapproved of by many at one level, is also admired by others, and seems almost to be a necessity of political life – one that applies to political rivals at home as well as to adversaries abroad. Within presidential campaigns and American political life in general, aggression appears to be a not-so-hidden American value, as one seeks to remain 'on-top' by removing someone else to 'the bottom'.

No matter how much the American public decries the use of negative advertising within campaigns, the public receives what many within this body deem necessary as a sign of leadership, namely, the display of power, confidence, and strength, even when expressed through messages that diminish or undermine the stature and credibility of another. Though there is more and more dissatisfaction with this trend, disapproval is not yet sufficient to make it disappear. This is in contrast to what is also possible, namely, the presenting of one's own point of view, straight-up, without involving a defamation of the character or intentions of another.

America is afraid to let go of the philosophy of 'might makes right' in the home court as well as on the battlefield. We are afraid of the accusation of weakness associated with gentleness, civility, compassion, and forgiveness. Indeed, despite the protestation of Christian values by many, where are those who would want a political leader who would be forgiving toward all? This is something that one might strive for in private, but in public an entirely different ethic prevails.

Despite this current that runs through American political life at present, there is, even now, another way to conduct a political campaign and, indeed, to conduct political life in general. This other way is through inspiration and moral leadership, through the display of integrity and truthfulness, through being firm in one's own central values, not through being able to deflate the character or stature of another.

Inspiration and integrity are profound representatives of a stream of American life that has deep roots – the deepest, since they go back, historically, to America's founding. These virtues do not require presenting one's own 'superior' position by making another seem inferior. They require standing only on the truth of one's beliefs, experience, plans, hopes, and capacities as a leader, thinker, and citizen who seeks to serve the greater good.

Nevertheless, despite America's desire for goodness and virtue in her leadership, it appears that she does not always accept these with open arms. There is still the need to sacrifice inspiration to toughness, to sacrifice plain-speaking to intellectual agility which can expose the weaknesses of another, and to sacrifice gentleness in order to create a feeling of security based on power.

America appears to desire inspiration and moral integrity, but not at the expense of a good fight. In the age of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the age of those who are tired of war and who seek peace, in the age of those who seek a new way for government to represent its citizens, this fear of modesty and integrity, of an unwillingness to engage in combat as if one's life were at stake, must be examined more closely. For if we truly, as a nation, want peace, we must become peaceful among ourselves. And if we truly want moral leadership, we must become more moral.

About the Author

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