

In Praise of Smoke-Filled Rooms

Michael Sean Winters | May. 14, 2014 | Distinctly Catholic

[This morning's Washington Post](#) [1] contains a story about Congressman Eric Cantor, who is facing a primary challenge from a Tea Party-backed economics professor for the Republican nomination. Cantor, who is Majority Leader of the House, threw his support behind an incumbent district chairman at a party convention last week, and the incumbent lost to another Tea Party-backed candidate.

It is doubtful Cantor will lose. He has gobs of money and his challenger, David Brat, is struggling to break into three figures of campaign donations. Cantor does not have to worry about moderating his positions in order to win the November general election: The district is the most heavily Republican in the commonwealth of Virginia and the Democrats have not even fielded a candidate. But, Cantor has a different reason for needing to moderate his positions: He is a leader of his party. And, if the GOP continues to be in thrall of the Tea Party activists, it is doomed to minority status. You would think that Republicans in Virginia understood this: They were swept out of all statewide races in last year's off-year election for governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general, breaking a long-standing habit of Virginia picking candidates from the party that does not control the White House.

It is hard to garner much sympathy for Cantor. He and his fellow establishment Republicans were all too willing to enflame the fires that turned the Tea Party from a fringe element into a national political movement. It swept the GOP into power in the House of Representatives in 2010 and Cantor went from being Minority Whip to Majority Leader. Now, he is paying the price as the conservative wing of the GOP seems bound and determined to eat its own.

The situation on the Democratic side is not much different. Apart from very few congressional districts, no candidate for a Democratic Party nomination to Congress can expect to get much fundraising help unless he or she signs on to the pro-choice agenda of NARAL. Single issue groups have benefited enormously from the collapse of any kind of governing consensus or party leadership. They appeal to voters who care deeply about one issue, take their money, and convert it into campaign cash. They use social media as once they used direct mail to turn out voters for whom their one issue is a litmus test.

This sad development has coincided with the personalization of politics. Gone are the days when party leaders in both parties argued over the party platform because party platforms mattered. Now, a presidential or gubernatorial candidate can use the party platform to throw a bone to the base, but certainly never pays attention to the document once it is written. The entire apparatus of the two parties have become less important than the campaign staffs of individual candidates.

I read the other day that Senator Marco Rubio touted his fifteen years in elective office as one reason he was ready for the presidency. I laughed to myself. There was a time when such experience would indeed be a factor that should incline us to support a candidate. Now, all we know is that anyone involved in elective office for the past fifteen years has repeatedly gone through the humiliating process of sitting in a room, making cold calls to potential campaign donors, five or six hours a day. A friend who ran for county council here in Maryland a few years back said he was expected to raise \$60,000 if he wanted to win. We know a person involved in politics the

past fifteen years has learned to trust the permanent class of campaign consultants whose reputations far outstrip their talents. We know this candidate understands that he or she should not decide what suit to wear without polling ?blue? or ?grey.? The one thing we know about people who run for office these days is that they have been thoroughly emasculated.

One of my earliest childhood memories was of my mother explaining to me that Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago was a ?bad man.? She reached this conclusion because Daley had shouted down one of her heroes, Senator Abraham Ribicoff, at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, when Ribicoff challenged the police brutality in the streets outside the convention hall. Many people shared my mother?s indictment of Daley. Many Democrats in the summer of 1968 thought he was a ?bad man.?

Daley represented a different kind of politics. It was not immune to corruption, to be sure. But, it was also not allergic to the real needs of real people. Daley was a mayor. He not only knew the importance of filling potholes, but knew how to get them filled. More importantly, he knew the people who wanted those potholes filled. How different President Obama?s style of political leadership would be if he had been a mayor of a city? It is hard to be aloof when discussing potholes. It is good to remember that people care about not having to replace their shock absorbers as much as they care about more rarefied political issues. It is good to have politicians who have actually gotten something done instead of mastering the art of striking a pose. And, once elected, those politicians knew how to hole themselves up in a smoke-filled room and find a way to govern. Ribicoff was right about the police brutality in the streets of Chicago, but my mother was wrong about Daley. I have made a vow to myself never to vote for a candidate for federal office who has not been a mayor or alderman.

In the article about Cong. Cantor, former GOP Congressman Thomas Davis fretted about the state of his party. ?What mature parties do, they sit together and work things out,? he told the Post. ?We?re not there yet. I don?t think we?ve been beaten bad enough to understand what it takes to work together.? I read those words and my mind harkened back to the admonitions of Scripture: ?And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people.? (Ex 32:9) And, my thoughts turned to Admiral King in the winter of 1941-1942, who thought the British model of escorting merchant vessels in convoys excessive, until so many U.S. ships were sunk along the U.S. coast by U-boats, he established a convoy system. We humans seem to need to be ?beaten bad enough? before we learn. Those of us who consider ourselves ?progressive? should remind ourselves of this dark, even Augustinian, thought more frequently than we do. The Church?s doctrine of original sin is the only doctrine of the Church that is self-evident to our senses.

The nation faces large problems. The biggest news story of the week, of the month, of the year, was the melting of the ice shelves in Antarctica. The political crisis in Ukraine is a moral and strategic crisis for the West. We are, all of a sudden, eager to rush into Nigeria to take on the kidnappers in Boko Haram, but it is clear to me that Western military involvement is precisely the thing that Boko Haram wants. Income inequality, at home and around the world, continues unchecked, inviting political as well as economic instability. None of these large problems will be solved by politicians who must bow before the idols of single interest groups on the left or the right. We need a few smoke-filled rooms where political leaders can come together and figure out how to lead. I never thought I would think this, but I am hoping Cantor survives his primary challenge.

Links:

[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/eric-cantors-tea-party-opponent-in-va-primary-may-be-picking-up-momentum/2014/05/13/1a2d92d0-d9d7-11e3-b745-87d39690c5c0_story.html?hpid=z1