
On June 24, 2009, at a hastily arranged press conference in the rotunda of the State House, Mark Sanford, the governor of South Carolina, and a rising star in the Republican Party, acknowledged that he had not spent the better part of a week "hiking on the Appalachian Trail." He had flown to Buenos Aires, Argentina to meet Maria Belén Chapur, with whom he was having an affair. "I hurt her, I hurt my wife," Sanford said. He did not, however, intend to resign as governor.

Censured by the South Carolina legislature, Sanford completed his term in office. In 2013, he was elected to the United States Congress, where he currently serves.

From 2007-2010, Barton Swaim, a young man with a doctorate in English from the University of Edinburgh, wrote speeches and letters to constituents for Governor Sanford. In *The Speechwriter*, Swaim takes us inside the governor's office - and reflects on idealism, principle, self-absorption, corruption and scandal in contemporary politics. He dissects the language politicians use. And, although he tries hard not to settle scores with individuals, Swaim illuminates the vanity that makes and often breaks politicians - and the shallowness of our political culture.

Swaim's Sanford does not remember the names of South Carolina senators and assembly members. The kindest word to use for his writing is "maladroit." And when he got into an "unreasonable mood," which was often, he objected "to anything for any reason - a misplaced comma, the word 'gallant'" - and used it as an excuse to verbally abuse and humiliate a member of his staff, and then throw him out of his office. Sanford was, Swaim writes, "a monster and a lout."

Surprisingly, perhaps, Swaim defends Sanford's performance in office. He makes the dubious claim that in refusing to accept money from President Obama's "economic stimulus package" for his state, Sanford was sticking to his principles, showing "great courage" and "defiant fearlessness," and not playing politics during an emergency (the unemployment rate in South Carolina was one of the highest in the country).

More important than Swaim's evaluation of Mark Sanford is his critique of our representative democracy. It has a special resonance, it seems to me, because it is born of injured innocence. Voters, Swaim reminds us, do not think deeply "or much at all" about political issues. Even those who took the time to write letters to the governor had "ingested one or two half-understood facts that accorded with their suspicions and then worked a few inane jibes into paragraph form."

Eminently aware of the apathy and ignorance of the vast majority of their constituents, Swaim writes (echoing the findings of political psychologist Drew Westen), politicians play to "feeling rather than meaning, warmth rather content." They try not to lie, but they make extensive use of "vague, slippery or just meaningless language...to preserve options, buy time, distance themselves from others, or just to sound like they were saying something rather than nothing."

Hailed as a compelling critic of the stimulus package, Sanford relied on stock phrases ("you can't solve a problem caused by too much debt by piling on yet more debt") aimed at people who were frightened of government spending and generational debt. The strategy worked - and it still works.

In our celebrity culture, Swaim suggests, we vote for self-absorbed, willful, and vain politicians in search of fame and glory, attention and acclaim. Even in his ruin, Mark Sanford "could not find more than the paltriest shred of self-criticism." He looked inside for remorse and "all
he found was more of himself." Swaim now believes that this is true "to one degree or another of all politicians." He pleads with his fellow Americans to laud their elected representatives when they are right, venerate them when they're dead, but never - ever - to trust them.

It's an interesting diagnosis - and a peculiar prescription. Representative democracy relies on trust. It works best with an informed and engaged citizenry, who evaluate candidates based on their political principles, ideas, judgment, character, and track record.

Instead of accepting the self-regard of politicians (and their pursuit of their own "petty, myopic desires") as the peculiar - and permanent - flaw of modern democratic politics, why not seek ways to combat it? To change our political culture, we might support a more authoritative, robust, non-partisan mass media, focused more on issues than horse races; civics classes in schools, which include Model Congresses and training in debate; and the creation of (book club-like) political discussion groups, composed of voters across the ideological spectrum, who spend an hour or two a month discussing controversial topics (like Affordable Health Care and the nuclear treaty with Iran).

Perhaps, like Barton Swaim, I sound naïve. But, if we want democracy to be an inspiring dream and not a nightmare, some things in American politics have to change. Soon.