Once upon a time, there was a presidential candidate named Harold Stassen. The one-time Minnesota governor sought the Republican presidential nomination eleven times, from 1948 to 2000. While his first bid was serious and competitive, he soon became something of a joke, an aging "Boy Wonder," known only as a perennial candidate.

The presidential contest always brings out the less-than-serious, from paranoid fringe politician Lyndon LaRouche, who ran eight times, to TV comedian Pat Paulsen, whose faux political rants and comic logic drove him -- sort of -- into two presidential races, in an ongoing gag that began on the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour.

You might think that this progression, from Stassen to Paulsen, leads logically -- even if the logic is perverse -- to some of the current crop of undeclared Republican presidential aspirants gearing up to challenge an incumbent who will be tough to beat. But in this presidential cycle we're seeing something new. At least three "candidates" in the race are being taken seriously by the media,
even though they are probably not intending to run. More to the point, and unlike actor turned politician Ronald Reagan, they are in it only to boost their television ratings. Their "campaigns," it seems to us, mark the realization of a significant shift in American public discourse: popular culture has now fully colonized politics. Elections are now subordinate to entertainment.

After all, Donald Trump (who is definitely not going to throw his hair into the ring), Sarah Palin (who probably doesn't have the presidency in her crosshairs), and Mike Huckabee (whose campaign war chest is as slim as he once was) all have, or have had, "reality" shows or talk shows to promote. What better way to command public attention than to pretend to run for the presidency? Mr. Trump is the exemplar of a "campaign" that is furious, fatuous, and phony. Trump himself recently noted the connection between his presidential pretensions and his TV series The Apprentice when he said on ABC's The View, "maybe that's why I'm sitting here, partially." He also admitted that he was delaying his formal candidacy decision until June, when Celebrity Apprentice goes on hiatus, because if he announced sooner, NBC would have to cancel the remaining episodes of the show.

Since success for Trump is all about media coverage, he has resurrected the nonsense about President Obama's birth certificate. His assertions about "the greatest scam in the history of American politics" seem to be resonating with fans old and new. The ratings for his show have skyrocketed, and, as Politico recently reported, Trump has garnered more network news mentions in the last month than former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty, even though Pawlenty has announced an actual and serious (and so far, the only) presidential exploration bid. In recent polls of Republican voters, Trump is closing in on current front runner Mitt Romney.

As a performance artist, Donald Trump is impressive. At the recent CPAC Convention, he stole the show with a star turn that trumped Newt and Mitt. But as a serious aspirant for the presidency, this self-proclaimed "really smart guy" sounds more like a really dumb guy. In a letter posted on the New York Times web site, written in response to Times columnist Gail Collins, who took Trump to task for embracing bogus birther claims, The Donald insists that while he has "great respect for Ms. Collins," "her facts are wrong!" After presenting the birther case, recycling "evidence" that has been repeatedly and authoritatively refuted, Trump sonorously concludes, in an argument advanced by exclamation points, "there's at least a good chance that Barack Hussein Obama has made mincemeat out of our great and cherished Constitution!"

Huckabee, of course, is also a born-again birther. Obama, he has claimed, grew up in Kenya, where he internalized the "Mau Mau" philosophy of his father. When called on it, Huckabee lied, suggesting, unconvincingly, and without an apparent desire to convince, that he meant to say that the president grew up in Singapore. The less-than-divine Sarah (who IS running - to replace Oprah, not Obama) has found all kinds of ways to stay in the limelight, from keynote speaker at Tea Party rallies to an overseas trip to burnish her foreign policy credentials.

At one level this is entertaining stuff, but it distracts, distorts, and distends our politics. Since Trump, Huckabee, and Palin probably don't intend to run, they have no need to temper appeals to Republican primary voters with statements that prepare the way for them to reach out to moderate Republicans, disaffected Democrats, and Independents in the general election. Nor do they have any desire to address issues that really matter. And so, they are sensationalizing the debate, pushing it toward "Un-Reality" TV.

And unfortunately for "T-Paw" (Pawlenty's affectionate street name), Trump, Huckabee, and Palin are sucking up all the oxygen at the very time when less-well-known, but more serious, politicians like Pawlenty need air-time to establish name recognition and credibility. In this environment, T-Paw's presidential aspirations might take him down the long, lonesome road of that other former Minnesota governor.
Democrats, no doubt, are enjoying the spectacle. But even if it enhances Barack Obama's prospects for reelection, they (and we) should worry -- a lot -- about this celebritification and trivialization of politics. The fault, in our view, is not in our "stars," but in ourselves. Here's a logical next step: as part of his rehabilitation campaign, Charlie Sheen announces his intention to become the third president, after John Quincy Adams and George W. Bush, to succeed his father in the Oval Office.

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