

What C.S. Lewis's Screwtape Tells Us About the Coming Election

Americans, finally facing the prospect of the *mano-a-mano* portion of the 2020 presidential campaign, have already learned that previous complainers about the negativity, underhandedness, and attack-dog nature of politics didn't know how good they had it.

Abetted by technologies that increase the reach and power of smear campaigns and by mechanisms that allow far more money to be spent on them, not to mention the mushrooming of "fake news," electoral politics has become an even more intense mud pit of attacks and finger-pointing about every conceivable issue, along with "O yeah?" responses, counterattacks, and bare-knuckle brawling among partisan spinners. And that was before the general election campaign, which can double down on duplicity and deception.

The incredibly bitter, and often deplorable, invectives and the constantly generated attacks, often created out of innuendo or whole cloth, as we have observed, has in my mind elevated C.S. Lewis to the rank of the most accurate, though accidental, commentator on the current state of politics even though he wrote over a half century ago.

[The Screwtape Letters](#) is written as a series of letters of instruction from an experienced devil (Screwtape) to a junior tempter (Wormwood) on how to successfully tempt humans. In one particularly notable letter, Screwtape described how to inflame domestic hatred between a mother and son:

"When two humans have lived together for many years, it usually happens that each has tones of voice and expressions of face which are almost unendingly

irritating to the other. Work on that. Bring fully into the consciousness of your patient that particular lift of his mother's eyebrows which he learned to dislike in the nursery, and let him think how much he dislikes it. Let him assume that she knows how annoying it is and does it to annoy—if you know your job he will not notice the immense improbability of the assumption. And, of course, never let him suspect that he has tones and looks which similarly annoy her.

“In civilized life domestic hatred usually expresses itself by saying things which would appear quite harmless on paper (the words are not offensive) but in such a voice, or at such a moment, that they are not far from a blow in the face. To keep this game up you...must see to it that each of these two fools has a sort of double standard. Your patient must demand that all his utterances are to be taken at their face value and judged simply on the actual words, while at the same time judging all his mother's utterances with the fullest and most oversensitive interpretation of the tone and the context and the suspected intention. She must be encouraged to do the same to him. Hence from every quarrel they can both go away convinced, or very nearly convinced, that they are quite innocent. You know the kind of thing: “I simply ask her what time dinner will be and she flies into a temper.” Once this habit is well established you have the delightful situation of a human saying things with the express purpose of offending and yet having a grievance when offence is taken.”

But with a few alterations Lewis seems to describe current American politics equally well:

“When two [political candidates or parties have campaigned against one another] for many years, it usually happens that each has tones of voice and expressions of face which are almost unenduringly irritating to the other. Work on that. Bring fully into the consciousness of your [partisan]

that particular lift of his [opponent's] eyebrows which he learned to dislike...and let him think how much he dislikes it. Let him assume that [his opponent] knows how annoying it is and does it to annoy—if you know your job he will not notice the immense improbability of the assumption. And, of course, never let him suspect that he has tones and looks which similarly annoy [the other side].

“In civilized [politics] hatred usually expresses itself by saying things which would appear quite harmless on paper (the words are not offensive) but in such a voice, or at such a moment, that they are not far from a blow in the face. To keep this game up you...must see to it that each of these two fools has a sort of double standard. Your [partisans] must demand that all [their] utterances are to be taken at their face value and judged simply on the actual words, while at the same time judging all [their opponents'] utterances with the fullest and most oversensitive interpretation of the tone and the context and the suspected intention. [Their opponents] must be encouraged to do the same to [them]. Hence from every quarrel they can both go away convinced, or very nearly convinced, that they are quite innocent...Once this habit is well established you have the delightful situation of [both sides] saying things with the express purpose of offending and yet having a grievance when offense is taken.”

Lewis hit the current state of politics on the head. Screwtape's strategy has increased in prominence with every recent campaign, and a virulent strain has now even spread to every crevice of day-to-day government and commentary. The consequence has been to move government and battles to control it far closer to what Lewis called the “lowerarchy” of hell. This strategy has done far more to retard than advance either integrity or the general welfare, moving our focus from James Madison's famous statement in Federalist no. 51 that “If men were angels, no government would be necessary” to the nature

of government when many participants act in a more devilish manner.

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