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Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

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September ASO Magazine Column **What makes a Leader we will Choose?**

The other night (7-27-09) I was watching a political discussion when something caught my attention. CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer asked commentator Bill Maher about the resignation of Sarah Palin, and whether she had a future as a presidential candidate. Maher answered that she might have a future as such, but also took the opportunity to mock the intelligence of the American people: *"I don't know about a presidential candidate, but I would never put anything past this stupid country- possibly. I think she certainly could get the nomination, considering what the Republican Party has become and where they are right now."*

After a commercial break, Blitzer sought a clarification from the HBO host on his "stupid country" label. Unsurprisingly, Maher stood by it, even after the CNN anchor defended the intelligence of the country by invoking the election of Barack Obama:

WOLF BLITZER: *Bill, a couple little clarifications, because we're getting flooded with e-mail already. Earlier, Sarah Palin I asked does she have a future ahead and you say- said something to the effect, I don't put anything past this stupid country. So, people are already complaining that you're calling the United States a stupid country. I'm giving you a chance to clarify.*

BILL MAHER: *I don't need to clarify. It is.*

BLITZER: *Well, tell me why you think the United States is a stupid country.*

MAHER: *Because Sarah Palin could be president. Please, do I need to expand on that anymore? Yeah, I do- I think this is, in general- I mean, it's a big country- that's the great thing about it. There's 300 million people here. So, within this large country, there are tens of millions of very bright, intelligent people- you know, the ones who are watching us, not the ones who are writing the e-mails. But, you know, in general- gosh, you know, this country just gets dumber and dumber by the day, and I don't think I have time on your show to list all the reasons.*

BLITZER: *But you- but you- this country did elect Barack Obama president of the United States.*

MAHER: *Look who he was running against. Yes- I mean, look at the situation. I mean, this was after eight years of Bush, which was, you know, a- pretty much, a disastrous presidency. John McCain was not a very attractive candidate, and of course, he picked Sarah Palin to run beside him. And, you know, given that choice, I think Americans- you know, came to the fore on that one, but just because they elected a bright guy doesn't mean they're bright.*

I found this passage interesting not because I believe Sarah Palin should or should not be President, but because it started others discussing what is it we look for in our political leaders. Many have taken Maher's meaning to be that we do not always elect the most intelligent leaders. I even heard one commentator explaining the comments away by saying that Jefferson and the other founding fathers

wanted every “educated” citizen to be involved in the system, not necessarily everyone. I find that interesting too because I find it hard to agree with this when the Founding Fathers started the Declaration of Independence with a statement of:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

If you believe that the Founding Fathers wanted only the most educated among us to be elected, I guess they should have started with “*all educated men*” instead of “*all men*”. Personally, I think they got it right the first time. Beyond this, while Founding Fathers like Thomas Jefferson, John and Samuel Adams, John Hancock and Benjamin Franklin were every well educated, many like Robert Morris, Francis Lightfoot Lee, John Penn, Roger Sherman and Samuel Huntington had little to no formal education. Clearly, education was not a requirement for them.

Education is an okay way to judge one's knowledge, but not the only way and certainly not always the most accurate. You can be an intelligent political student and still not be a very good representative of the people who elect you. At the same time, you can be considered under educated and do a great job of leading; Reagan, Lincoln, Washington and Jackson were considered “un-educated” while running for president. During the Civil War, many of the best leaders of soldiers were from the bottom of the classes of West Point while many of the most horrific leaders came from the top of class. Maybe someone can tell me who was the one that asked General Patton for his diploma?

But if we are not always looking for the most intelligent, then what are we looking for. I will admit I have been frustrated with political leaders that do not always understand the basic principals of running a municipality, county or state. But does a lacking of education in how a political organization works mean an individual cannot run it. I do not fully understand how a car operates, but I was still able to get a license. I do not fully understand all of the complexities to building a home, but I can still buy one.

I feel choosing a leader comes down to not just education but the measure of the individual. I realize this is hard to pin down to a definition, but I would say it amounts to trust, knowledge, articulation, position on individual issues, and yes, even a little bit of gut feeling. It's hard to say what makes a good leader, but you know it when you see it.

Do I think it would be great if as a collective whole we increased our knowledge of the political system? Certainly. I feel we have become too used to getting all of our knowledge from short sound bites and have not always done the hard work of diving into the issues of the day. But at the same time, the system needs to make it easier to understand the issues. Does a bill in Congress really need to be thousands of pages long, written in such a way that it requires three readings to understand and even then three people read it three different ways? Does a bill in Congress covering one subject really need to have countless amendments covering multiple other subjects add to it? Are there ways we as a government can make the issues more clear and simplistic, rather than purposely complex so that we can manipulate and hide.

So is he correct in calling the American voting public stupid? I do not think so. Are a few of us stupid for watching a certain HBO host commentator? More than likely, but that is the freedom of choice.

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