

POLITICAL
CAMPAIGN

1996 + 1960

A reflection by an American person

VALLEY CITY (ND) TIMES RECORD 12/3/1996

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 Heus 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

GUEST

COMMENTARY

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 at 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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Melba Millard, business editor

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OF THE ABOVE COLUMN (BELOW PAGES)

A REFLECTION BY AN AMERICAN PERSON (ONE OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE)

by Dick Bernard

November 27, 1996

While observing the often sordid political campaigns of '96, I found myself revisiting in my mind a scene in the Valley City (ND) City Park in the summer of 1960.

I was, then, a 20-year-old college student, about a year from attaining the right to vote. I remember a beautiful sunshiny day, with many people gathered around the bandstand in this small park, which was bordered on three sides by the beautiful Sheyenne River. This day a high school band was playing. We were waiting for a visit of New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, then beginning to seek - unsuccessfully it turned out - his party's nod for the 1960 Presidential race.

I recall that the governor came, was politely received by all in attendance, gave his speech, and left for his next stop. It was a thrilling day for me, being the first time I had actually seen in person a real national political figure.

My memory of that day carried forward for 36 years. I do not remember the content of the governor's speech, nor the precise date. What I do remember was the civility and respectfulness of the occasion. It was one of those positive memories we all carry about certain events, with the passage of years perhaps revising the reality of the event.

In my mind, I contrasted that gentle day in 1960 with the "slash and burn" disrespect-of-others-as-persons national spectacle presented from 1993 to 1996 by political leaders and their parties, including Ross Perot's, as well as by many business and labor PAC's, and others. I labelled many of this year's actions "character assassination by pious hypocrites". I think I was accurate.

But did my perception of that 1960 gathering match the reality? With profound thanks to Rebecca Heise of the Barnes County (ND) Historical Society, I recently re-visited what really happened that day, June 4, 1960:

The June 3 Valley City Times-Record reported that the governor, after speaking for about 10 minutes, would spend about 20 minutes "shaking hands with North Dakotans following the speechmaking." The governor and his party

were accompanied by "a busload of newsmen and commentators...." and "[t]he Litchville high school band...present[ed] a concert...until the governor [arrived]."

So far, so good.... Perception conformed with reality.

The June 5 Fargo Forum reported on Mr. Rockefeller's speech: "Estimates of upwards of 1,200 persons cheered Rockefeller ...in the Valley City park."

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

"So it is wonderful to see so many here today to take part in this political rally," he added.

"It's too bad so many people say that politics is a dirty business, when in reality it is the life-blood of the American government. When they tell me that politics is a dirty business I tell them 'why don't you get into politics then and clean it up?'"

He said that freedom has never been challenged more than it is today.

"This was 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...in the speech I heard the governor talk about "dirt" and "insults" as a part of the then-political process.

Did this mean that the 1996 campaigns were nothing more than "the same old, same old" of contemporary politics in 1960? I don't think so.

As months went on in 1960: Governor Rockefeller lost the Republican nomination to Richard Nixon. John Kennedy won both the Democratic nod and the election (I was still not old enough to vote).

Political "dirt" in 1960, to my recollection, was pristine compared to today. John Kennedy's peccadilloes, reported ad nauseum in recent years, apparently were widely known and considered as private matters by most everyone - press and opposition included - in 1960. If there was a personal "character issue" it never filtered down to the grass roots. Richard Nixon, who might have easily won

a 1996-style "personal character" test in 1960, in 1974 resigned the U.S. presidency in disgrace.

Kennedy's religion - Roman Catholic - was perhaps more exploited as an issue than any other in the 1960 election. TV 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 then was not the instantaneous, full color business it is today. Rather, the medium used black and white film, and TV advertising and news were not developed to the extent they are now. A smaller percentage of Americans owned TV sets than now. There were no mute buttons or remotes to use to tune out junk either. But, in 1960, we were spared endless hours of sophomoric attack ads on the tube.

As an electorate, those who voted in 1960 had yet to deal with the harsh reality of President Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War, and the battles on many fronts for assorted civil and human rights. Some would say we were naive, then.

