

# Bring on the Mud

by Christopher Hitchens

In his classic post-World War I novel *The Good Soldier Schweik*, the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek makes mention of “The Party for Moderate Progress within the Boundaries of Law,” the very sort of political formation the powers-that-be have always dreamed of. With such respectful parties, there’s no danger of any want of decorum, or challenge to the consensus, or spreading of misgiving about authority or institutions. Instead, or rather: “There’s much to be said on both sides of the case.” “The truth lies somewhere in between.” “Lurid black and white must perforce give way to reputable gray.”

Satire defeats itself, as usual. A political formation that could readily be considered absurd by intelligent readers in the stultified Austro-Hungarian Empire is now considered the beau ideal by the larger part of the American commentating class. What’s the most reprehensible thing

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a politician can be these days? Why, *partisan*, of course. What’s the most disapproving thing that can be said of a “partisan” remark? That it’s *divisive*. What’s to be deplored most at election time? *Going negative* or,

worse, *mudslinging*. That sort of behavior *generates more heat than light* (as if there were any source of light apart from heat).

The selection of these pejoratives tells us a good deal, as does the near-universal acceptance by the mass media of the associated vernacular. To illustrate what I mean, consider a celebrated recent instance. Senator John Kerry was not adopting any “issue” when he proposed himself for the presidency by laying heavy stress on his record as a warrior. (That is to say, he clearly could not have intended to assert that Democrats had been more gung-ho than Republicans during the Vietnam War.) The “issue” was his own record, and ostensibly no more. But when that record was challenged, with varying degrees of rancor and differing levels of accuracy, the response was immediate. I have in front of me as I write a full-page ad in *The New York Times* of August 27, 2004, attacking the “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” who challenged Kerry. This costly proclamation states, and then demands: “It can be stopped. All it takes is leadership. Denounce the smear. Let’s get back to the issues.”



*The election of 1884 stirred deep partisan passions and inspired some of the dirtiest campaigning in U.S. history. It also elicited very high turnout at the polls, with Democrat Grover Cleveland winning by only 23,000 votes over Republican James G. Blaine.*

Never mind the truth or falsehood of the allegations for now. What's worth notice is that the ad does not deny their truth so much as say that nobody has the right to make the allegations in the first place. Thus, having himself raised a subject, the candidate is presumed to enjoy the right to have his own account of it taken at face value. Anything else would be indecorous. The slight plaintiveness of this is underscored by the call to "get back to the issues." But surely Kerry had made his military service an "issue." At the bottom of the ad appear the legend "Paid for by the Democratic National Committee" and the accompanying assurance that "this communication is not authorized by any candidate or candidate's committee." Even the law requires us to believe these days that, for purposes of fund-raising, the organs of a party are independent of its nominee (which is why the members of the "Swift Boat" group had to pretend to be above politics in the first place, thereby leaving themselves vulnerable to the charge of being sinister proxies).

**B**ut is there any place "above politics"? Is there a subject that can avoid becoming "a political football" or a resource out of which "political capital" cannot be made? The banality of the automatic rhetoric is again suggestive here. Since every other electoral metaphor is sports oriented, from the top of the ninth to the 10-yard line to the play-

ing of “offense” and “defense,” why should there not be a ball or two in play? (Surely, to move to a market image, it’s short-term dividends rather than actual capital that one hopes to accrue.)

Opinion polling shows how far cognitive dissonance on this point has progressed. When asked, millions of people will say that the two parties are (a) so much alike as to be virtually indistinguishable, and (b) too much occupied in partisan warfare. The two “perceptions” are not necessarily opposed: Party conflict could easily be more and more disagreement about less and less — what Sigmund Freud characterized in another con-

text as “the narcissism of the small difference.” For a while, about a decade ago, the combination of those two large, vague impressions gave rise to the existence of a quasi-plausible third party, led by Ross Perot, which argued, in effect,

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that politics should be above politics, and that government should give way to management. That illusion, like the touching belief that one party is always better than the other, is compounded of near-equal parts naiveté and cynicism.

The current discourse becomes odder and emptier the more you examine it. We live in a culture that’s saturated with the cult of personality and with attention to the private life. So much is this the case that candidates compete to appear on talk shows hosted by near-therapists. In so doing, they admit that their “personalities” are under discussion and, to that extent, in contention. Even I, who don’t relish the Oprah world, say, “Why not?” There must be very few people who choose their friends or their lovers on the basis of their political outlook rather than their individual qualities. Yet just try to suggest that the psychopathic element in a politician, whether Richard Nixon or Bill Clinton, is itself a consideration, and see how fast you’re accused of “personalizing” or “witch-hunting” or “mudslinging.” This charge will most often come from someone who makes his or her living as the subsidiary of a party machine and has an idealized or personalized photo or portrait of a mere human being or “personality” in a position of honor somewhere near the mantelpiece.

