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John McCain's Elephant Man Moment

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Election campaigns bring to mind - usually ruefully - standards of many types. Among them are the levels of civility, truthfulness, and fair play that we wish candidates would exhibit when they compete for our votes. But as the day of final electoral reckoning approaches, the gulf between the standards we favor and the conduct we observe on the hustings tends to widen rather than narrow. To my mind, nothing demonstrates a lack of character in a candidate as the degree to which he or she is willing to slander an opponent.



Holding candidates accountable to reasonable standards of conduct and character in this respect has become more problematic of late, in part because candidates and their parties keep developing new ways to distance themselves from sordid practices, while still reveling in their results. Some of these tactics have become sufficiently notorious to contribute new names to the lexicon of electoral dirty tricks. The 2004 campaign, for example, gave us a new verb: to "Swiftboat," meaning to spread disinformation through an organization that has pretensions to credibility, and also denies any connection to the campaign of the candidate the disinformation assists. The name, of course, derives from the ostensibly ad hoc association of war veterans that sought to impugn the war record of Democratic candidate John Kerry, a decorated Viet Nam war hero. Most recently, we have a new adjective - "Rovian" - derived from the name of former Bush political mastermind Karl Rove. This word is used to condemn (although sometimes with grudging admiration) conduct that is both artful and wrong - such as collaborating with Swiftboaters (yes, there is a noun form as well).

By design, Rovian Swiftboat tactics are difficult to pin on the candidates that benefit from their use. This allows the candidate to seem to float above the unsavory muck

while still enjoying its predictable results ("Of course, I would never have said such a thing, but you know..."). Still, as with any other foray into the exercise of subjective morality, a candidate cannot totally avoid becoming sullied by the same dirt, unless he or she immediately and consistently condemns the lies, as well as those that have promoted them.

Outing Swiftboating and other Rovian tactics, of course, can lose the benefit of the lies, and the art is therefore for a candidate to avoid being placed in a position where they must either endorse, or condemn, the statements that they know to be false. When that effort fails, a candidate may suddenly find him or herself publicly caught short in front of a mirror that forces them to see things about themselves that they have been unwilling to confront before.

John McCain found himself in just that position this week in a manner that I'll return to at the end of this blog entry. When he did, I could not help recalling *The Elephant Man*, a much acclaimed 1980 film directed by David Lynch. That movie dramatizes the true story of Joseph Merrick, a horribly deformed and sensitive individual rescued from a Victorian-era freak show by a well to do physician named Sir Frederick Treves. Lynch takes substantial liberties with historical facts to explore, through the role of Treves, questions of integrity, responsibility and personal motivation that could not be more germane to the events we are witnessing in the closing weeks of the United States presidential campaign.

The central question that underlies Lynch's film is whether Treves is truly acting in the best interests of Merrick, or whether he is exploiting the Elephant Man of the freak show for his own personal benefit. Which individual, the director asks, is truly deformed - the innocent condemned by birth to be an object of visual horror, or the privileged physician, who provides Merrick with a safe place to live, but also makes him available to the social elites that come to gape at Merrick's horribly deformed face and form. In effect, Treves steps more humanely into the role of Bytes, the brutal freak show owner that provided Merrick with a marginal living at the cost of displaying him to the mob. As the plot unfolds, Treves's star in society rises in direct proportion to the increasing celebrity of his ward. Meanwhile, the luminaries of fashionable society that Treves introduces to Merrick trade pleasantries with the now-dandified Merrick over tea - and horrified comments at his expense as soon as they leave.

In one scene, Treves catches his own reflection in a mirror hung in the entryway to his home. He is brought short by the sudden appearance of his image before his eyes, and studies his face, as if for the first time, to determine whether what others see on the surface is truly representative of what lies beneath. The image of his wife then appears next to his own, and they engage in everyday greetings, while Treves's side-lit image appears in contrast not only with the glowing face of his saintly wife, but also within its own silhouetted features - starkly recalling the virtuous and the

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reprehensible, and the light and dark in his own soul- two facets of the same individual, sharply defined and opposed and yet inseparable.

Lynch is not shy in forcing both Treves as well as the movie to confront the responsibility of his, and by extension our, actions. In what is (to me) the most haunting scene of the film, Treves sits in the dark of the evening in his lamp-lit study, selecting books to lend to Merrick. He pauses in his task to gaze at a copy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, another metaphoric tale that juxtaposes moral purity with physical deformity. He places the volume back on the table, saying, "You stay with me." The script continues as follows:

ANNE TREVES (calling from the next room): Dinner will be served shortly, dear. (Getting no response she enters.)

ANNE: More romances for John?

FREDERICK TREVES (far away): Hmmm?

ANNE: ...Freddie! What's the matter? You've been like this all evening.

FREDERICK: Oh... I've just been thinking about something that man Bytes said.

