

I Dream of A New America

A new book by George Cappannelli www.IDreamOfANewAmerica.com

An Open Letter To Political Candidates

*“The administration of government
like guardianship
ought to be directed
to the good of those who confer
not of those who receive the trust.”*

Cicero

I believe Cicero was correct in his advice and that you and I and all Americans can learn a great deal from his council. I also believe that the steps we take now and in the next period of our history could well be the most important and critical steps we have ever taken for they will determine if we continue this rapid and precipitous decline toward the end of a noble dream or regain our sanity and once again set this ship of state on a heading that will lead us toward a proud and positive future.

To that end, I believe that you, as a political candidate, play a critical role in this process and so I ask you to reflect carefully on some of the ideas presented I Dream Of A New America, in this open letter and, most especially, on the messages that come from that quiet voice inside you that guides you to do the best and highest good.

In 1964 when Marshall McLuhan made his now famous assessment that ‘the medium is the message’ he was issuing a challenge to us to wake up and free ourselves from what he called ‘the shackles of 19th Century perceptions and beliefs.’ Unfortunately, it is clear that instead of waking us up to the dangers ahead, his comment seems to have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, the ‘media’ of our time have not only become the message, but this message has, for all

intent and purposes, succeeded in trivializing content, marginalizing meaning and anesthetizing most of the world's population.

Getting Lost In The Sound and The Fury

So I begin this letter to you who claims to want to serve the public good with the reminder that any attempt by you to speak into the noise of the current political debate on the contentious topics that seem to divide us will eventually doom itself. Indeed although there is a great deal of 'sound and fury' out there, you and I and an increasing number of other American's know that most of it truly 'signifies almost nothing'. For this 'sound and fury' not only fails to advance the primary goal of uncovering and executing real solutions, it actually drives us away from the debate.

As a result, in the absence of real content and meaning, the only choice left to you is to continue to perform empty mimicry and to relatively deliver poorly disguised platitudes and posturings; and the only choice left to us, the voters, is to either turn away from you and the entire melodrama (as so many of us have) or to evaluate you on inconsequential and subjective qualities – physical appearance, glibness, accent and mannerisms and the superficial answers you often deliver to what we all know are enormously complex challenges. Yes, with no other viable options available to us we, the people, like the bystanders along the parade route for the King Who Had No Clothes, turn a blind eye to the charade. How else could we possibly explain the fact that this or any other nation could elect so many mediocre and dramatically under-qualified individuals to public office?

Fortunately for us and for the particularly fragile balance of our world, however, even the heavily sedated eventually wake up and from my perspective, this waking up is happening for an increasing number of Americans. Yes we, the members of this Aspirin Culture, are showing signs of having had of the self-medicating with mindless entertainment, overwork, addiction to food, sex and the internet that keeps us stumbling around in the dark and although a clear strategy has yet to emerge by which we can find our way back into the bright light and sunshine of hope, there is a damn good chance we are moving in that direction.

Taking Advantage Of A Rare Opportunity

As a result, I believe our waking up offers you a rare opportunity to participate in the creation of a new kind of political conversation in which you and all of the other candidates place a much greater focus on ‘process’ (how we can arrive at solutions) rather than on ‘task’ (the solutions themselves.) I believe this shift in focus will gain you far more credibility as a candidate than your position on any single or cluster of issues.

This focus on process will also point the way to the only sensible and successful means of actually uncovering the essential and effective solutions we require.

So my advice to you is to avoid repeating the same mistake that so many candidates and office holders have been making for so long – stop pretending you have ‘the answers’ to most of the major challenges we face. Instead start saying what everyone already knows – *These challenges are daunting and if we are ever to be successful in addressing them we have to find a new way of uncovering and implementing them.* (As the old saying goes - “If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always gotten.”) By this act alone you will both differentiate yourselves from the pack as well as serve the greater good.

Being Heard

So to break through the information overload you must avoid being seduced into speaking into the current political conversation about surface (transient) issues and instead address the process itself. While this may seem impossible in the face of both the media’s and the public’s seemingly insatiable appetite for sound bites, each question asked about a surface issue becomes another opportunity for you to point out the superficiality of the current debate.

Example: “Good question and I think you will agree, a really complicated issue. While I have my own opinion on the subject and our team has done a terrific job of researching the topic, I think it would be irresponsible of me to give you one of those glib 15 second answers we’ve become accustomed to getting from our leaders. Instead, I think we should stop looking for band aid solutions and accepting short term fixes and start bringing the best minds together from all sectors (and I mean the best minds in the world) to work on finding real and sustainable solutions to this and other problems. Don’t you think it’s about time we actually solve some of these things?”

