

# *The K.F. Stone Weekly*

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



January 07, 2013

## THE PERPETUAL ULCER

The irrepressible Dorothy Parker once quipped that no matter how long she lived, there were two things she knew would always confuse her: the theory of zippers and the exact function of Bernard Baruch. So far as I know, Mrs. Parker (1893-1967), the world-class punster who wrote the screenplay for the original "A Star Is Born," willed her estate to Dr. Martin Luther King and her ashes to Lillian Hellman, never did figure out how a zipper worked. No matter; even without grasping the theory, it still worked every time she gave it an upward tug.

Wouldn't it be peachy if we could say the same thing about Congress? That despite not always being able to fathom its function, it still works? Well, we



cannot. As time goes by, the role of Congress is becoming ever murkier and more maddening. It is *supposed* to be the place where spending bills originate (House), executive appointments are -- for the most part -- approved (Senate) treaties ratified (again, the Senate) and the president's legislative agenda given both shape and reification (House and Senate).

Yes indeed, that's the way Congress is *supposed* to work. But of course it does not -- and has not for the past couple of years. Today, the workings of the House and Senate have become fossilized; one entire branch of the federal government is suffering from stage two *osteogenesis imperfecta*. It is next to impossible to get anything of significance accomplished unless -- and until -- that bell of doom is

about to toll. I for one am amazed that no one has yet seen fit to filibuster the daily invocation. The last Congress -- the 112th -- was, without a doubt, the worst in American history. As *The Daily Beasts* Howard Kurtz wrote just the other day,

*The era of the grand bargain is over. Even the era of hold-your-nose-and-cooperate-for-the-good-of-the-country is over . . . . There is little incentive in our poisonous political culture for any cooperation across the aisle, or with an administration of the opposite party.*

Simply stated, the men and women of the 112th Congress have achieved the impossible: they have made Harry Truman's "Do Nothing Congress" (the 80th) look like legislative behemoths by comparison.

And things aren't likely to get much better in the 113th. It makes you wonder why anyone in their right (or left) mind would want to run for Congress. I mean, there are actually people out there who are willing -- nay, obsessively anxious -- to spend a year or two or three raising money, forsaking family, traveling incessantly, shaking millions of hands and telling thousands of lies . . . and for what? Becoming part of an institution that nearly 90% of the public holds in lower esteem than the Kardashians? And before you say, "Well perhaps they're doing it for the money," let me remind you that although the current annual salary of a senator or representative is \$174,000 plus benefits, an awful lot of the folks occupying those 535 seats (House + Senate) took a cut in pay to get there. And for those who say, "Yeah, but they only work a couple of days a week and have more time off than a professor on sabbatical leave," let me tell you that senators and representatives are never truly "on holiday." When they aren't "in session," senators and representatives are traveling back home, raising dollars for the next campaign, meeting constituents, attending rubber-chicken functions, and generally attempting to reengage with their family and friends. Believe me, I'm not trying to make you feel sorry for them; this is the life they freely, enthusiastically, chose.

Sure, there are lots of ego strokes involved. You get to be on television. You are frequently quoted in the press. You get preferred parking at Washington National and Dulles. Then too, being a member of Congress these days is tantamount to volunteering for a perpetual ulcer.

Having said all this, there *are* many hardworking, devoted members of the House and Senate; people who sought and achieved high office because they really, truly wanted to help make America a better place for all. The 113th Congress will have dozens and dozens of them, although many will do their jobs far away from the spotlight.

Over the years, I have, of course, specialized in writing about the Jewish members of the House and Senate going back to 1841. This new Congress will be home to 11 Jewish Senators (12 if you count Colorado's Michael Bennet, whose mother is a Jewish survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto) and 22 Representatives. This new Congress will be without Senators Joseph Lieberman (CT) and Herb Kohl (WI) who chose to retire, and Representatives Howard Berman (CA) and Steve Rothman (NJ) who were defeated for reelection, Bob Filner (CA) and Shelly Berkley (NV) who chose to run for different offices (Filner is now Mayor of San Diego and Shelly Berkley a private citizen), and Barney Frank (MA) and Gary Ackerman (NY) who chose to retire after decades of service.