ANNE: Oh, Freddie. What could that wretched vampire say to upset you?

FREDERICK: That I am very little different from him.

ANNE: Oh that's absurd, Frederick. No, no Frederick, that's all wrong.

John is happier and more fulfilled now that he has ever been in his entire life. And, that is completely due to you!

FREDERICK: But why did I do it? What was it all for? So John Merrick could live out his last days in peace and comfort? Or so I could become famous?

ANNE: Frederick, just what is it that you are saying?

FREDERICK: ...Am I a good man or a bad man?

ANNE: Oh, Frederick. (She holds her profoundly distraught and troubled husband in her arms)

The Elephant Man metaphor works so powerfully in part because of the visual contrast between the spiritually pure but horrific-looking Merrick and the proper and privileged, but morally troubled Treves. The former struggles with rejection at the hands of an imperfect society that counts appearances over character, while the latter luxuriates in the approval of the social peers that reward him despite the morally compromised game they recognize he is playing. Because Treves is both self-aware as well as vulnerable to temptation, we watch the conflict play out before our eyes even as we are challenged by our own visceral reactions to the inhuman face that The Elephant Man displays to the world.

John McCain had his own Elephant Man moment this week, when he, like Treves, was forced to face up to the moral consequences of a campaign that has too often been marked by a stream of Rovian Swiftboat allegations launched against his opponent. These statements have associated Obama with terrorism, the covert practice of Islam, and even Arabic heritage. Each of these pieces of disinformation has been cynically promoted in an effort to destroy the Democratic candidate's credibility in the eyes of the type of voters that would find the practice of Islam or the fact of Arabic heritage to be as morally deformed as the practice of terrorism. Nor have all such assertions been of a Swiftboat nature, as McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin, has sought to paint Obama as a terrorist sympathizer through association with a founder of the Weather Underground - who is now a respected university professor and a recent recipient of Chicago's Citizen of the Year Award.

Specifically, McCain's moment occurred as he faced crowds of supporters that have been whipped up to believe things that McCain well knows not to be true. Visibly taken aback on camera as Town Hall participants made more and more outrageous claims about Obama to his face, McCain found himself confronted with the need to ask himself the Treves question: "Am I a good man or a bad man?"

Here are three video clips of an increasingly uncomfortable McCain, trapped in the You Tube eye, in the harsh moral silhouette of the moment. In the third, he is looking an older woman directly in the eye. When she says that she doesn't trust Obama, McCain smiles, and nods vigorously in agreement. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kf6YKOkfFsE>)

Making the correct decisions will require us all to look inside ourselves to determine whether what we ask for from our government is right and just and for the benefit of all, or simply hypocritically self-serving, and disguised in disinformation of our own.

But then everything goes all wrong. The woman struggles with the reason. "Because..." she says, "Because...he's an Arab." Suddenly, McCain's face falls, as if he finally realizes three things all at once: the absurd falsehood of the statement he has just heard; the role that his own campaign has played in bringing this woman to her statement; and finally, that a man that has repeatedly said that he would rather lose a campaign than lose a war had somehow seriously lost his way. In that moment, the self-image that McCain holds in his own mind's eye, of the maverick war hero riding to his country's defense in its hour of need, must have suddenly morphed into the morally deformed image of a man whose ambitions had perverted his principles. There and then, you could see the question flicker across McCain's face: "Am I a good man...or a bad man?"

To his credit, McCain made the right choice in the moment. He took the microphone back from the woman, and looking down humbly at the ground, saying, "No Ma'am," in a voice that almost added, "They..I...have misled you." Obama, he was forced to admit aloud, is a "decent family man" who should not be feared, but respected, and treated with respect. Many in the crowd booed in response, not seeing the picture in McCain or Obama that they wished to see. Unlike McCain in that moment, they failed to realize that the moral deformity at issue was in themselves, and not in the history or the character of the object of their scorn.

Perhaps when the dust of this election has settled and the ballots have been tallied, some of them will have their own Elephant Man moments, and take a closer look at their own principles and motivations to determine whether they like what they see. Many, I fear, will not.

That, of course, would be a great pity, because regardless of the outcome of the current election, we as individuals, and all of us collectively as a society, will have many difficult decisions of principle to make. Making the correct decisions will require us all to look inside ourselves to determine whether what we ask for from our government is right and just and for the benefit of all, or simply hypocritically self-serving, and disguised in disinformation of our own.

A poem by Isaac Watts that Merrick often used to close the letters he sent during the final few happy years of his short life (he died at the age of 27) might assist us all in our own processes of self-appraisal. That poem reads as follows:

Tis true my form is something odd,
But blaming me is blaming God.
Could I create myself anew,
I would not fail in pleasing you.
If I could reach from pole to pole,
Or grasp the ocean with a span,
I would be measured by the soul,
The mind's the standard of the man.

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