Creating A Genuine Vision

I also believe you will contribute substantially to the creation of a higher level of political dialogue by crafting and articulating a much more comprehensive vision for America, one that identifies clear goals, articulates possible roles and responsibilities, sets realistic and measurable timelines and establishes clear metrics by which we can evaluate our progress. For example - rather than talking about education, healthcare, poverty, energy and the environment as individual priorities within the current paradigm of scarcity, divisiveness and limitation, I recommend you paint a new world view in which our objectives and values are of a different and higher order, our priorities more meaningful, and our ability to cooperate and collaborate identified as essential elements in making our daily lives more positive, meaningful, effective and satisfying.

Paint a vision of a future world with images, sounds and feelings that allow us to experience your vision; a vision that describes a world in which 'fighting terror, drugs and poverty' or struggling over the allocation of resources made scarce by artificial manipulations are neither the focus nor the obstacle to living lives in genuine peace and in a climate of abundance, prosperity, hope and enthusiasm.

Also articulate a vision that challenges us to rediscover our discipline and patience and to do the real work necessary to achieve this new state. Create for us a vision that is clear, understandable and resonates with our deepest and most sacred needs for happiness and well-being. Create a vision that give us hope and re-energies us.

If you craft this vision artfully and deliver it solidly – especially in a book that you rather than a ghost writer write - your message will not be lost in the information overload or perceived as the ramblings of a Pollyanna, but instead will be heard as the message of a powerful, compassionate and capable leader who is committed to making a real difference at a critical time. One other thing I recommend, give your vision a compelling, captivating title and symbols that makes it easy to remember and serve as the metaphors for the process itself.

In framing this new political conversation I recommend you address bedrock beliefs (those stable, unchanging beliefs) the constituency identifies as malleable (have not yet made up their minds, but about which they have a strong desire to know more) rather than those transient surface issues so much of our media focuses upon and fixed beliefs (those on which they have intractable positions). Speaking to individuals about fixed beliefs only alienates them further. Also speak more about those beliefs that unite us rather than divide us.

I also recommend that you identify and only utilize 'intelligent' and 'viable' media such as public broadcast (radio and television), the internet and credible and viable journalistic sources that will allow you to conduct a genuine, in depth conversation and give you the scope and opportunity to articulate it most fully. These kinds of quality media interactions offer you the only unique opportunities to amplify the reframing of the political conversation with any real dignity and depth.

I know this is not an easy task, however, if you articulate a compelling vision that explores a new and higher state of existence for America; a vision that identifies more viable roles for each and every American in fulfilling this country's destiny of bringing genuine democracy to the world, you will open the door to real, content-focused media.

Focusing On Process Rather Than Partial Solutions

As part of your focus on 'process' rather than giving glib answers and partially formed solutions, you can educate the public on the difference between discussion (from the Latin 'discutere') which means to shatter into pieces and dialogue (from the Greek 'dialogos') which means to arrive at truth through reason. I also suggest you model this difference whenever possible.

Example: "As most of you know, our normal form of public political debate doesn't work all that well. No wonder! It is based on what we call discussion. In discussion we take a topic, rip it into pieces, stir up a lot of emotions, go away unresolved and mad and generally stay that way – sometimes for a long time. I'm interested in finding a better, more intelligent way for people – even people who disagree – to be able to address the issues we face, identify our commonalities rather than focus on our differences, and use the resources that are available to us wisely and in concert so we can finally solve the problems we face."

Indeed, I strongly recommend you use every opportunity to stress the fact that the challenges we face are too complex for a small group of isolated and philosophically biased individuals from any one party or sector alone to solve. Point out that those who insist on band aid, quick fix alternatives, who continue serving up simplistic solutions are apparently more interested in accumulating personal power and having their way than in finding real answers. Also point out that

this inclination not only adds to our difficulties now, it also increases substantially the inevitable price future generations will all have to pay.

So whenever possible continue to stress ‘process’ over ‘fix’ by calling for the formation of special Brain Trusts, advisory boards and special study groups that bring our best and brightest from the public, private, corporate, research and academic sectors together (and don’t limit the search to this country) to apply their talents, intelligence and resources to genuinely address our challenges. By this I do not mean the usual collection of tired old faces and equally tired minds who spend months haggling over the wording of so-called ‘bi-partisan’ reports that ultimately only put a vanilla face on a strictly partisan effort. I’m talking about a genuine collection of the best critical thinkers of our time, no matter where they come from or what political philosophy they represent. This will not only advance the ‘process’ proposition, it will also position you as an innovative, thought-leader and peer of the experts.