Of the 33 (or 34) Jewish members of the House and Senate, all but one -- Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia -- are Democrats. Some, like Senators Schumer, Levin Feinstein and Sanders and Representatives Waxman, Wasserman-Schultz, and Israel are well-known to anyone who watches the news. Most toil in relative obscurity, managing to do their jobs away from the camera's glare, trying hard to avoid that perpetual ulcer.

The newest members of what I have long called the "Congressional Minyan" are:

**Sen. Brian Schatz (HI):** Appointed to take over the seat of the late Senator Daniel Inouye, Schatz, Hawaii's Lieutenant Governor, has already announced that he will run in the 2014 special election. Ironically, like another Hawaiian politician, the Michigan-born Schatz has a Kenya connection: he spent a term studying there as part of the International Training Program, where he developed skills in public service and community organizing.

**Alan Lowenthal (CA 46):** Prior to his election to Congress, the nearly 72-year old Lowenthal served 8 years in the California Assembly, and 8 years in the California Senate where he specialized in education.

**Lois Frankel (FL 22):** Well known to the people of South Florida, Lois has been a fixture in state and local politics for nearly 30 years.

**Alan Grayson (FL 9):** Grayson, who lost his Orlando-area seat in 2010, returns to the House for another go-round. Brash, bright (Harvard, Harvard Law), and unafraid, the self-made multi-millionaire is a champion to progressives and a *bête noir* to the guys and gals on the Tea Party side of the aisle.

**Brad Schneider (IL 10):** Unusual in this day and age, Schneider enters elective office for the first time as a 51-year old member of Congress. Prior to seeking office, Schneider was a business management consultant and industrial engineer.

Rounding out the rest of the "Congressional Minyan" are:

**Senate:**

Dianne Feinstein (CA), Barbara Boxer (CA), Michael Bennet (CO)\* Richard Blumenthal (CT), Ben Cardin (MD), Carl Levin (MI), Al Franken (MN), Frank Lautenberg (NJ), Charles Schumer (NY) Ron Wyden (OR) and Bernie Sanders (VT).

**House:**

Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA), Adam Schiff (CA-28), Brad Sherman (CA-30), Henry Waxman (CA-33), Susan Davis (C-53), Jared Polis CO-2), Ted Deutch (FL-21), Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (FL-23), Jan Shakowsky (IL-9), John Yamouth (KY-3), Sander Levin (MI-9), Steve Israel (NY-3), Jerrold Nadler (NY10), Eliot Engel (NY16), Nita Lowey (NY-17), Allyson Schwartz (PA-13), David Cicilline (RI-1) and, Steve Cohen (TN-9).

To all of these men and women -- and the rest of their colleagues, I wish them a legislatively significant session -- one which will be characterized by civility, compromise and progress. I hope you don't think this is too much to ask -- that you, like Dorothy Parker's zipper, work even when we don't quite understand the theory behind it all. And if you do work, perhaps that collective pain you feel -- that perpetual ulcer -- will finally, finally go into remission.

Please, the nation depends on you.

Now, back to figuring out what Bernard Baruch's function was . . .

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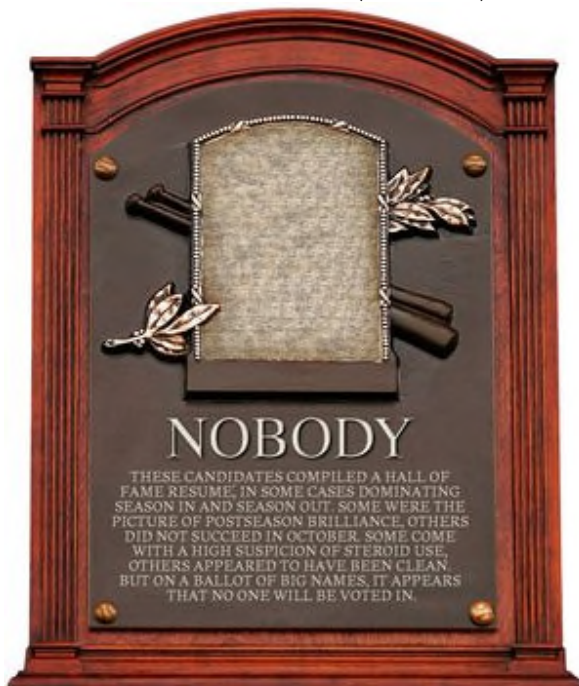
(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