**B**y definition, politics is, or ought to be, division. It expresses, or at least reflects, or at the very least emulates, the inevitable difference of worldview that originates, for modern purposes, with Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine. This difference can be muddied, especially in a highly disparate society, but it cannot be absolutely obscured. So given the inevitable tendency of the quotidian, the corrupt, and the self-interested to muddy differences and make sinuous appeals

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to all sides, might we not place a higher value on those who seek to make the differences plainer and sharper?

Yet we seemingly dread controversy, almost as a danger in itself. The consequence is that there are large and important topics that the electoral “process” is almost designed to muffle or muzzle. Let me select three important topics that everybody knew in advance could not break the surface in an election year: the “war on drugs,” the death penalty, and the Pledge of Allegiance. It’s quite simply assumed, across the political class, that no candidate interested in forwarding his or her own cause would depart from the presumed consensus on all three—which is that we must persist in the “war on drugs,” come what may, that the death penalty is a necessary part of law and order, and that the pledge should recognize the Almighty. Each of these “issues” is symbolic of a greater one—the role of the state in the private life of the citizen, the posture of the United States toward international legal norms, and the boundary of separation between religion and government—and there is good evidence that the extent of apparent agreement on all three is neither as wide nor as deep as is commonly supposed. In any event, could we not do with more honest and more informed disagreement on these subjects? Is not the focus on the trivial a product, at least in part, of the repression of the serious? In much the same way, the pseudo-fight over Senator Kerry’s valor in the Mekong Delta is a distorted and packaged version of the “debate” over the conflict in Iraq, in which both parties pretend to agree with each other on the main point, while in fact not even agreeing genuinely with themselves. The general evasiveness and cowardice surely call for more polarization rather than less.

Just as hypocrisy is the compliment vice pays to virtue, so, I sometimes think, the smarmy stress on “bipartisanship” is a tribute of a kind to American diversity. A society so large and plural must depend, to a great degree, on the observance of an etiquette of “non-offensiveness”—to give this affectation the off-putting name it deserves. In fact, that very diversity demands *more* political variety rather than less. The consensus that slavery in America was too toxic and divisive an “issue” to become a political subject only postponed the evil time when it became the cause of an actual civil war.

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That reflection, on its own, puts paid to the vague, soft view that politics used to be more civil in the good old days, and that mudslinging is a new invention. Leave aside the relative innocuousness of the supposed mudslinging that now takes place; it is simply flat-out mythological to suppose that things were more polite in the golden past. Yes, there was Adlai Stevenson in the mid-20th century saying that he’d rather lose the election than tell a lie, but ear-

lier in the century there was also Ed “Boss” Crump of Memphis, Tennessee, charging that his opponent would milk his neighbor’s cow through a crack in the fence. When I was a boy, the satirical pianist-and-songster duo Michael Flanders and Donald Swann made several excellent albums. One of their hits was a rousing ditty about the basking habits of the hippopotamus. The refrain went as follows:

Mud, mud, glorious mud!  
Nothing quite like it for cooling the blood!  
So follow me, follow—down to the hollow  
And there let us wallow  
In glorious mud!

Michael Flanders’s daughter Laura is now a punchy presenter on Al Franken’s Air America station, where people can say whatever they like about Dick Cheney and Halliburton, George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, the Carlyle Group and other elements of the invisible government.

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Bring it on, I say. Where would we be without the tradition of American populism, which adopted for itself the term hurled as an insult by Teddy Roosevelt—“muckraker”? What goes for muck should go for mud. Who would wish to be without that

“used-car salesman” innuendo against Richard Nixon, or the broad hint that Barry Goldwater was itchy in the trigger finger? Just let’s have no whining when the tables are turned.

**I**n the election that pitted Thomas Jefferson against John Adams, the somewhat more restricted and refined electorate had its choice between the president of the American Philosophical Society and the president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. “What could possibly have been more civilized and agreeable?” breathes the incurable nostalgic. Yet it’s worth looking up what was said, especially about Jefferson, in those days: He was called adulterer, whoremaster, atheist, even deserter in the face of the enemy. There’s no doubt that the emergence of parties or “factions” after the retirement of George Washington gave voters a set of clear and often stark choices—and a good thing that was, too.

The United States makes large claims for itself, among them the claim that the nation is the model for a society based simultaneously on democracy and multiethnicity. It’s certainly no exaggeration to say that on the success or failure of this principle much else depends. But there must be better ways of affirming it than by clinging to an insipid parody of a two-party system that counts as a virtue the ability to escape thorny questions and postpone larger ones. □