

When Quiz Shows Meet Politics: Game On

Written by Jack Sparacino

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"When I die, it's going to read, 'Game Show Fixture Passes Away.' Nothing about the theater, or Tony Awards, or Emmys. But it doesn't bother me." - Charles Nelson Reilly

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Americans largely agree on their favorite TV programs. Reality shows hold up fairly well in some sectors, though *Business Insider* recently noted that “Fewer reality TV shows are making it to air: according to the LA Times, a total of 13 hours per week were devoted to them in last fall's season on the major networks, compared to 20 hours in 2011.” Perennially popular are high profile sporting events such as football playoffs, award shows, news programs, and game shows.

Full disclosure, folks: I love game shows, especially the classics. *Jeopardy*, *Wheel of Fortune*, and

The Price Is Right

get a lot of play in our house. I don't go for crossword puzzles, but love the brain twisters in game shows. You know, those that feature contestants competing for prizes by answering endless questions ranging from pure trivia to arcane academic stuff to current events to price tags. Evidently I've got a lot of company, at least judging by the annual salaries of some of the top hosts.

For Jeopardy, Wheel, and Price, the average income is about \$9M. Alex Trebek, for example, is reported to earn about \$10M. When he hosts

Jeopardy

, I think about how frequently teachers appear as contestants. And

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their

salaries. The median high school teacher's annual pay in the U.S. is about \$57k. Mr. Trebek makes as much as 175 of these teachers...

combined

. Not too shabby for an old geezer who appears to be able to do his job in his sleep.

Do I sound a little jealous? Actually, I mostly watch *Jeopardy* to see how often I can come up with the right response when none of the players get it. Call it the smart aleck (smart Alex?... alecks?) factor.

Back to reality TV. Facilitated by a famous reality show fellow making it into the oval office, politics looks increasingly like one gigantic reality program. Or is it really anti-reality? Maybe Kellyanne Conway was onto something—perhaps cynically—when she offered up the term “alternative facts” to describe Press Secretary Sean Spicer's tortured efforts to put forward obvious falsehoods on *Meet the Press*, in some twisted sense perhaps an ultimate reality show.

With our cohorts waiting in the wings, my original Roundtabler, Kent, weighed in as I wrestled with some of these television conundrums. We were struck this week by another avalanche of gems and debris from the incoming administration. This included an interview with Bernie Sanders (remember him?), who expressed his concern that Mr. Trump is “delusional,” a “pathological liar” capable of moving the U.S. into a more “authoritarian mode.” These are harsh words and Sanders says he doesn't like using them.

To quote Mr. Sanders, "I use the term 'delusional' with regard to Trump when he said there were 3 to 5 million 'illegals' who voted in the last election . . . That is delusional . . . There is zero evidence to back it up. But he makes that statement. So I think the word 'delusional' is correct . . . Clearly, we have a President who does not understand what our Constitution about, what democracy is about."

What's a game show kind of guy like me to do here? Game shows are based largely on reality, on facts, on the truth. This is especially true for *Jeopardy*, which tests contestants' factual knowledge regarding history, science, geography, show business, etc. And it's

The Price is

Right

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not

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The Price is Wrong

or

Fake

, yes? What do we do with a president who claims that the U.S. murder rate is the highest it's been in 47 years? The FBI maintains, on the other hand, that

the murder rate in 2015, the latest year for which data are available, is actually among the *lowest*

in fifty years. Murders, Mr. Trump, are decreasing, not increasing as you have claimed. If I'm prompted on

Jeopardy

, what am I supposed to say? Your version of reality or actual reality?

Kent, what say you? Can we 'saddle up' again and straighten out some of this undulating mess?

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Kent: Well, we can try, Jack. By the way, did you see Gene Robinson's piece in the *Washington Post*

in which he said "No one should have been surprised when President Trump raged that the 'so-called judge' who blocked his travel ban should be blamed 'if something happens'?"

Robinson, a Pulitzer Prize winner, went on to say that "It is clear by now that the leader of the free world has the emotional maturity of a 2-year-old who kicks, punches and holds his breath when he can't have ice cream. He dismisses anything he doesn't want to hear as "fake news," which is the equivalent of holding his hands over his ears."

Jack: I do recall seeing that article—"Governing By Tantrum," as I recall – which really rang a bell with me since I love ice cream. I remember back in college the cafeteria had it out for us every night. We were pretty good about not having fits when they ran out, as I recall. Unless it was chocolate, of course.

Then there's Michael Specter, who wrote in *The New Yorker* about something that really rattles my inner scientist. Specter said that we were now being led, in times of truly remarkable scientific achievement, by the "most narcissistic and thoughtless denialist ever to have entered public life." Remember me telling you how incredibly warm it's been here this winter? Well one warm winter doesn't make

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a case for climate change, but Trump's dismissal of the climate work of leading scientists seems likely to ultimately have the worst impact on the world's poorest people. Those most vulnerable and least likely to have the resources to get out of harm's way. And he's a populist?

Kent: There you go again, worrying about us poor people. Seriously, though, we're heading to Mexico tomorrow for a couple of weeks. Last year several of the folks that we got to know were concerned about Trump's candidacy. One of our favorite Mexican friends asked me if Americans really hated Mexicans. I told him that of course Americans didn't hate Mexicans and that Trump would never get elected.

Jack: Ha. Better trade in that crystal ball.

Kent: Right. This year I expect that the concern in Mexico will be even greater. I don't know how to explain this to any of the folks we've gotten to like down there. Linda suggested that we wear t-shirts saying "I'm sorry" or "We're Canadians" while we are down there. Most people think we're from Canada anyway because we Minnesotans sound like them I guess. If someone asks if we're Canadian maybe we'll say yes. Otherwise, I don't know what to tell them except that Americans are nuts.

Jack: Not all of us, just some of the ones who watch *Let's Make A Deal*, maybe. Have you seen the costumes some of those audience members wear? You have to love it.

Kent: Look, we're only 3 weeks into a scandal and stupidity laden administration. Our new president will find out that running a government isn't the same as running his daddy's real estate empire. You actually have to obey the law, although he seems to have gotten a pass throughout much of his career. He said yesterday he has learned a lot in the first three weeks. I'm not sure he knows how a democracy should be run. I'm hoping that, once he finds out that there actually are checks and balances, he may lose interest. Is that too much to hope for?

Jack: We should still give him a chance, he's so hyperactive he's likely to get a few things right just by chance. Meanwhile, let's keep watching *Saturday Night Live*. Hopefully Melissa McCarthy will continue playing Sean Spicer . . . she is a riot and even he said her routine was "cute." We can only try to maintain our sense of humor.

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And when in doubt, turn off the darned news and watch a good game show.

Kent: Yeah, man. How about we join you after Mexico?

Jack: Yep, “come on down!”