

Gawking Season

Written by Margaret Evans

Tuesday, 21 April 2015 12:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 22 April 2015 05:09



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Election season is upon us. Well, it's not really *upon* us – not bearing down just yet – but the storm is out there, churning away in the murky sea that is social media, and I'm already feeling the effects here on shore. Time to batten down the hatches, my friends.

(Ew. I sound like John McCain. See what I mean? *It's coming* . . .)

If you're like me, a reader and a thinker who also happens to be extremely touchy, you're in a bad position. You're deeply repelled by our political discourse, but deeply fascinated, as well. You can't stand the heat, but you're helplessly drawn to the kitchen. So what to do? Do you ignore election season entirely – the lies, the spin, the meanness – or just try to grow a thicker skin? I know myself well enough to know neither of those things will be happening at my house. I'll just be standing there in that hot kitchen again, sweating and fuming and wiping my brow . . . and gobbling up whatever they're serving. And as usual, it will make me sick.

But I always start with high hopes and a dash of idealism. *This time it'll be different*, I think. *The*

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candidates will all be noble and inspiring. The media will be honest and fair, the voters kind and respectful. It will be a new day in America and we will all be so proud.

Don't laugh. (You're laughing, aren't you?)

A day or two after Marco Rubio declared his candidacy, I approached my computer with the innocence and curiosity of a child. I wanted more information about the young senator from Florida. Not opinion, not commentary, just general biographical information. Wanted to start from scratch, make up my own mind. I did not go to a conservative website, nor a progressive website, nor any political website at all . . . just straight to my Google home page. I didn't type in any provocative key words – “immigration” or “religion” or “marriage” or *anything* – just the man's name. I expected to be taken to Wikipedia, or Rubio's campaign site, or perhaps a news headline about his announcement.

Instead, up came an opinion piece from Gawker – it was the top Rubio story on Google – called “Get to Know Marco Rubio, the Biggest Idiot Running for President.” A wave of nausea washed over me as I clicked on the link (you knew I would!) and read the article. As it turns out, the title was its most gracious line. The piece was written by Adam Weinstein, a political columnist who cut his teeth at *Mother Jones*, so the fact that he didn't like Rubio wasn't shocking. What *was* shocking was the depth and breadth of his disdain. The unmitigated nastiness . . . the complete lack of human decency . . . the casual smattering of F bombs. That his cavalier cruelty was cloaked in cleverness made it twice as awful. It always chills me when people use their God-given wit to wound and destroy.

(It's easy to do – and can even be fun – but is that really why God gave it to ya?)

I was reeling. I felt assaulted. I don't even know Marco Rubio – or much about him, really – but I suddenly wanted to rise up and defend him against this sneering smarty-pants of a pundit. I wanted to rally to his side.

An irrational response? Certainly. Purely emotional? Undoubtedly. All too familiar? Absolutely.

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Warning to Mr. Weinstein and his counterparts on the right: This is how you will lose people like me. This is how your work will backfire. When you blithely defenestrate and eviscerate human beings in the name of furthering your political goals, however noble they may be, I will rebel. Tread lightly.

Oh, who am I kidding? People like that don't care about people like me. I've come to wonder if they even care about politics. What they care most about, I think, is generating blog hits. I gave this guy exactly what he wanted . . . and got bludgeoned with vulgar hostility for my troubles. (Ouch. Days later, my soul is still a little sore.)

This is just a typical day on the Internet, where your best intentions often lead you into an ambush. Be careful what you click on and always wear a helmet.

A friend of mine recently lamented the state of our public discourse, saying, "I long for someone who writes about issues without using the words Democrat, Republican, Communist, Leftist, Right Winger, Liberal, Conservative, etc. The minute those words appear, it is too easy to dismiss the content."

I share her frustration, as well as her longing for commentary that shatters the "liberal vs. conservative" paradigm, a model that's become unhelpful, and even harmful. Where are the public intellectuals like the ones of yesteryear? The ones *everybody* could love . . . or love to hate? The ones who transcended party politics with universal wisdom and humor? Where is today's Mark Twain? GK Chesterton? HL Mencken? Heck, where's our WC Fields?

Somewhere along the line, Political Discourse became a spectator sport in its own right – almost separate from politics, itself – kind of like wrestling or NASCAR, with fans who are every bit as rabid. If you want to be a public intellectual, it seems the only way to make a decent living nowadays is to pick a "team" and become one of its MVPs. Our political conversation no longer feels like it's about solving problems or making the country better. It's about spinning arguments and counter-arguments for their own sake . . . scoring points against your opponents . . . keeping the public tuned in and riled up. It's entertainment. Bread and circuses. Political pundits are our modern-day gladiators. It's a shame, too, because some of them could be so much more.

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And to be fair, some of them try. But when they do, their fans turn on them in angry-mob fashion. Nicholas Kristof, for instance, wrote a nice piece a few weeks ago about Evangelical Christians and the good work they do in the world. His loyal readers at the *NY Times* were so incensed, you'd have thought he'd penned a glowing defense of serial killers. (Actually, that might have gone over better.)

David Brooks wrote movingly last week about his new book, *The Road to Character*, and his own quest to become a better person . . . to develop a greater "generosity of spirit" and "depth of character." Well, this did not fly with the good readers of the

Times

, either, who could not manage to hold the words "generosity of spirit" and "Republican" in their heads at the same time. The comment section was as depressing as it was predictable. Brooks is the Bad Guy at the

NY Times

– that's his role – and any trace of goodness he displays must never be validated. Those are the rules of the game. Period.

And this is not Gawker we're talking about, y'all. Not some partisan political pub, either. This is the *New York Times*. . . The Gray Lady . . . our nation's newspaper of record. You would expect readers with more sensitivity, more nuance, more – dare I say it? – generosity of spirit. But except for a few outliers, you would be wrong. (In their defense, the commenters at the *Times* do

tend to use fancier words in their diatribes than the ones at Gawker.)

Ugh. It's all so exhausting and dispiriting. And so very damaging, too. To our society, to our personal relationships, to our souls. And unless you completely disengage with current affairs, there's virtually nowhere to hide. Not in the virtual world, anyway. Not during election season.

So don't say you weren't warned. It's coming, and it won't be pretty. Either shut your eyes or get ready to gawk.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. Read more of her [Rants & Raves](#) or visit her blog at

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