January 14, 2013

## **IF ONLY AMERICA'S VOTERS WERE MORE LIKE AMERICA'S BASEBALL WRITERS**

Last week, for only the second time in the past four decades, the Baseball Writers Association of America (BBWAA) failed to elect anyone to the Baseball Hall of Fame.



This, despite the fact that the 2012 class was about as stellar as any in recent memory. The ballot included first-timers Barry Bonds, the all-time home run champion and only 7-time Most Valuable Player, and Roger Clemens, the only seven-time Cy Young Award winner. Also included on the ballot were first-time nominees Sammy Sosa and Rafael Palmeiro who finished their careers with, respectively, 609 and 589 home runs. Based on statistics alone, Bonds and Clemens should have been unanimous selections; Sosa and Palmeiro shoo-ins. And yet, when the ballots were counted, a mere 37.6% thought Clemens merited entry into Cooperstown, followed by Bonds

(36.2%), Sosa (12.%) and Palmeiro (8.8%). The leading vote-getter, former Houston Astro Craig Biggio was named on 68.2% of the writers' ballots, with 75% needed for enshrinement. (This likely means that Biggio, a former catcher

who became a Gold-Glove 2nd baseman and finished his career with more than 3,000 hits and 668 doubles, will be elected next time around).

Of course, what will keep Bonds, Clemens, Sosa and Palmeiro, as well as current Dodger hitting coach Mark McGuire (not to mention all-time hits leader Pete Rose) out of the Hall of Fame for at least the next generation, if not permanently, is that they cheated. In the case of everyone save "Charlie Hustle" (Rose), the offense was using performance-enhancing drugs and then lying about it. Whether or not the [drugs banned by professional baseball](#) really give players an unfair advantage is not the issue of this essay. However, it should be recognized that when it comes to the world of sports, we demand that athletes maintain a high level of honesty, purity and integrity or risk losing both the admiration and support of the great unwashed masses, and receiving a one-way ticket to Palookaville, instead of a invitation to seat next to Hermes (the Greek god of sports) on Mt. Olympus.

Wouldn't it be a hoot if we held our elected officials to such high standards of probity? I mean, why should professional baseball, basketball or football players be saddled with the mark of Cain for being dishonest (in the case of "juicing") while presidents, governors, senators, representatives and leading media figures generally receive a free pass? What does it mean when a society apparently holds its athletes to a higher, more rigorous standard of virtue than its leaders? That it is debased? That it is cynical? That it possesses a deeply warped set of priorities?

Sadly, perhaps all of the above -- and likely even more.

Case in point, Florida Governor Rick Scott. As is well-known, Governor Scott is one of those who would like to shrink the Federal Government to the point where it could fit in a shoe-box. He firmly believes that outside of defending the nation's borders -- and providing tax breaks for multi-national corporations -- Washington should stay the hell out of people's lives and let the states make all the



important decisions. Scott is so vehemently anti-Barack Obama that he has long refused to accept free federal funds to expand the state's Medicaid program -- as if all this free money were tainted with presidential cooties. And yet, were he to accept these funds, as many as 2 million more Floridians -- including upwards of 100,000 disabled children -- would be able to see a doctor. (**Note:** According to

*terms of the Affordable Care Act, the federal government picks up 100% of the cost of expanding Medicaid for the first three years. After that point, the states can opt out, if they so choose).*

Scott's has loudly argued that implementing this part of the Affordable Care Act will cost Sunshine State taxpayers \$26 billion over the next ten years. When questioned about where he got this figure, Scott says it was the result of a study. What he does not say is that he commissioned the study. Turns out, not only is this estimate wildly incorrect; it is a lie on steroids. (Check out [Politifact's findings](#).)

