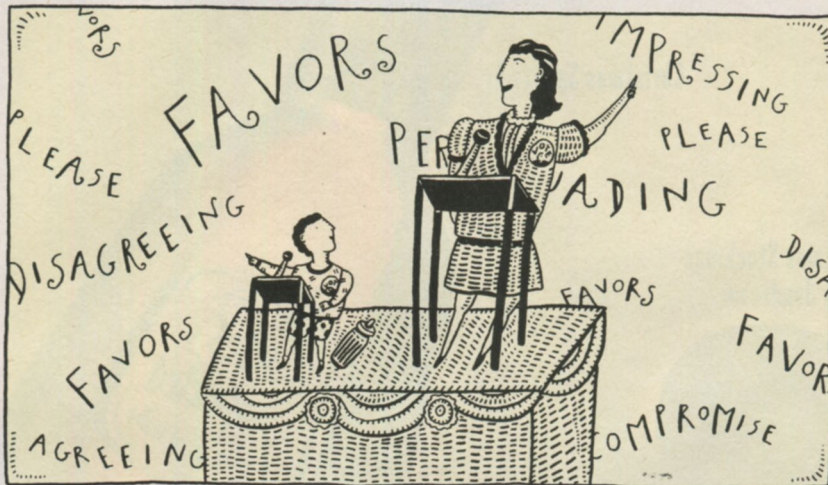


The Personal Campaign



We all disdain the shameless pandering of politicians, but we all do it, too.

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

NOW THAT THE PRESIDENTIAL election is behind us, we can all breathe a huge sigh of relief that we are, at last, done with politics for another four years. Politics may be fine for the inside-the-Beltway crowd, but no regular American, let alone a Bostonian, would ever stoop so low as to engage in the near-criminal behavior of presidential candidates.

Right?

After all, this was the year in which Americans, enraged by a congressional check-bouncing "scandal" that hurt no one, finally had it up to here with politicians. *Why Americans Hate Politics*, by *Washington Post* political writer E. J. Dionne, was the leading piece of campaign punditry. Early on, one of Clinton's greatest liabilities, amazingly, was that the guy had actually been a professional politician his entire working life!

What a stiff! And so, some of us turned our yearning hearts to H. Ross Perot, the billionaire Cincinnatus-wannabe whose chief qualification was a can-do attitude untainted by any ac-

tual hands-on experience running a government. The idea of electing Perot president made as much sense as hiring a Roto-Rooter man to conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but Perot found himself in the heady position of leading the presidential pack even before he had declared his candidacy. Of course, once he got close to doing that, he ran into a few problems.

No, politics is not a fit occupation for anyone. This generally acknowledged truth is correct as far as it goes. The unfortunate part is, that, like it or not, we are all politicians, and we engage in that dubious calling every minute of our lives—at work, with our friends, and at home. If we do not strike all the poses of Messrs. Clinton, Bush, and Perot, it is only because we can afford to be more subtle about our politicking. The stakes aren't so high for most of us: we don't need 100 million votes—just a handful will do.

"All politics is local," Tip O'Neill famously said. More local

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Social Relations

than he knew. Politics thickens as you drop down from the national level to the neighborhood level to the family level.

The average kitchen in, say, Concord is one of the most intensely political places in the country, as every night the same grisly issues have to be faced by two exhausted parents: who should cook, who should clean up, who should watch the children? These are the real domestic policy issues of our day.

Such questions, especially when posed at the arsenic hour in an era when an adult's every move is scrutinized for gender bias, make solving the national deficit look like a snap. Let's go to the videotape.

He: Darling—

She: Don't call me darling; you always call me darling when you want me to do something I hate.

He: Would you mind terribly if—

She: Oh, stop with the Fred Astaire. What's that make me? Ginger Rogers?

He: —we ordered out?

ANTHROPOLOGISTS HAVE LONG PONDERED what makes humans so special, how we have been able to cope with the exigencies of life so well that we have ended up monopolizing the planet.

Tool using is one leading theory, and articulate communication is another, but I would argue that politicking is a better guess, if only because it is so all-encompassing. Politics covers everything: from impressing your boss to persuading your wife to trade a sexual act for a back rub.

Politics is the way we obtain the many things that can't be bought. It's the underground economy by which things really get done in this country; it's the ATM of what Tom Wolfe called the Favor Bank. You make a deposit by doing me a favor, then make a withdrawal when I do one for you.

Such give-and-take comes as naturally as breathing, which is why small children are so good at it. As every parent knows, children do not simply do stuff when you ask them to; they politick about it endlessly. Little Jimmy will not let you put on his sneakers unless you let him watch the end of this video. All children are masters of the if-then construction: if you do this for me, then I will do that for you.

They need only be a little older before they learn a more important trick of the politician's trade, which is the art of lying through one's teeth. "Janie," a mother asks, "did you eat that fruit roll-up I told you not to eat because it would spoil your dinner?"

"No," Janie says innocently, as she polishes off the last bite.

After that, it's a cinch to tell a bill collec-

tor that the check is in the mail and, after a one-night stand, to assure a temporary love that you really will call.

WE LIE ON SUCH OCCASIONS BE-
cause it is easier and because
lies go down more smoothly
than the bitter truth. Is that any different
from professional politicians giving us the
line that, even if we are \$4 trillion in debt,
there is no need to raise everyone's taxes?

What's so impressive about professional
politicians is the way they do everything to
the max. They don't just tell little white
lies, they tell whoppers—Clinton's claim
that he didn't dodge the draft, Bush's insis-
tence that he was "out of the loop" on
Iran-Contra. And they throw themselves
into everything—shouting themselves
hoarse, rolling up their sleeves, plunging
into the crowd. They're like some kind of
rodent, the way they keep coming at you,
never taking no for an answer.

But even this determination has its "real
life" analogue in the social climber, the
professional up-and-comer, and the ardent
suitor. It's amazing to see, even amid all
the current skepticism, how successful
such campaigns can be.

One of my closest friends succumbed to
just such a determined campaign on the
part of a woman he had met in college. She
began in the year of Jimmy Carter's insur-
gent bid for the presidency, and she wooed
my friend with the same sweetness and fe-
rocity that Carter expended on the Ameri-
can people. She constantly asked him out,
sent him little notes on vacations, and
gazed adoringly at him whenever he was
in the room. It was almost laughable the
way she was always in his face. He did his
best to ignore her. But, as his other roman-
tic interests flamed out one by one, it gradu-
ally dawned on him that she really loved
him and that maybe it wasn't such a bad
thing. So he turned around and married
her. Now the Carter presidency is ancient
history, but they are still married.

The big difference between pols and
regular people is that the pols are profes-
sionals. They make a science of personal
relations, using focus groups and polling
data to see how they are coming across.
That way they can trim away, as if by lipo-
suction, any aspects of their personality or
program that aren't winning. If "family val-
ues" is a downer, no matter how much
you have harped on it, out she goes. We
might all learn from their professionalism.
But maybe what we really need is simply
their hard numbers. As it is, the best we
amateur pols can do is blunder along
through a sea of unreadable faces, uncer-
tain if, even among our closest friends,
anyone really likes us at all. □



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