

Political time-out: A year of elected silence

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [December 11, 2007](#) issue

"Politics pulverizes," observed the elegant, white-haired editor as she looked at me across her mahogany desk. She knew about such things, having grown up a bishop's daughter, single-handedly raised several children, lost friends to war, managed a farm and worked for the last decades of her life in journalism and publishing. She died many years ago, but this one bit of alliterative advice comes back to me time and again, bringing with it her imperious and knowing regard, the glint of warmth in those imperturbable blue eyes, and the white curls that gave a Pre-Raphaelite frame to the high arches and columns of her face.

"Politics pulverizes," I seemed to hear her say once more as I was reading the journals left behind by a family friend, a remarkable woman who, after graduating from college in 1908, devoted herself to socialist causes and lived to a lonely old age unfettered by bourgeois marriage. When I was young I used to drink tea with her in her New York apartment while she regaled me with tales of her martyred friends the Rosenbergs. Of course, she assumed, one knew what the truth was, knew who was lying, and knew who stood to gain from the conspiracy. It was not to be considered that the facts might prove otherwise. But now the hindsight of history casts a different light on that whole era; an era of idealism gone awry, of lives blighted by political passion.

I've seen milder cases closer to home. A certain gentle matron in my family never spoke in anger except to register her contempt for American political leaders. "They all hate us," she used to say of the rest of the world, and seemed to derive a certain bitter satisfaction from agreeing with them. Her daily diet of political broadcasts didn't help.

On the one hand, I've always thought—I still think—that informed political awareness is a small price to pay for the rare privilege of living in a fundamentally free and decent society. On the other hand, as I look back at those times when my political

radar was most actively engaged, I'm sobered to see how seldom my moments of political high dudgeon produced anything beyond an unwholesome agitation of spirit.

"Politics pulverizes" comes to mind again in this 2007-2008 election year. I live and work in a New England college town where a certain enlightened all-knowingness about politics and society is taken for granted, where there is pervasive agreement about the war in Iraq, global warming and the benefits of shiatsu massage. As the presidential contest heats up, it seems more difficult than ever for the presiding majority to remember that there are decent folks who have alternative views.

Some conservative wags like to say that liberalism is a mental disease. But the mental disease isn't liberalism and it isn't conservatism, it's utopianism—and the antidote to utopianism isn't apathy, it is faith. Faith isn't a fix. Faith isn't sure it knows in detail what's wrong with the world and how to repair it. Faith doesn't drive out doubt, but sits well with honest ignorance as to how hunger and poverty and war and prejudice and disease and ugliness and cultural degeneration are to be eliminated. Faith helps us discern the limits of what any government can do to improve our fallen human condition. Faith saves us from being seduced by totalistic schemes. Faith teaches us that politics is not the only way to serve the polis. Faith enables us to make prudential judgments with a measure of humility and realistic sangfroid. The bumper sticker says, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention," but faith would have us pay attention to the world's ills without outrage. Commitment with detachment—it's a difficult road to walk, and only faith makes it possible.

Meanwhile, would we be culpably ignorant if we didn't know the political views of our friends and neighbors? Would we be culpably reticent if we kept our own political opinions under wraps? The practice of monastic Christians may serve as a model in this regard. Our monastic friends vote, to be sure, and they read the news in order to pray for the world's concerns; but they maintain a certain custody of the tongue that makes it difficult to detect their political colors. I'm not convinced that this tactful silence diminishes their democratic voice; I am convinced that it helps them preserve harmony within the community and openness toward the guests they receive in Christ's name.

As I look out at my neighbors' lawns, I see the placards of the incumbent mayor and the write-in candidate who opposed her in a recent election still glaring at each other across the street. The usual mild neighborly tiffs about whose leaves have

migrated onto whose lawns have unfortunately been colored by these partisan differences. All this makes me wonder, purely after the fashion of a thought experiment, what it would be like to place a 12-month moratorium on lawn placards. What if we could drink from the waters of forgetfulness and, for this election year's brief duration, lose consciousness of our neighbors' political convictions? Civic-mindedness, I hope, would be none the worse for it. We would still have to fulfill our obligation to vote with an informed conscience, after a suitable amount of careful reading and thought; but to the secret ballot we would add a further layer of silence and discretion. When we drive home from church on Sundays, after praying for our leaders to govern wisely, we could listen to the *Polka Hour* on our car radios instead of the strident political talk show that replaced it. The only thing we'd miss, during our year of elected silence, would be an all-too-easy way to size each other up.