Rick Scott is lying through his teeth . . . and he knows it. Turns out, the cost to Florida taxpayers -- beginning in 2016 IF the state decides to remain with the program -- will be somewhere between \$1 and \$3 billion over ten years. That's a far, far cry from Scott's "findings." Is it any wonder that the man has the lowest popularity rating of any governor in America?

If we, the voters, would hold our elected officials to the same rigorous standard of honesty that members of the BBWAA hold professional baseball players, guys like Rick Scott would be turned out of office by overwhelming margins. Florida has a gubernatorial election coming up in a mere 22 months . . . more than enough time to marshal forces, find the right candidate and send Scott and his team mates to the showers.

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January 20, 2013

## YOU SCHMOOZE, YOU LOSE

Dear President Obama:

As I write this, you are no doubt putting some last-minute, finishing touches on your second inaugural address. I for one cannot wait to hear it, and hope that it will be both



inspiring and transcendent. Even your most demonic detractors have to admit that you are endowed with a felicity of expression, the likes of which few presidents have ever possessed. For your millions upon millions of supporters, this ability to inspire and uplift is, without question, a lustrous gift. Of course, there are additional millions who denigrate your eloquence; who find in your phrases traces of treachery and elitism.

Don't take it too personally Mr. President; as the great French essayist and skeptic Michel de Montaigne noted long ago, *Peu d'hommes ont été admirés par leurs domestiques*, namely, "No man is a hero to his valet."

Yes indeed, Mr. President, I *am* looking forward to your inaugural address, and know you won't let us down. At the same time, there are a few things I hope *not* to hear you say. Chief among these are the expressions "Reaching across the aisle," "In the spirit of cooperation and bipartisanship," and anything including the words "The higher angels of our being." For you see, Mr. President, it is my deep and sincere hope that you learned a lesson during your first term; that no amount of wining, dining, schmoozing or boozing will ever get the opposition to support -- even via compromise -- any program or proposal you put on the table.



During your first term, you spent a lot of time seeking out Republicans you thought might be reasonable. And then, you made compromises in the hopes that mollified, these "reasonable" folks would then go back and convince other members of their caucus to join you in doing that which was right for America. But time and again, the only message they brought back from their caucus was *"No bipartisanship, no compromise, no nothing . . . it's our way or the highway."* How many times can you hear *"Do what we want or we'll shut down the government, blow up the economy, and dump tons and tons of coal into middle-class stockings"* before it begins to sink in that these guys aren't ever going to become political partners?

Inviting Speaker Boehner to play another round of golf with you just isn't going to cut it. I'm not sure he would even accept an invitation; in the eyes of those on his right flank, hitting the green with you would be an act of duplicity . . . consorting with the enemy. Heck, to the best of my knowledge, not a single new GOP member of Congress accepted your invitation to come on over to the White House for punch and cookies. And that's a tradition as old as Adams and Jefferson. And recently, when you held a private screening of *Lincoln* -- attended by Steven Spielberg, and stars Daniel-Day Lewis, Sally Field and Tommy Lee Jones -- Boehner, Minor Leader McConnell and Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Tom Coburn (R-OK) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME) turned down invitations. Hells bells: if you can't get them to come out for Spielberg and free popcorn, what chance is there of reaching a consensus on Global Warming, Immigration Reform or the next Secretary of Defense?

The only thing that motivates Republicans these days is fear; fear that if they don't toe the most conservative line imaginable, they will be challenged in the next primary by someone who is even further to the right. This excruciatingly obtuse situation should, Mr. President, give you the beginnings of a strategy for your second term. If handled properly, you can hasten the complete and utter marginalization of the GOP. How? By increasing the political cost of having the GOP coalition -- shaky though it may be -- defined by Second Amendment absolutists, climate science deniers, supporters of "self-deportation" and the pure no-tax wing.

Little by little, you are beginning to see the strategy at work. Already, members of the GOP including Governors Chris Christie (NJ) and Bobby Jindal (LA) are upbraiding fellow Republicans for putting hard-core deficit reduction ahead of heartfelt disaster relief, and Senators Rubio (FL) and Cruz (TX) ridiculing the "self-deportation" wing of their party. Its a start, Mr. President; one that you should just stand back and enjoy. You don't have to lift a finger; the GOP is imploding of its own accord. Just proceed with a second-term agenda which includes addressing global warming and immigration, sensible gun control and the retrofitting of the nation's infrastructure, education and the cleaning up the nation's economic woes.

