

COMMENTARY

Conversation

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Florida Weekly (FW) recently hosted two analysts who commented on issues facing Americans in the election year, 2008. Among the general topics: politics, war, and religion; the question of heritage in American families, especially political ones; and the avoidance of foolishness.

The experts included nationally known commentator S. Clemens, and nationally respected pundit A. Bierce. Each has devoted the latter part of his career not only to commentary on the American scene, but to the active practice of history (since both ARE now history).

Here are some of the results.

FW: Welcome, gentlemen. American politics seems to be in a state of turbulence, or at least high excitement — witness Florida's strange Democratic primary, in which two candidates competed for votes that didn't count, but might if the race between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama remains close as the Democratic convention approaches. Then, of course, there was the spectacle of John McCain-the-former-prisoner-of-war versus Mitt Romney-the-newly-conservative-Mormon, which gave 57 delegates to McCain, now the leading GOP candidate.

What do you make of all this? Sam, let's start with you, and then Ambrose, if you would comment, too, please.

S. Clemens: History has tried hard to

teach us that we can't have good government under politicians. Now, to go and stick one at the very head of the government couldn't be wise.

A. Bierce: Well, as I have often said, the word Politician is a noun, defined thus: An eel in the fundamental mud upon which the superstructure of organized society is reared...as compared with the statesman, he (or she) suffers the disadvantage of being alive.

FW: Which raises the question of statesmanship, and what to do with Iraq and Iran, let alone allies such as the French, who seem uncertain in the best of times. Given what we're facing abroad and in the world, how would you define true statesmanship?

S. Clemens: This singular game, which is so costly and so ruinous and so silly, is called statesmanship — which is different from assmanship on account of the spelling. Anybody but a statesman could invent some way to reduce these vast armaments to rational and sensible and safe police proportions, with the result that thenceforth all Christians could sleep in their beds unafraid, and even the Savior could come down and walk on the seas, foreigner as He is, without dread of being chased by Christian battleships.

FW: Or terrorists?

S. Clemens: Mmm. The statesman will invent cheap lies, putting the blame upon the nation that is being attacked, and every man will be glad of these conscience-soothing falsities.

But I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.

FW: Ambrose?

A. Bierce: Sam was always a little windy on this subject of religion, or war. Let's just define War, which is a noun: A by-product of the arts of peace. The most menacing political condition is a period of international amity.

FW: Yes, I see. Well, let's talk about the economy. These are said to be hard times. Do you think we can get past them? Sam, let's start with you.

S. Clemens: By trying we can easily learn to endure adversity — another man's I mean.

A. Bierce: That's true, Sam, and let me point out that what we need is healthy commerce. And commerce is defined thus: A kind of transaction in which A plunders from B the goods of C, and for compensation B picks the pocket of D of money belonging to E.

FW: And Ambrose, didn't you also observe that piracy is merely "commerce without its folly-swaddles, just as God made it?" Which suggests to me that you see God, and religion, as key questions in the upcoming presidential election, questions, which many say, are responsible in part for sinking Mitt Romney's bid for the Republican nomination as the first Mormon candidate. Is that a fair characterization?

A. Bierce: We can answer that by looking at religion strictly defined: A daughter of Hope and Fear explaining to Ignorance the nature of the unknowable.

FW: Really? Sam, how do you see this question of an afterlife, and the just rewards of the good or the bad among us?

S. Clemens: I am silent on the subject because of necessity. I have friends in both places. But I will say personally, that when I reflect upon the number of dis-

agreeable people who I know have gone to a better world, I am moved to lead a different life.

FW: One of the questions many have asked themselves this year concerns heritage. Among our would-be or current leaders we have the wife of a former president, the presidential son of a former president, the son of parents from Kansas and Kenya, and countless other variations. Sam, what do you make of it all?

S. Clemens: Well, the average American may not know who his grandfather was. But the average American (is) one degree better off than the average Frenchman, who, as a rule, (is) in considerable doubt as to who his father was.

A. Bierce: Yes, well, a Frog is a reptile with edible legs.

FW: Ambrose, that sounds like prejudice. How do you answer such criticism?

A. Bierce: Prejudice is defined as vagrant opinion WITHOUT visible means of support.

FW: I see. That would make a prejudiced person a fool, I guess. So let's wrap this up: How would you counsel our leaders or our voters who face the complexities of life today, to help them avoid being foolish? Ambrose?

A. Bierce: Define fool, then avoid it.

Fool, n: A person who pervades the domain of intellectual speculation and diffuses himself through the channels of moral activity. He is omnific, omniform, omniperceptive, omniscient, omnipotent...He created patriotism and taught the nations war — founded theology, philosophy, law, medicine and Chicago.

S. Clemens: It is better to keep your mouth closed and let the people think you are a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt. ■

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