

PL2-- "WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE IN POLITICS: A VETERAN OF AMERICA'S POLITICAL TRENCHES EXPLAINS WHY PUBLIC SERVICE HAS BECOME A DIRTY TERM -- AND HOW WE CAN CLEAN UP THE SYSTEM", SALON, 5/20/96

Fred Branfman has worked in American politics for 25 years, beginning with the war in Southeast Asia when, after serving there as an educational advisor, he helped expose the secret U.S. bombing of Laos. He subsequently worked with Tom Hayden to found the grassroots Campaign for Economic Democracy in California, and served as research director for Governor Jerry Brown, helping shape the Brown administration's innovative policies in technology, education and job training. He also served as research director for Sen. Gary Hart's think tank, co-writing the main economic plank of Hart's promising 1988 presidential campaign before it was sunk by the "Monkey Business" scandal. Branfman has worked on campaigns for city council, state Assembly, the U.S. Senate and U.S. President.

In 1990, following his father's death and his mother's stroke, Branfman dropped out of politics and began a spiritual journey that took him from India, where he worked briefly at Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying; to Hungary where he studied with spiritual teacher Laszlo Honti; to Jerusalem, where he lived and studied with Hasidim; and to six months of silent meditation, including a three-month retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA.

Branfman is currently directing For Generations to Come, a San Francisco-based project that supports people grappling with the meaning of life in the face of their own death.

How is it that most of our politicians, left or right, start out well-motivated -- a teenaged Bill Clinton earnestly pumping John F. Kennedy's hand, an idealistic Newt Gingrich visiting European battlefields and vowing to end war -- and turn years later into the paunchy, cynical and compromised pols that we have come to so distrust?

We tend to blame the politicians themselves, focusing on Clinton's indecisiveness or Gingrich's pettiness. But in fact, our present system would corrupt even Mother Teresa or the Dalai Lama, were either to run for office in America.

To a young person asking me for advice about getting into politics today, I'd say you must be prepared to confront the Four Iron Laws of political life:

Law #1:

Money talks, bullshit walks.

Congressman Ozzie Meyers of Abscam fame was right. Your main activity in politics, for the rest of your life, will be raising money. And raising it from total strangers, many of whom you will neither like nor respect, and who are mainly interested in having their egos stroked and/or getting something out of you.

The chief personal trait you will need to succeed is insincerity. We're talking a dozen or more phone calls a day, as you exude warmth to disembodied voices, no matter how tired, distracted or miserable you actually are.

We're talking an endless round of cocktail parties, breakfasts, lunches and dinners, making small talk with strangers, laughing at their jokes, learning to tell little stories with a wink of the eye and pat on the shoulder, communicating how much you really like and value people for whom you feel nothing.

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i remember sitting in on a little tete-a-tete between Gary Hart, who just hated this kind of thing, and two major donors. It was excruciating to watch Hart, who is basically uncomfortable around other human beings, do his best to perform: taking two extra drinks in an attempt to

become more sociable, his face reddening, searching desperately for some anecdote to lighten things up, trying to fill the increasingly long silences.

In real life, a Hillary Clinton wouldn't spend five minutes with people like the MacDougals. In political life, they become part of her extended family.

I remember once talking to a millionaire who doled out \$1,000 checks to various politicians. He smiled happily as he listed, one by one, the various politicians who had trooped to his home for personal visits -- Congressional, mayoral, gubernatorial candidates. "They come to me, someone who has barely a high school education!" he said. "I don't understand how they have all this time to visit a crummy \$1,000 contributor. Don't they work for a living?" What did he get out of it? I asked, since I knew he had no interest whatsoever in issues or legislation. "Ego," he laughed, "what else? I mean they're coming to my house, I'm not going to theirs."

Once in a while the politician gets tired of playing the game. Long negotiations once ensued, for example, between the Jerry Brown campaign and a major contributor, who had just one little demand: that Jerry attend his daughter's wedding. Governor Brown finally agreed to put in a phone call that would be broadcast to the 1,000 assembled wedding guests. The moment came. The crowd hushed. The host stood before his guests speaking into a telephone. "Hello, Jerry!" he boomed. Oops, no Jerry. The governor, who was staying at Linda Ronstadt's house at the time, simply did not come to the phone.