I like your official second-term photo; it displays a bit of attitude I believe was missing



in your first term. For here, you are smiling, but with your arms crossed. Could it be symbolic of the way the next four years are going to be? That you mean business? That you're going to be a more resolute, more forceful Barack Obama? I for one certainly hope so. Please Mr. President, don't waste any of the next four years trying to schmooze the opposition. You schmooze, you lose. Time and again the GOP ("Guns Over People" as one pundit has taken to calling them) have shown themselves to care more about reelection than repairing that which ails us. There is no need for you to divide them so that they may be conquered; they have, after all, divided themselves. As the greatest of your predecessors once said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

Best wishes for a successful second term. We're in your corner, just as you, are in ours.

Be good to yourself,

*Kurt F. Stone*

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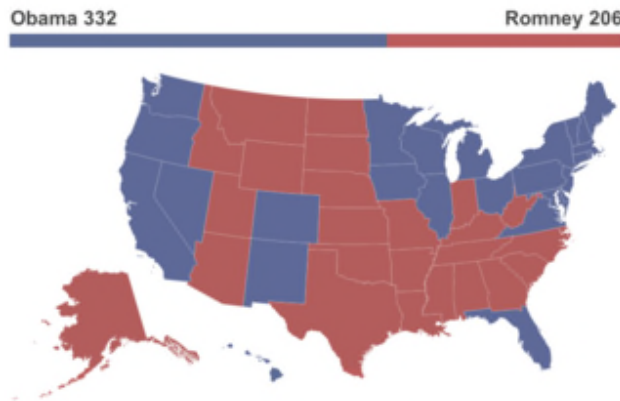
**January 27, 2013**

## **THE ADULTS IN THE ROOM**

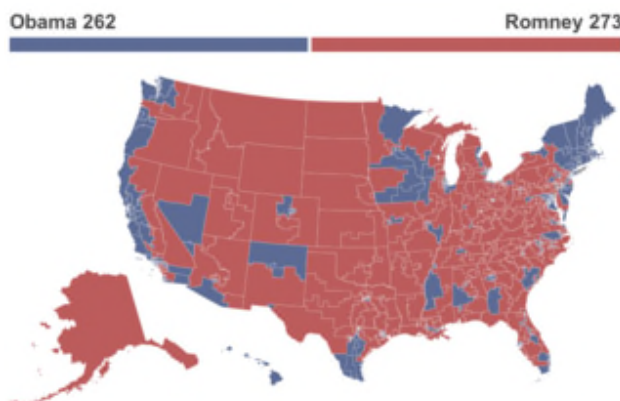
Over the past several days, Republican leaders in [Virginia](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Michigan](#) and [Pennsylvania](#) have proposed legislation that would effectively alter the balance of power in presidential elections. "How's that?" you may well ask. "By changing how most electoral votes are allocated," that's how. According to these proposals -- which are so closely identical in their wording as to likely to have been crafted by a single hand -- most electoral votes would be awarded to the winner of individual Congressional Districts rather than the winner of the state as a whole. Since Republicans plan to implement the proposal in states that are heavily gerrymandered to favor the GOP, the resulting maps would guarantee that Republican candidates would win a majority of each state's electoral votes, even if the Democratic candidate wins the state as a whole.

