

THE LAWYER, THE BUMPKIN AND THE COWBOY

There is a well known Latin saying that appears to affirm and validate democracy: *Vox populi, Vox Dei* – The voice of the people is the voice of God! I always felt a little bothered by it. If this is so, then what about the popular support of the likes of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Osama bin Laden, Arafat, the despicable Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, and all the rest of the murderers and thugs whom their people adored?

It turns out that my skepticism was justified. Actually, the saying does not mean what most of us think it means. The actual quote, by a medieval scholar, Alcuinus, in a letter to Charlemagne, is: *Nec audiendi qui solent dicere, Vox populi, Vox Dei, quum tumultuositas vulgi semper insaniae proxima sit.*

Here is a rough translation in English: *Don't listen to the people who say that the voice of the people is the voice of God - mobs tend to be irrational.* In other words, the voice of the people is not the voice of God – just crazy ravings!

I passionately support democracy but I do not believe that policies should be based on opinion polls. The *Vox populi* is not necessarily *Vox Dei*.

This brings me – finally - to the point of this article, presidential approval ratings.

The ratings were introduced in the 1930s by George Gallup. There were no opinion polls in 1864, when Lincoln, a Republican, faced reelection in the middle of an unpopular and unsuccessful war. Grant's campaign was getting off to a rough and bloody start. The Democrats were willing to negotiate peace without victory – accepting the continuation of slavery and recognition of secession by the South. This was not what the majority of the northerners wanted but it seemed as the best that they could get. Two generals who had been fired by Lincoln were striving for the presidency, several members of Lincoln's cabinet openly sabotaged his campaign, and Lincoln's nomination by the Republican party was far from certain.

Lincoln was so aware of his growing unpopularity that he even wrote a letter to the “next President” promising his cooperation in finishing the war and saving the

Union. Had opinion polls existed in 1864 they would have certainly shown a Lincoln approval rating of less than 30%. The media of the day printed cartoons of an ape-like Lincoln and stories of his ignorance, incompetence and total unsuitability to be President.

Then, as the election neared, the war turned around. Sherman captured and burned Atlanta, Sheridan won at Shenandoah, and the Union navy was victorious at sea. Lincoln was nominated and the electorate, its confidence restored, gave Lincoln a solid 55% of the vote. History – and current *Vox populi* - now recognizes Lincoln as one of the greatest American presidents.

Harry Truman, is also a President held by historians to have been among the 3 or 4 great ones. But Truman holds another record: the lowest approval rating, in 1952, of any President since the ratings' introduction – 22%!

The American *populi* in 1952 were tired of the Korean War, outraged at his strike- breaking of steel workers and the firing of General MacArthur and his apparently senseless foreign policy. He had never gone to college, had a background as a farmer, a bankrupt small businessman, a provincial politician and was assumed not to be fully aware of the large picture. His first electoral victory was assumed to be a fluke – a major newspaper even went to press with a headline announcing the victory of Dewey, his opponent. During his last 3 years in office, Truman's approval rating never went above the low 30s.

So much for the *Vox populi*.

The low Truman approval ratings mirror those of George W. Bush whose approval ratings during his second term have not moved above the low thirties. There are other uncanny similarities: both Truman and George W. started and unflinchingly backed unpopular wars, both lost their parties control of Congress, both were criticized as unsophisticated, lacking in scholarship and language skills, even though W's educational background and earned grades are higher than those of his past Democratic rivals. Both presidents were unwilling to take the advice of the self-important intellectual and informational elites, driving them into paroxysms of fury for being ignored by a country bumpkin – Truman – and a wild uncivilized cowboy – Bush.

Parenthetically, in addition to the 3rd lowest approval rating (Nixon is 2nd with 23% during the Watergate scandal), Bush also holds the record for the highest approval rating ever: 93%, shortly after the 9/11 attacks.

A parting thought. I would be willing to give anything to be able to see what future historians will have to say about the George W. Bush presidency. I strongly suspect that there is a good chance of his being in Lincoln's and Truman's company.

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