Issue Us A Challenge

I also strongly recommend that you use the complexity and immediacy of the many challenges we face, as a reason to issue a call to the rest of us. Challenge us to become participants and co-collaborators in making our world safe and sustainable. Remind us of Marshal McLuhan’s quote about there being *“no passengers on Spaceship Earth, only crew members.”*

Also remind us of Emerson’s sage advice, *“Talent for talent’s sake is a bauble and show. Talent working with joy in the cause of universal truth lifts the possessor to a new power as a benefactor.”*

Help us to remember all sorts of ways to get and stay involved from town hall meetings and innovative public opinion processes to participation in local community, church and educational organizations. Encourage us to redefine our responsibility as citizens. Describe for us the characteristics and qualities we and you need to develop and display in order to return trust and confidence to our political process.

Please also speak to one of the primary aspects this ‘call’ must contain - that we, as individuals, have to take primary responsibility for our lives and our nation back – back from the degrading values that erode our family structure and primary institutions, back from the arrogant and self-focused process we now call politics, back from the numbing sense of media addiction that overwhelms us and saps us of our energy, discipline and commitment.

Remind us that we have to do something about our addiction to noise and violence, to insipid forms of entertainment, to foods that kill us and fear based thinking that causes us to withdraw. Inspire us and tell us that, like athletes, we have to go into training in order to overcome the lethargy and indifference that has us in its grips. We have to get back in shape to get this country back on track so that it can fulfill the promise made in its founding documents to its people and to the world. I believe this is a call that will be incredibly well received.

And do not listen to the fears of the politically correct and the timid, such calls to action do not turn us off, but instead thrill us and re-engage us in pursuits we know are higher and more worthy. In short, these calls re-ignite in us a sense of purpose and this purpose and commitment will serve this nation greatly.

Walk Your Talk

In addition, I believe the aligned demonstration and practice of a specific set of characteristics and qualities will greatly support you in your effort to reframe the political dialogue. These qualities and characteristics emerge primarily from my own and others experience in both the public and private sectors.

If you already possess and practice these qualities, then by all means continue to do so. If you find yourself lacking or deficient in some or all of them, then by all means use every means at your disposal to development and own them.

Authenticity

At all levels people are showing signs that they have had more than enough of those in the public eye who are out of touch with themselves, lack genuine conviction, and who therefore look to the shifting winds of public opinion as the primary source for their beliefs and strategies. My recommendation to you is to look instead for ways to stay in touch with your inner conviction and passion. This will, of course, become increasingly more challenging as the pace of the race and the demands for the articulation of positions picks up - an excellent reason for getting well grounded in this characteristic now. Authenticity (synonyms include: genuine, unique, sincere, original, bona fide) will also contribute more to your credibility and to the public's confidence in you in these troubled times.

While I believe strongly in coaching, I recommend that you avoid the kind of media coaching that places too much attention on body language, tonality and camera presence and not enough on genuine alignment, sincerity and content. It is the latter that will ultimately win the day. In short, I believe there is no substitute for originality and authenticity. And those who doubt it need only look to a number of individuals in our government today, both elected and appointed officials, to see how political campaigns devoid of genuine content and lacking in authenticity and originality result in the selection of individuals who lack both the skills and the character to lead us.

Honesty

In a public climate such as ours in which distrust of public officials, corporate executives, the judiciary and the political process itself is at an all time high, directness and honesty will play like no other song. It will also bring a much needed breath of fresh air. To this end, I recommend you start early and remind the public often that we are all human, susceptible to error and that it is okay to not to know something. Indeed, remind us that it is actually a sign of courage, intelligence and a genuine commitment to get things right. (As Peter Drucker says, “There is a significant difference between doing things right and doing the right things.”)

Also remind the public that ‘no one can con an honest man’ (i.e. as long as one is willing to admit what one does not know and has the perseverance to stay with it until things become clear, one cannot be taken advantage of – i.e. Unfortunately this did not apply to enough of the post 9/11 members of Congress). I believe this concept may, in fact, be one of the most important lessons any leader can remind us of at this time when our democracy is on the line.

Clarity & Common Sense

In line with honesty, keep things simple and communicate them in ways that resonate with common sense. It will prove an unbeatable combination – especially in this age of double-speak, spin and obfuscation. It will also be taken as a sign by the large number of citizens who have turned away from the political process that it is safe to come out and play again. Finally, it will remind us that even in this world of unprecedented scientific and technological advances and

very complex issues, the greatest wisdom is and has always been spoken in plain language and through ideas and concepts that resonate naturally with our inner knowing.

