

# UNDER COVER

## Politics: The Fundamental Things Apply

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Increasingly, Americans do not read about, listen to, or even watch politics. They watch television watching politics. Politics has become an event staged by the media. Cameras take us from the rostrum to the floor, to various headquarters, or to human-interest sidelights as seems appropriate to the director. Among news people, reporting the news must compete with banter, the gruesomely cute repartee designed to project a "personality" for the news "team." If either party wants its candidate heard without interruption, it has to buy the time. And no speech will be allowed to pass without a battery of interpretations.

Even critics of the media sometimes give this process too much dignity. Dan Rather recently conceded that TV was not suited to the discussion of "philosophic" issues in politics. It is not. But it also seems to me that the news teams do not understand politics and—I suspect—do not *want* to understand it. In crucial ways politics is defined by invisible things, matters that can be spoken of but not shown, and in that respect politics is a standing menace to television. At a more basic level politics is a permanent challenge to secular individualism, a rebuke to the liberal understanding of life that shapes the thought and institutions of our media.

One night during the Democratic Convention, New York's Channel 11 competed with the networks by running *Casablanca*. It was an appropriate choice; *Casablanca* is a great political film. The song says it: "The fundamental things apply/as time goes by." Eventually in politics you come to a time when they do. Like Rick and Ilsa, we face a moment when deliberation ends; choices are constrained; other, passionately desired alternatives are excluded. We are left with "fundamental things," the first principles of political judgment.

What are the "fundamental things" in politics? In *Casablanca* one principle is clear: *Private feelings must be sacrificed to the public good.* Citizens and leaders pass the test of politics only when they can govern private feeling, not tyrannically but firmly—giving up ambition, dignity, and even love, when necessary, for the things that matter. "With so much at stake," Ilsa rages, "all you can think about is your own feelings," and Rick eventually agrees. "The problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans..."

The media have trouble with this precept because it sees the individual as a part of a whole. The whole is not visible; it can only be "seen" from within, and slighting inwardness is an occupational hazard of the media and a cultural principle of secular society. When Senator Kennedy endorsed President Carter, for example, the news team expatiated on Kennedy's "lack of enthusiasm." Surely such reserve is not news after a long, bitter, and disappointing campaign. What is surprising is the internal discipline that led Kennedy to

support Carter and to observe the proprieties. But one cannot show the concern for his country that made Kennedy calculate that even his serious differences with the president were not "fundamental." In fact, the media managed to imply that Kennedy's sole concern was to establish a claim on the nomination in 1984, because to the "realistic" and empirical mind all self-discipline must be interpreted as a form of self-interest. David Brinkley is typical of these shortcomings when he dismisses "rhetoric" as irrelevant. Rhetoric seeks to win private feelings for public causes and good rhetoric is essential for good politics. Certainly, one cannot understand Kennedy without attention to the public rhetoric of his speeches and the private rhetoric of his internal dialogue. In *Casablanca*, Victor Laszlo is only a rhetorician—a talker and a sometime song-leader—but the Gestapo never doubts that he is a dangerous man.

A second "fundamental thing" follows from the governance of self: *Politics considers the good of the ruled before that of the ruler.* Given a sound people, leaders are dispensable. Laszlo tells the Gestapo that even if he betrayed the leaders of the underground, others would rise in their place. By the same logic, the one inexcusable political crime is to betray or debase one's people.

Of course our ideas of "the people" differ, and those differences say a good deal about our politics. Liberals and people on the left always find elections maddening because their people are so needy. The results of the election always *matter* to the poor and disadvantaged. The silent pressure of the people's pain militates, among the Left, against third parties or abstentions. The conservatives' people, by contrast, are better off and less dependent on the regime, and it is easier for conservatives to scorn "lesser evils." This is one reason why the Right is stronger within the GOP than the Left is among Democrats. In love or politics it is an offense to one's dignity to be taken for granted, especially by an arrogant so-and-so like Hamilton Jordan predicting that the liberals will be forced to come around in the end. But for the Left to *refuse* to come around would amount to a betrayal of its people, a violation of the fundamental things.

The media slight publics and constituencies because they exist in the minds of citizens and leaders. It is probably fair to say that in the secular, liberal world of the media, publics and communities do not really exist. Empirically, we are only so many separate bodies, and the people enter the media only as statistics or in crowds, as aggregations of individuals. Better be taught by *Casablanca*. *Casablanca* is a great love story because it understands that there are things more important than love. Love, in fact, makes us see those more compelling things. Rick can be cynical and detached until his love for Ilsa revives, but not after. If we find it hard to make political choices in 1980, it may be because our capacity for love, of one another or of our country, has grown so small. In the moment of truth, however, Americans may prove to know how to apply the fundamental things.

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