In short, the environment Governor Rockefeller described that June day in Valley City was dramatically different from today, even though he used rhetoric still familiar to all of us.

Will we ever again approach the relatively innocent and naive days of 1960? I often wonder....

Tabloid journalism has infected today's mainstream media - sometimes there seem to be too many newspeople and too little news. Many pundits and other media persons are so blatantly partisan - left and right - that their highly polished one-sided arguments merit little or no serious attention. Some have worked in Republican or Democrat administrations as speechwriters or spokespersons.

Much of contemporary talk radio is nothing more than "infotainment" - with credible "info" in very short supply.

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. The airwaves are full of faux-sincerity. Messengers know how to use the medium: how to stay on message, and how to avoid answering tough questions without seeming to avoid those questions. The manipulation of the camera is so universal and so transparent that it is (hopefully) beginning to reduce TV's impact as a credible medium.

Today ever more complex and advanced technology seems ascendant, with messages, opinions and rumors zapped instantaneously and worldwide via the Internet. Will this, too, suffer from fatal credibility problems when the novelty wears off and use of the medium has been sufficiently abused? What will be the next stage....?

I hope that 1996 was the nadir of sanctioned disrespect of candidates especially at the national level. I cannot see how we can go much lower than we descended in 1996, and still attract candidates who are capable of the immensely complex job of leading this magnificent country, and who are willing to face the intense, unfair, daily and unremitting scrutiny of their personal lives, and then endless second guessing of their every decision. It is as if a microscope is used to find every flaw, no matter how small, and then each flaw is absurdly magnified.

I wonder what business would succeed if its officers and products were as constantly ridiculed and second-guessed as are political candidates and government these days. I wonder what business would succeed if its leaders were at polar opposites in philosophy about the product line, and ruled by a "winner take all" credo in Board of Director votes. I suspect business, under current public policy tradition, would be rife with failure - customers would not buy its products, even if the products were highly desirable and essential.

Had Colin Powell run this year, he would have become fodder for the media and for his opposition, and I would not be surprised to learn some day that this was a major factor in his declining to run for public office. There are means, far easier and less humiliating than politics, for him to accumulate money, power and influence. We all - including the general - have "something to hide". General Powell doubtless knew that in a campaign he would not have been treated deferentially like his predecessor general Dwight Eisenhower was treated in 1952.

How about "we, the [American] people?" Since I earned the right to vote in 1961, I have cast my informed vote - to my recollection - in every election. This makes me feel qualified to spout off to the 50 percent of the American citizens who did not even vote in November 1996, (and the 60 percent who did not vote in 1994).

I have personally become sick and tired of the endless analysis of what the "American people" were saying when they voted this Nov. 5. Every imaginable "special interest" seems to have had its own "spin" on what "we, the people" decided.

When I stood in line at the polls at 6:45 a.m. that chilly Tuesday, the 30 or so of us waiting to vote didn't talk about the issues, or look like Republicans or Democrats, or treat each other disrespectfully. We were there as individuals - as "American persons" - to mark our ballots and fulfill our civic duty. I suspect mine was not an unusual polling place.

I admit ambivalence about those who did not vote. Perhaps it is best that they stayed away, if their source of political information was TV ads and the like. Having said that, those who succumbed to cynicism (a hope of those who strategically use negative advertising or rhetoric to encourage people to stay away from the polls) or whose views are so narrow that they could not find the perfect candidate to represent them, do not deserve the respect they seem to demand. They copped out and effectively gave up their right to be credible critics.

Are there any silver linings as this election season ends? I think there are many. More so than I've ever seen before, efforts are being made to once again develop an honest and credible political process.

Mr. Rockefeller in June, 1960, said it right: "It's too bad so many people say that politics is a dirty business, when in reality it is the life-blood of American government. When they tell me that politics is a dirty business I tell them 'why don't you get into politics then and clean it up?'"

There is hope for our country's political system - but only if we get actively involved beginning now. As citizens we need to constructively advise those committed people who are willing to represent us in all levels of government. We need to learn the issues, and develop constructive opinions about these issues. If we identify problems we need to also identify solutions.

This is our country - the richest, most powerful, complex and diverse on earth. It needs us and we need it.