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Maine Code of Election Ethics

By Gregory P. Gallant

A few weeks ago during my morning commute up I-95, I saw a Cold War relic, a bumper sticker that had been popular during the seventies and eighties. It went something like this: “It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber.” When I first saw it years ago, I’m sure I labeled it naïve. The sentiment was sweet but unrealistic. After all, back then there were concerns about geopolitical alignments, mutually assured destruction, missile throw weights and trickle-down economics. But with each click of my odometer, I thought more about the bumper sticker. Increasingly I felt empathy for those who created it, because weeks earlier (in the height of last year’s election season) an effort I have been involved with for the last six years—the Maine Code of Election Ethics—had been characterized publicly by someone I admire as being “utterly stupid, meaningless, and naïve.” When I mentioned this to a friend who sits on the University of Maine’s faculty, he concurred. “It is utterly stupid,” he said.

What had elicited such a reaction? The Maine Code of Election Ethics is a project sponsored and organized by the University of Maine’s Margaret Chase Smith Center for Public Policy and the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan. The code is a voluntary

effort designed to elevate political discourse in Maine’s federal and gubernatorial elections. In part, its goal is to eliminate from the campaign process unfair personal attacks and to encourage candidates to focus on and debate substantive issues relevant to the people of Maine. Since 1996 every eligible candidate, incumbent and challenger alike, has signed the pledge, taking time from their demanding schedules to humor what some perceive as a stupid concept.

The sting of my friends’ criticism caused me to pause and wonder whether they weren’t right. Perhaps the code was meaningless. Maybe it is stupid to apply Marquis of Queensbury rules to a potential street fight, to seek a remedy to the alienation increasing numbers of citizens feel from the political process, a divide driven in part by unfair campaign conduct. I guess some politicians are comfortable with the fact that the Kashmir and Lesotho have higher rates of voter participation than our representative democracy. Maybe the Maine Code of Election Ethics has run its course. And yet, a question kept nagging me: Just what does it take for an idealistic concept to cross from the state of utter stupidity into the realm of valued effort?

During the preparation for a museum exhibit focusing on the building of social capital and the importance of community associations, I read a book by the recently

shamed journalist Bob Greene. *Once Upon A Town* is the unique story of North Platte, Nebraska during WWII.

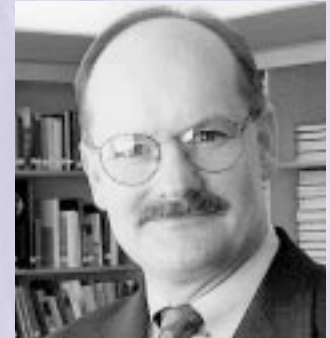
Shortly after Pearl Harbor, a small town of 12,000 formed a canteen at their train depot and spent the next five years feeding soldiers, providing magazines, birthday cakes, words of encouragement and gratitude. Every day of the war, from early morning until after midnight, the women and men of North Platte and surrounding communities cooked and prepared refreshments for the six million soldiers who passed through on their way to the Pacific or Europe. They donated eggs and other scarce food, rationing coupons and gasoline that could have been used by their own families. They cooked and cleaned and gathered supplies for hours, days, years and never failed to greet a train. They did not have to do it. But they did. They unquestioningly used only their own scarce resources. The only government money involved was the five-dollar bill Franklin Delano Roosevelt donated to the effort. Since it could have been any one of their relatives on those trains, it became a community effort that had relevance to everyone involved. They were onboard with the effort. They must have been stupid, or perhaps just naive, to exercise such sustained caring.

Margaret Chase Smith, who recognized the critical role civic engagement plays in our society, inspired the code. "She sought to involve individuals in public service and to encourage them to fulfill their responsibilities of citizenship. She worried about the impact a disconnected electorate had on our process. Throughout her career, she maintained close, daily contact with her constituents through whom she fostered, within her supporters and opponents alike, a strong

feeling of relevance between government and governed. She also recognized the deleterious effect money could have on the process. As such, throughout most of her political career, with the exception of her first U.S. Senate campaign in 1948, she did not accept campaign contributions, a strategy that helped to "limit" her tenure in Congress to a mere 32 years.

Her approach to governing and public service called for an ongoing, evolving, and even contentious debate centering on the role of government in Americans' daily lives. The Maine Code of Election Ethics is a tool candidates, voters and media representatives can use to bring focus and clarity to that discussion. While the purveyors of unfair broadsides and negative attacks apparently believe we don't need to achieve a climate of civic participation in which citizens feel connected to the ongoing process representative of democracy, I'm sure they have the best interest of all at heart. If only they could spend their campaign millions unencumbered by efforts like the Maine Code of Election Ethics.

Undoubtedly, it is the pernicious influence of such utterly stupid efforts that is causing what Derrick Jackson of the *Boston Globe* recently observed about the 2002 primaries: 9% of registered voters participated in the Georgia primary; 5% of registered Connecticut voters showed up for the Republican primary (a number, incidentally, that did not include the state's Republican governor); and a mere 11.5% of registered New York Democrats voted in the gubernatorial primary. As Mr. Jackson concluded in his article, "It is as if we need a gun to our heads to exercise democracy." Or maybe just a more imaginative approach. It requires a sustained effort far less demanding than



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the people of North Platte demonstrated. Historically the cause is not much different. Who knows? Maybe we need a new bumper sticker that reads, "I'm utterly stupid. I Vote." 🐾