But that was the exception. Michael Berman, who managed California Congressman Mel Levine's primary race for the 1992 Democratic U.S. Senate nomination, finally reached the logical conclusion. Since only money for TV commercials mattered in a statewide race, his candidate would not waste time on irrelevant matters like making campaign appearances or meeting with the press. The congressman would spend the election season in a room, dialing for dollars. He would only be allowed out for the unavoidable: casting a vote, visiting a particularly wealthy contributor personally or going home to sleep.

Levine agreed and succeeded in raising a record amount of money for the Senate primary.

It turned out, however, that Berman had made a major miscalculation. The public and media are unwilling to admit this dirty little secret of American politics. Decorum must be maintained. The candidate's refusal to appear in public became the issue in the primary -- he was tagged the "Stealth Candidate" by the press -- and he was defeated by Barbara Boxer, who went on to win the Senate seat.

Berman was just being honest. Politics is primarily about raising money for TV commercials. Campaign appearances and media interviews are mere window-dressing. If you enter politics, raising money will consume the single largest portion of your time -- far more than the combined time you will spend learning about the issues, formulating policy, enjoying your family and simply thinking.

**Law #2:
The media rules.**

The second iron law of politics is that you will inevitably become obsessed with seeing your name in print or appearing on radio or TV. You will much rather be mentioned in a story that opposes your beliefs than ignored in a story favorable to them. Other than raising money, nothing will matter more to your political future than this "free media" exposure.

The moments before the Normandy Invasion were pleasant compared to the nerve-twisting mornings when then-Congresswoman Bella Abzug's staff arrived at the office to find the morning papers waiting. Trembling, they opened the pages to stories on the Vietnam war, abortion or other issues that Abzug was identified with. If she was not mentioned, a gloom settled over the office so thick that one would have thought a close relative had died.

Sure enough, the congresswoman would enter her office and, a few moments later, a bellow would issue forth from the inner sanctum: "Smith (or whatever the names of the unlucky aides of the moment

were), get the fuck in here!" The next 15 minutes would feature some of the most creative use of profanity this side of Texas. The storm over, the red-faced aides slunk back to their desks, trying to regain some composure and remember what it once felt like to be a human being.

Bella, another good person to whom bad things happened by being in politics and who mellowed considerably afterwards, was only a slightly extreme example of what dependence on media does to politicians.

The media is never good for a politician's character development. The press will only consistently cover you if you are shrilly negative, constantly carping about your opponents' failings. And it will never give you the benefit of the doubt. The assumption whenever a politician goes into a press conference or other media event is that he or she is a self-aggrandizing, ambitious, hypocritical human being who is motivated only by the desire for power.

Your success in this profession, in short, will largely lie in conforming to the values of journalists who lack the slightest respect for yours. Your ability to think, reason or reach wise decisions will become much less important than your ability to create soundbites and spoon-feed reporters. But no matter how hard you try to ingratiate yourself with the media, they are always poised to lunge for your neck. The press pack is never happier than when blood is in the air. And don't ever forget -- you are the prey.

Which brings up the next law.

Law #3:

There really is someone out to get you.

That's right -- you're not paranoid. And not just someone. Lots of people are out to get you. Every candidate you will ever run against, backed by an army of researchers, media specialists, even private detectives. And if they don't get you, you know the media will.

Know now that every action you take for the next 50 years, in public or in private, at three in the afternoon or three in the morning, may someday be publicized to everyone you care about, and twisted luridly out of shape to boot. As a politician you have no right to privacy, no right to fairness, no right even to the safeguards we grant a criminal.

I remember, for example, a terribly nice Republican mayor who made the mistake of challenging California Democratic Assemblyman Richard Robinson. Robinson sent his research "hit man" to the mayor's city to gather dirt. It turned out that the mayor, a conservative family man, had attended a national mayor's meeting in Denver, where his host had invited his fellow mayors to a harmless luncheon at the local Playboy club. Without thinking, Robinson's future opponent filed a receipt from the luncheon with his trip expenses. Wrong move.

During the election every household in his district received a mailing in big, bold letters, entitled "YOUR PLAYBOY MAYOR!," implying that the mayor was a sexual libertine who was unfaithful to his wife and worse. He lost the election. Years later, he still got tears in his eyes describing the pain his daughter had suffered from the taunts of her classmates as well as the shame and embarrassment it had caused his wife.

