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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Why Experience Matters

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Philosophical debates arise at the oddest times, and in the heat of this election season, one is now rising in Republican ranks. The narrow question is this: Is Sarah Palin qualified to be vice president? Most conservatives say yes, on the grounds that something that feels so good could not possibly be wrong. But a few commentators, like George Will, Charles Krauthammer, David Frum and Ross Douthat demur, suggesting in different ways that she is unready.

The issue starts with an evaluation of Palin, but does not end there. This argument also is over what qualities the country needs in a leader and what are the ultimate sources of wisdom.

There was a time when conservatives did not argue about this. Conservatism was once a frankly elitist movement. Conservatives stood against radical egalitarianism and the destruction of rigorous standards. They stood up for classical education, hard-earned knowledge, experience and prudence. Wisdom was acquired through immersion in the best that has been thought and said.

But, especially in America, there has always been a separate, populist, strain. For those in this school, book knowledge is suspect but practical knowledge is respected. The city is corrupting and the universities are kindergartens for overeducated fools.

The elitists favor sophistication, but the common-sense folk favor simplicity. The elitists favor deliberation, but the populists favor instinct.

This populist tendency produced the term-limits movement based on the belief that time in government destroys character but contact with grass-roots America gives one grounding in real life. And now it has produced Sarah Palin.

Palin is the ultimate small-town renegade rising from the frontier to do battle with the corrupt establishment. Her followers take pride in the way she has aroused fear, hatred and panic in the minds of the liberal elite. The feminists declare that she's not a real woman because she doesn't hew to their rigid categories. People who've never been in a Wal-Mart think she is parochial because she has never summered in Tuscany.

Look at the condescension and snobbery oozing from elite quarters, her backers say. Look at the endless string of vicious, one-sided attacks in the news media. This is what elites produce. This is why regular people need to take control.

And there's a serious argument here. In the current Weekly Standard, Steven Hayward argues that the

nation's founders wanted uncertified citizens to hold the highest offices in the land. They did not believe in a separate class of professional executives. They wanted rough and rooted people like Palin.

I would have more sympathy for this view if I hadn't just lived through the last eight years. For if the Bush administration was anything, it was the anti-establishment attitude put into executive practice.

And the problem with this attitude is that, especially in his first term, it made Bush inept at governance. It turns out that governance, the creation and execution of policy, is hard. It requires acquired skills. Most of all, it requires prudence.

What is prudence? It is the ability to grasp the unique pattern of a specific situation. It is the ability to absorb the vast flow of information and still discern the essential current of events — the things that go together and the things that will never go together. It is the ability to engage in complex deliberations and feel which arguments have the most weight.

How is prudence acquired? Through experience. The prudent leader possesses a repertoire of events, through personal involvement or the study of history, and can apply those models to current circumstances to judge what is important and what is not, who can be persuaded and who can't, what has worked and what hasn't.

Experienced leaders can certainly blunder if their minds have rigidified (see: Rumsfeld, Donald), but the records of leaders without long experience and prudence is not good. As George Will pointed out, the founders used the word "experience" 91 times in the Federalist Papers. Democracy is not average people selecting average leaders. It is average people with the wisdom to select the best prepared.

Sarah Palin has many virtues. If you wanted someone to destroy a corrupt establishment, she'd be your woman. But the constructive act of governance is another matter. She has not been engaged in national issues, does not have a repertoire of historic patterns and, like President Bush, she seems to compensate for her lack of experience with brashness and excessive decisiveness.

The idea that "the people" will take on and destroy "the establishment" is a utopian fantasy that corrupted the left before it corrupted the right. Surely the response to the current crisis of authority is not to throw away standards of experience and prudence, but to select leaders who have those qualities but not the smug condescension that has so marked the reaction to the Palin nomination in the first place.

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