Transparency

The first rule of both comedy and effective communication is – *Tell them what you are going to do. Do it. And then tell them what you have done.* Although this strategy has worked since the beginning of time, a lot of contemporary political candidates and office holders seem to believe that doing what they want to do, telling us something we might believe (for a while) and then denying what they have done when the pigeons come home to roost is a better formula. Clearly this kind of thinking is getting old. In this age of instant communication, emerging new constituencies, blogs, and a genuinely troubled populace, transparency will prove far more effective and attractive to the public.

Trust

We have already talked about the level of distrust, anger and cynicism present in our world today. Demonstrating the characteristics identified in this section will cultivate a new level of trust for you and contribute to re-establishing a strong relationship between you and the constituency you seek to serve. And trust in leadership will certainly be required if we are to successfully make the tough decisions, sacrifices and ultimately, the changes that are needed. (For more information on this it might be helpful to review John von Neumann's work on Game Theory – specifically the 'w' factor.)

Caring and Compassion

An old cliché tells us, 'no one cares how much we know until they know we care.' It is easy to trivialize this message and to suggest that it is something for the naïve and inexperienced to hold onto - which is precisely what many who make their way to power have done for so long. Reverse this trend and demonstrate genuine caring, empathy and concern for the people (as peers) and I believe the results, especially in this age of distrust and cynicism will astound.

To accomplish this, of course, requires the modeling of the characteristics/qualities discussed in this section, and two more: humility and the willingness to share one's vulnerability. The inability to demonstrate these two characteristics was, in my opinion, (voting improprieties aside) the factor that actually led to the defeat of both Al Gore and John Kerry. Had either of them been able to connect on a deeper and more caring level with the electorate and to demonstrate genuine empathy for the human condition, not from above the fray, but as people who were right in the thick of it with us, both elections would not have been close enough to have allowed manipulated courts and fraudulent polling place results to even matter.

Flexibility

At no time in history has this quality been more absent or more needed than it is today. Rigid, inflexible thinking, stubbornness and the unwillingness to reverse position or let go of previously held limited beliefs account for most of the world's primary problems. We see this in the halls of government, in boardrooms, church rooms, classrooms and living rooms and in our own bathroom mirrors. To model flexibility, to admit fallibility and to proclaim that revising one's position based on new findings and better insights is not only natural, but a sign of maturity and intelligence will pay enormous dividends for you as a candidate. Modeling this characteristic/quality will also greatly assist you to advance the state of the state at all levels of our society.

Humanity

Closely allied with caring is the need to demonstrate a genuine sense of humanity. And by this I do not mean the overly sentimentalized, manipulated forms of melodrama that have been badly abused by this and other administrations. Instead I mean a deeply felt and emotionally communicated sense that we are not only in this together, but that whatever happens to the least of us happens to all of us. A genuine sense of humanity, of course, requires leaders to check their egos and any inflated sense of special entitlement and importance at the door. (See Robert Fuller on Rankism.)

It also requires that we finally do what McLuhan advised us – *give up our attachment to 19th Century perceptions and beliefs* - especially those that espouse the idea of ‘the white man’s burden or the ‘divine right of kings’ (presidents, corporate leaders, theologians, etc.)

Celebration and Humor

No two characteristics are more absent in contemporary public life than celebration and humor. Indeed, it appears that most politicians believe that ‘seriousness is next to Godliness and there ain’t nothing next to that!’ This does not imply that I think we should make light of the serious challenges we face, or that we should, as George W Bush did, run up the flag arbitrarily and call the game victorious long before it is over. What I do believe, however, is that we need to stop trying to make ourselves important by being somber and stop believing that we somehow will drain our resolve by stopping along the way to laugh at our foibles and celebrate our courage, our willingness, our compassion and our incremental achievements.

Instead a strong sense of humanity allows us to admit our frailties while also acknowledging our remarkable and indomitable spirit. In this election, I believe humor and celebration will prove to be incredible allies to the candidate who uses them.

In concluding, I can ask you once again to take the time to reflect on some of the ideas and recommendations presented here in these pages and above all, that you go into the quiet of your being and listen to the wisdom that awaits you there. I ask you to remember, as William Graham Sumner reminded us that, *“the real danger of democracy is that the classes which have power will assume all the rights and reject all of the duties – that is – they will use the political power to plunder those who have.”*

The challenges we face demand a new and higher quality of leader. Are you prepared for these challenges? Are you one of the new leaders who can represent the well being of this nation going forward? Are you prepared to participate in the next American Revolution? Will you dream with us?