

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Senior Civics Columnist

A “CIVICS” Test for Candidates

“Americans, a recent study has shown, want leaders who are forward looking - steering a definite course, alert to where they are headed. They look to leaders for inspiration, and of course the competence required to pursue their aims effectively. More than anything else - and significantly - Americans want honesty in their leaders. They want leaders to make clear where they stand. They want them to speak the truth. They want them to keep their promises. They want leaders who are worthy of their trust.” – James MacGregor Burns

After Labor Day, traditionally, straw cowboy hats turn to felt, white shoes are eschewed, and political campaigns begin in earnest. (Except for the 2008 presidential race, which has been boring us since before woolly mammoths went extinct, it seems.)

This will be the first year since 2000 I won't be actively involved in an electoral contest for myself or someone else. I decided last autumn not to run again for Ellenville Trustee this year. (As we all thought the final March-held Ellenville election would be this year – until a Board of Elections ruling made our new November village election cycle begin in 2007, automatically extending our 2005-7 terms until year's end – I felt obliged to alert party officials at least a month before the January date when I assumed caucuses would occur.)

The initial reason was simple – the village and town boards were finally talking seriously about a joint Development Office, and finding a director for it; as I had been lobbying for both since the 1980s, I wanted the boards to know that I was serious enough about it to make my availability absolute. Of course, any such decision would be up to the present or new boards, so I intended to step even further back from that process by not aligning with *any* of the candidates.

Also, like George Washington – who cited the example of Cincinnatus leaving his plow, doing his public service, and then returning to his plow where he left it – I have never considered holding public office as a goal to be maintained long-term for its own sake, but a necessary duty where one contributes as one can, and then leaves before becoming too comfortably entrenched, or burnt-out, or compromised... or worse.

Then there's the frustration of seeing one's ideas or advice ignored or slammed, of banging one's head against a status-quo wall, of having one's motives impugned, sincerity challenged, or concerns poo-hooped. Which, being par for the course, makes me wonder why any otherwise-sane person would subject himself or herself to it... and yet, *there they are*, this year's crop of candidates, oblivious to the inevitable!

Now, even though I will not be endorsing or working for any candidates this year, I am not completely uninterested in the outcome! Surely, I want the *best* possible person to represent *me* at each level of government – to do what is *best* for each level of community being served – and I would hope that *you* do, too! I don't simply want the most popular person with the nicest smile or most pandering spiel. I want someone with true leadership history – or potential – *and so should you!*

Therefore, I came up with the following easy-to-remember formula, based on six critical traits of political leadership that I would have you measure all candidates against before giving any your precious vote. (There are dozens of lists of “leadership qualities” out there, analyzing the key traits of business, military, or political leaders, ranging from two to 21 characteristics;

I came up with my own list before researching those, but so many of the traits identified by them are identical, or overlap or include the others, I confidently offer my list as comprehensive enough to serve.)

CIVICS = Competence, Integrity, Vision, Intelligence, Courage, Selflessness.

Competence is fundamental; if the person can't *do* the job, due to lack of skills, understanding, or available time... STOP! Don't waste another second, as this is the minimum hurdle nobody should get a free ride over. Check past history in elected or appointed office, in business management or employment, with community organizations, volunteer work, etc., for a track record of capability and responsibility... or lack thereof.

Integrity is essential; as the study in James Burns's cite notes, people want honesty in their leaders more than anything else. Have they earned your trust? Do their actions live up to their words? Do they admit to their mistakes? Or do they waffle, flip-flop, avoid stands, deliver mealy-mouthed excuses, hide the unpleasant, or blame others? Don't yield to gossip or rumors, but find out what colleagues and others who have personally dealt with them say about their veracity and reliability.

Vision. “For lack of vision, the people perish,” says Proverbs 29:18. Is the candidate stuck in an out-dated past... or pushing an unrealistic or fanciful future? Where does he or she want to lead the community to? Is there a plausible plan to get there? What priorities are put forth? Don't expect a Nostradamus or Jules Verne, but how good has he or she already been at accurately predicting events, or the consequences of actions taken?

Intelligence isn't just about education or even how long you've been around; as they used to say about Ronald Reagan, “It's not what he *doesn't* know that concerns me, but what he does know that's *wrong!*” Is there a curious mind at work? Does he or she listen, then ask relevant and useful questions, yet isn't afraid to say “I don't know, but I'll find out”? Can he or she grasp the details as well as the big picture, and do the necessary research to come prepared to meetings? Does the candidate communicate his or her thoughts clearly?

Courage to stand on principle, speak truth to power, take sensible risks, get out in front of the pack, or even to admit errors, failures, or ignorance, regardless of consequences (even at the cost of one's career or future) is what ultimately distinguishes the true statesman/leader from the political hack. British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said, “You will find as you grow older that courage is the rarest of all qualities to be found in public life.” We don't *choose* leaders to wimp out on us; yet, how often do we just shrug when they inevitably do? Check the record; forgo the wishy-washy wuss with feet of clay when push came to shove for someone whose words of determination were backed by true-grit action.

Selflessness, because people don't care how much you know... until they know how much you care. “The first step to leadership is servanthood,” as John Maxwell said. Has the candidate proven through previous public service in government or community organizations, or in business, that the PUBLIC comes first? Or do questions of personal gain or benefit, or conflict of interest, seem to constantly surround the candidate? Does he or she seem to seek self-aggrandizement and recognition over quiet labor, humility, and the public weal? Is “I” emphasized over “You” and “We”?

Nobody will score perfectly, so don't hold out for the impossible! Pick the *best* in each race... but refuse to settle for mediocrity. If *nobody* qualifies, demonstrate your own leadership traits and proudly announce you're voting for *None of the Above*... and you expect (and will insist on) better choices in the future!