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Letter to the Editor/Op-Ed Piece: Breaking Partisan Barriers; Part I

Lessons in How the Two Dominant Parties Keep Independents at Bay—and What We Can Do about It

Des Moines, Iowa—These days, even dyed-in-the-wool ideologues in both parties grouse about the state of American politics in general, but partisan intransigence in specific. It seems almost everybody tsk-tsks the shortcomings of the US' two calcified political syndicates yet almost nobody is willing to take 'em on.

I know at least some of the reasons why. Since announcing two weeks ago that I'm challenging both Charles Grassley and the Democratic machinery's darling, Patty Judge, I've bumped into outwardly immovable walls blocking access to the public forum. But, I'm stormin' 'em anyway: They will *not* stand.

It began with my press conference to announce my candidacy. Volunteers had emailed invitations to all of Iowa's major media players: Few came. Not to be deterred, I began contacting directly the absent organizations. What I found out edified me a great deal, but also sobered me. It should sober you, too.

For starters, Iowa Public Radio's loud silence about the latest candidate to bid for the long-occupied US Senate seat from Iowa begged an explanation. My probes were met with only polite, sympathetic words of apology. Ironically, when IPR did announce my candidacy—some ten days late, respectful yet terse—it was followed the next day by a gratuitous IPR notice of Grassley's appearance at a local Rotary where he mused on how the increased polarization of America's body politic is "good" because it helps the "grassroots" know for what the people who represent them stand. I found the piece irritatingly inane.

Then, I moved my research to our state's Associated Press office—and got from its head a non-sequitur: "We don't always write stories about announcements by all US Senate candidates." Ok—thought I—but based on what criteria? If the venerable AP doesn't *always* announce all candidates, in the name of non-partisanship fairness "should" it *never* announce any, ever? Well, so it seems to me—but I'm jus' sayin'.

The Des Moines *Register's* stance left me even more dumbfounded. When I finally was able to connect with an editor, I immediately liked her and felt she genuinely tried to respond to my concern. Still, she fronted a policy that appears essentially flawed. She relayed a purported rule that "We don't announce independent candidates for the US Senate until August 19th." As far as I know the only person in Iowa belonging to that rare breed, I quipped "But the *DMR* reports on the Democratic nominees all the time."

"Yes" she countered, "but they currently are in a real race, competing for nomination to that office."

"Ah, you report on nearly Grassley's every move yet he's not competing for the Republican nomination."

"I can see why you feel that way" the nice lady replied, "but unless you make some news somewhere in the state before August, we won't be mentioning that you are running for the US Senate from Iowa."

As I thanked her for her kindness despite her company's discrimination and four-month banishment, I pondered if my chaining myself to the *DMR's* front door might catapult me at least into its crime report.

Letter to the Editor/Op-Ed Piece: Breaking Partisan Barriers; Part II

Lessons in How the Two Dominant Parties keep Independents at Bay—and What We Can Do about It

Des Moines, Iowa—Sure, misquoting happens in all print- or electronic-media reporting: My experience as an independent candidate for the US Senate from Iowa has been no exception. Still, it strikes me as odd that hour-long newspaper and quarter-hour-long radio interviews chocked full of seemingly endless quotes and clever turns-of-phrases get boiled down till all flavor evaporates. Mysteriously, when interviewers finish distilling “my” platform into bullets, they are tame versions of The Next Guy’s, with all firebrand ideas surgically neutralized: “No revolution here, folks, so go back ta yer sleepwalkin’!”

Another way to muzzle any ideas falling outside the mainstream parties is to simply refuse to entertain them. In that way, the bland loop of clichés posing as genuine political discourse in this country endures, not only well-guarded but actively cultivated. In Germany, where I lived thirteen years earning a Ph.D. in history, taught and wrote, six political parties hold seats in the *Bundestag*, the federal parliament. Another dozen or so vie for public attention and get votes, but less than the 5% required to wield a seat.

In this country, anyone wishing to run for office or shift the public debate feels obligated to join one of two status-quo parties—the Democratic and Grand Ol’ Party. Virtually every public institution in our republic defends this stasis, including our colleges and universities, which “should” facilitate reflection, discussion and debate. They, too, inhibit the voices of independent candidates from being heard—even if that means being non-compliant with Iowa Disclosure Board codes of equal access. Two examples:

When I inquired about speaking at the University of Iowa, I was told that I had to be “hosted” by a student political party: “Ah, isn’t that a challenge” I protested, “for as an ‘independent’ I don’t belong to a party—so how should I be able to locate a sympathetic party when...?” But that was nothing:

One private Eastern-Iowa college even requires that a student chaperone accompany candidates at all times while on-campus. Again, how should a party-less candidate find a student politico to fill that role?

It’s bad enough that our media effectively blacklists non-Demos or -Repubs, and that campuses shield their youngsters from alternative ideas, but one of the most insidious hurdles facing non-partisan, non-career candidates is the cynical attitudes of the citizenry. “Oh, mainstream politicians are rascals and crooks” so many complain, yet in the next breath quietly add “but independents don’t ever win office.”

Of course, this isn’t true—well, at least not fully true. Bernie Sanders—a figure I respect, even if I don’t support his platform *carte blanche*—won his first major office by a margin of ten votes. And, even non-conformists like much-maligned Paul Wellstone never fully embraced the Democratic Party’s echelon.

I’m left scratching my head after wading through the myriad hurdles that are placed in front of any citizen trying to recast public narratives and thereby wrestle even a symbolic smidgeon of power from the career politicians who’ve usurped America’s one-time democracy. How will the madness ever end, if we don’t end it? If we keep on doing what we’ve always done, we’re going to keep on getting what we’ve always gotten. Problem is, at this precarious juncture in our nation’s history we risk losing the last shreds of any real democratic power that might still exist. So, either we vote boldly or perish quietly. ###