Had these laws been in effect in the 2012 election, Barack Obama would still have tallied 4,660,833 more votes than Mitt Romney. However according to the proposed scheme, instead of trouncing Romney by a margin of 332-206 in Electoral College,

Romney would have won the presidency by capturing 11 more electoral votes than Obama -- despite the president's having won the same number of popular votes and carrying the same number of states.



abortion, one of  
 naked, most insidious power grabs, is but one more indication of how increasingly  
 rapacious and tone-deaf the GOP has become since the end of the Reagan years. For  
 instead of recognizing that any hope they have of recapturing the glory days of  
 yesteryear will require equal measures of rethinking and repositioning -- on issues  
 ranging from defense and the social safety net to guns, abortion and immigration -- the  
 GOP brain trust has instead concluded that the best way to win elections is to game the  
 system and put on a heavier base-coat of political makeup. The current scheme is even  
 more bald-faced than last year's "enhanced-voter-i.d.-requirements-in-the-name-of-  
 protecting-society-  
 fraud" scam. At  
 the GOP could  
 fraudulently) a  
 "After all," they  
 amongst us favors  
 case of former --  
 reapportioning of  
 votes -- there is no  
 for the common  
 rational behind the  
 legislation is  
 cannot win elections based on the positions and principles we bring on to the field, we  
 will simply change the rules of the game . . . because we are in a position where we can  
 get away with it."



This political  
 history's most  
 against-voter-  
 least with the latter  
 claim (albeit  
 noble civic motive.  
 could ask, "who  
 voter fraud?" In the  
 the proposed  
 states' electoral  
 claim of enactment  
 good. Their  
 proposed  
 crystal clear: "If we

Although it is too early to tell whether any of the proposals will become law this year, the idea -- outrageous and bald-faced though it may be -- has attracted some support on the national level. Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Preibus, elected to a new term this past Friday, told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* recently that the change was something that Republicans in blue states "ought to be looking at." If these childish proposals truly represent the Republican strategy for success, they are indeed in serious trouble.

Fortunately for GOP, there appears to be a few adults in the room. Within the past 48 hours, such Republican heavyweights as Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell and former

Mississippi Governor (and RNC Chair) Haley Barbour have come out against any change in the way electoral votes are apportioned. MacDonnell's position is crucial; without his support, there is virtually no chance for any legislative enactment. In Florida, Republican House Speaker Will Weatherford expressed opposition to changing the way the largest swing state allots electoral votes, which almost certainly dooms any chance that it will happen here in the Sunshine State. The speaker told the Miami *Herald* that Republicans don't "need to change the rules of the game; I think we need to get better." Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder told the AP that he could "go either way" on changing the method for allocating his state's electoral votes but doesn't plan to push the idea -- thus putting a major roadblock in its path.

A cynic would say that all this "adult activity" on the part of such players as Barbour, MacDonnell or Snyder is due more to their reading of the political tea leaves (and desire to win the next election) than to some great epiphanic moment of moral clarity. I for one could less; even doing the right thing for the wrong reason results in a positive good here on *terra firma*. I leave it to God to mete out rewards and punishments in the world beyond that are based on underlying motive. I mean, here in Florida, Governor Rick Scott has proposed giving the state's public school teachers a \$2,500 bonus, and recently announced that he wants to expand voting hour. Now mind you, Scott is the fellow who pushed for -- and got -- one of the steepest cuts in education spending in Florida history, as well as signing into law a measure that curbed early voting in 2012. And by the way, he's up for reelection in 2014, and has a public approval rating slightly higher than that of Donald Trump. Could his newfound generosity and civic concern based on something less honest than generosity or civic concern? Yes indeed, but I for one don't care; \$2,500 spends the same regardless of the underlying motive. The trick is taking money, rejoicing in the expanded voting hours, saying thanks for both, and not being fooled . . .

The other day, John Boehner, speaking from notes likely provided by the folks at [ALEC](#) told members of the RIPON Society that "*We're expecting here, over the next 22 months, to be the focus of this administration as they attempt to annihilate the Republican Party.*" The speaker said that as the GOP pursues an agenda of fiscal responsibility, tax reform and economic growth, "*We're going to be doing it in an environment that is going to be far [more] hostile than anything that I think we've seen for a long, long time. And we're going to have to make some big decisions about how we as a party take on this challenge. Where's the ground that we fight on? Where's the ground that we retreat on?*"

Seems to me that if the GOP is really going to be in danger of annihilation, it will be because they are listening so hard to the ranting and railing of their deluded base, that

they are incapable of making heads or tails of the more measured, more reasonable thoughts, words and suggestions of the adults in the room.

Hey, here's a thought . . . listen to the adults!

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