What will it do to your own capacity to grow, to lead an authentic life, if you must live in fear that any risks taken, harmless or not, will one day be used against you? And what will it do for your soul to authorize, election after election, the same kinds of petty, vicious attacks on your opponents that they are unleashing on you?

Law #4:

Your brain will drain.

Perhaps the most important impact on you personally will be the loss of your ability to focus or concentrate. Kept running from event to event like a rat in a cage, your mind will fragment, to the point where you'll find it difficult to read a book, reflect or just sit quietly. Your most important survival trait will be mastering the art of

simultaneously thinking four or five things, while giving others the impression that you are following what they say.

If you are a member of Congress, for example, you will run from committee hearing to press interview to fundraising lunch to floor vote. Wherever you are, you will often need to be somewhere else.

Thoughts will flit continuously through your mind at any given moment: what position you should take on an issue, how to find time to call an important contributor or journalist, how to deal with your family's demands for more time.

The most dramatic examples of this phenomenon are President Clinton and his predecessor George Bush. Bush was literally unable to sit still. "Gotta move, gotta move" was one of his well-known expressions, uttered on vacation, as he careened from speedboat to jogging track to tennis court. And one of our most vivid images of Bill Clinton is of the President sitting in the Oval Office, simultaneously eating a big meal, conducting a phone conversation, reading a policy memo, tracking CNN and interacting with family, aides and friends. Political mind fragmentation is bipartisan.

While the media presents this as a positive trait -- how wonderful that our man can get so much done -- you may not find it so enjoyable from the inside. There are few politicians who know the joys of contemplation and inner peace -- let alone have the ability to write a decent speech of their own.

After Clinton moved into the White House, his staff quickly realized they needed to focus him on a few key issues, to maintain a "theme for a day." But our fragmented President could not comply. He had long ago lost the ability to concentrate or focus.

I remember meeting with then-Governor Bill Clinton, to recruit him for the board of directors of an economic competitiveness organization. I described our activities for 15 minutes or so. When I paused, he responded by describing in intimate detail his work on welfare reform,

an interesting topic but one that had no relevance to the point of our meeting. He then agreed to join our organization.

I wondered afterwards why he had gone on about welfare. Then I realized that his goal was to impress me with his grasp of policy, and he probably hadn't heard a word I'd said about competitiveness. Since he agreed to join our board, I didn't take it personally. He was just another politician with attention-deficit disorder.

Perhaps this is why you will probably find yourself talking far more than listening if you enter politics. It's so much easier to talk than to pull the mind together and hear what others are saying.

So are we doomed to live out our days in a political system that keeps churning out morally and intellectually stunted leadership? Not if we begin to seriously confront the roots of the problem. I'd begin with these three sweeping reforms:

1. Public financing of all elections, a ban on all lobbyist and large donations to the political parties, and a ban on self-financed campaigns.

Politicians can neither deeply understand issues nor maintain their integrity if their major waking activity is sucking up to the rich. Nor do Steve Forbes-style vanity campaigns elevate the political process. Level the playing field by financing elections with taxpayer dollars. There is nothing wrong with a millionaire or celebrity running for office, as long as they win on their own merits and not on their bank accounts.

2. Strict term limits.

It is critical that our politicians have real lives before and after entering politics. Tough term limits will force them to pursue other careers and interests, during which they may even develop the habits of reading, thinking and spending time with their families. No politician should be allowed to serve more than 12 years in public life.

3. Reject media cynicism and negative campaigning.

A free press is critical, and democracy will not survive with government-imposed or legal constraints on the media. At the same time, however, democracy cannot thrive in a media environment that degrades politicians and patronizes voters.

We've already seen signs of a growing public revulsion against media excess and negative campaigning. Steve Forbes' key loss in the Iowa primary, for example, was widely attributed to public distaste for his vicious attack ads. Groups like the Common Ground coalition are working to encourage politicians to campaign on their ideas, and recent decisions by major networks to let the candidates directly address the voters is a big step in the right direction.

As millions of voters, particularly swing voters who determine elections, change their values, so too will the media and political campaigns. The public clearly wants substantial political reform and, sooner or later, the system will respond.

Until then, however, voter beware.