

A reflection by an American person

By Dick Bernard

During the often sordid political campaign of '96, I found myself revisiting in my mind a 1960 scene in the Valley City City Park.

It was a beautiful day, with many people gathered around the bandstand. A band was playing. We were waiting for a speech by New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller. I was 20 and in college.

The governor came, was politely received, gave his speech, and left for his next stop. It was a thrilling day for me.

I contrasted that gentle day in 1960 with the disrespect-of-others-as-persons national spectacle presented in the 1996 campaigns.

But did my memory match the reality? Rebecca Heiser of the Barnes County Historical society helped me re-visit what really happened that day, June 4, 1960.

The June 3 Times-Record reported that the governor, after speaking for about 10 minutes, would spend about 20 minutes "shaking hands ...". He was accompanied by a "busload of newsmen and commentators ..." and "the Litchville High School band ... present[ed] a concert ...".

The June 5 Fargo Forum said "... upwards of 1,200 persons cheered Rockefeller ...".

"We in a free land, often take for granted the many blessings we enjoy," Rockefeller told the Valley City gathering.

"It's too bad so many people say that politics is a dirty business, when in reality it is the lifeblood of the American government. When they tell me that politics is a dirty business I tell them, 'Why don't

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you get into politics then and clean it up'?"

He said freedom has never been challenged more than it is today ... "shown," he added, "by the wrecking of the summit conference where insults were hurled at President Eisenhower who has dedicated his life, first as a military man, and now as President, working to help this nation through trying times."

So ... dirt and insults were a part of the then political process.

Later in 1960, Gov. Rockefeller lost the Republican nomination to Richard Nixon, and John Kennedy won both the Democratic nod and the election.

Political "dirt" in 1960, to my recollection, was pristine compared to today. John Kennedy's personal failings apparently were widely known and considered as private matters by the press and opposition. Nixon, who might have easily won a 1996-style "personal character" test, in 1974 resigned the U.S. presidency in disgrace.

Television was a campaign player in 1960 — witness Richard Nixon's five o'clock shadow and its supposed effect on viewers in the first televised debate ever. But TV news and advertising were

amateurish compared to today; and a smaller percentage of Americans had television. In 1960, we were spared endless hours of sophomoric attack ads.

Voters in 1960 could not conceive President Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War and many other battles. Some would say we were naive then.

The environment Gov. Rockefeller described in June, 1960, was dramatically different from today, even though he used familiar rhetoric.

Our innocence seems gone:

Tabloid journalism has infected today's mainstream media. Many pundits and others are so blatantly partisan — left and right — that their highly polished one-sided arguments merit little serious attention.

Today's television has, in many ways, become an Orwellian wasteland in the hands of those who seek to influence political decisions, including religious leaders, commentators and politicians of all persuasions. Fake sincerity seems universal. Messengers know how to use the medium: how to stay on message. The manipulation of the camera is so universal that it may be reducing television's impact as a credible medium.

I hope that 1996 was the nadir of sanctioned disrespect of candidates especially at the national level. I wonder how we can even attract candidates capable of the immensely complex job of leading this magnificent country. Even Gov. Colin Powell's life, if he had run, would have become fair game for everyone. It seems a micro-

scope is used to find every flaw of our candidates, no matter how small and then each flaw is absurdly magnified.

No business would succeed if its officers and products were as constantly ridiculed and second-guessed as are political candidates and government these days.

But there are many silver linings as this election season ends. Many efforts are being made to once again develop an honest and credible political process.

There is hope for our country's political system — but only if we get actively involved as Rockefeller suggested and constructively advise those committed people who are willing to represent us in all levels of government.

Editor's note: Bernard, of Apple Valley, Minn., attended what is now Valley City State University and edited the student newspaper.

RECORDS OF THE PAST

Dr. Lokken inaugurated

10 years ago—1986

The Valley City Senior High School Band will present their annual Christmas concert.

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