

IPA-Winning isn't the whole game-10-19-19

Winning isn't the whole game in politics

By Jim Nowlan

In a recent column, I wrote about how to run for office—and win. In retrospect, current “must win at all costs” campaigning—where big money and trashing one’s opponent in a close race seem *de rigueur*—may be at the heart of what ails American politics. There are other reasons, and good ones, to run even, if one doesn’t win, or even expect to win.

Of course, candidates want to win, and believe they should. Indeed, once in a race, even a longshot bid, candidates almost necessarily develop a mindset that they can and will win. It’s part of our DNA.

But why go to the trouble of running if one has only a long shot at winning? Let me count the ways:

One: Have your say in front of a big audience, and maybe start a conversation. My friend and retired pharmacist Charles Owens of Henry IL is a dear fellow. In 2002, Charles ran for the Republican nomination for lieutenant governor of our state; he filed the appropriate petitions and appeared on the ballot.

Charles and everyone in the party knew he had zippo chance of winning. Charles traveled the state to participate in the traditional candidates’ meetings and rallies. At these gatherings, each candidate who qualifies for the ballot is on the stage and offered three-to-five minutes to say his piece.

A good Catholic, Charles devoted his brief remarks to social issues, including the plight of the homeless, a subject rarely if ever on the radar screen of the GOP.

The audiences politely applauded Charles, as they did everyone else on the stage—and they heard about how Charles would help those among us who are struggling.

Maybe a few even learned something, and were moved to act somehow. Who knows? After all, 70,000 voted for Charles (3.6 percent of the total). The quiet, reserved Charles had a ball, enjoyed meeting hundreds of people, and marveled at our big, tall state. He spent but gas money on his campaign. Recalling his bid, Charles told me recently,: “I was a winner.”

Two: Make a really big difference. Eugene V. Debs ran for president of the U.S. five times on the Socialist Party ticket between 1900 and 1920, the last time from prison, incarcerated in 1918 for opposing American participation in World War I.

A labor union creator and leader, Debs never received more than 6 percent of the vote, yet everyone came to know Debs, love him or hate him. Among the issues he plumped for when in the national spotlight, all the while wagging his fist defiantly in the air: Social Security and employer health care coverage. ’Nuf said.

Three; Spoil the outcome for another candidate. I am not recommending this one, as you may get what you didn’t wish for, to wit:

In 1912, the irrepressible former Republican president Teddy Roosevelt ran for his old office atop the Progressive (Bull Moose) Party. He split the vote with GOP standard bearer, and his former vice president, William Howard Taft. Roosevelt’s candidacy thrust Woodrow Wilson into an office that Republicans would clearly have won in a head-to-head race, sans Teddy.

Four: Prepare for a win next time. At age 24, way back in 1966, I ran for the Illinois House. (By the way, I was way too young, knew next to nothing. But, hey, Stephen A. Douglas was elected to the state House at age 21; of course, fellows grew up faster on the Illinois frontier.) I came in a close third in a six-way race for the two GOP nomination slots (Illinois had multiple member districts back then).

In raising and spending \$4,000 (about \$30,000 in today's dollars), I learned the ropes of campaigning. I came to know all the party leaders in the five-county rural district, honed my stump speech skills, built my network of future supporters, and learned what works and what doesn't. For example, always insist on seeing a proof of your advertising before it runs. I used a line-drawing headshot of my mug for costly billboards. Somehow the artist or printer left off my nose! Unusual billboard but, hey, people sure slowed down as they drove by, gandering at my boards.

So, two years later when a House seat opened up, I was way ahead of my newcomer opponents, and I won.

We need more "amateur" candidates in our democratic process. And if at first you don't succeed,
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