

The Common Touch:

The common touch is upon us. The touch has descended in full force across our nation. We have invited it, encouraged it, and praised it. The trait which President Bush honed for his eight years in office has reached its logical conclusion in the person of Sarah Palin. She has moved the dialogue beyond pretending to be common (Bush is from an old line, elite Eastern family) to a conversation actually rooted in being truly average, not exceptional, common.

Webster's Unabridged has many entries defining the word 'common'. Some of them are not flattering, not the kind of thing one thinks of as qualities to be sought after and practiced. Some of the words that jump off the page are "hackneyed, inferior, mediocre, coarse and vulgar". When I think of the qualities that I would like to see in the leaders of our country I do not think of inferior or mediocre.

Webster's also notes the quality of 'being shared by many or all' as in 'common ties' or 'common goals'. I hope we are not confusing the two when we evaluate the worth of a public figure. While we want leaders who share our 'common goals' such as peace and prosperity we need also to be careful that they don't merely represent the unexceptional and the mundane. It is not useful for a leader to be over her head and out of her league. It may be charming and it may play well but it is not useful to the country.

The cynics who cajoled John McCain into picking her (she was not anywhere on his 'A' list) did so at great risk. They did it to solidify the Conservative base and succeeded in solidifying both bases; Conservative and Liberal. I guarantee you that this liberal would not be writing about a vice-presidential candidate so close to the election if not for the fact that she is an absolutely terrible choice for the job.

I want a vice president who is more talented, smarter and imaginative than I am. I would not vote for me or my neighbor to be the vice president. We are not qualified for it. It's that simple. So when a new leader shows up who is obviously unexceptional and precisely mediocre I look elsewhere to cast my vote. We don't need a Jane six-pack we need a Jane Roosevelt. I'm not talking about who would make a good next door neighbor; that is not the point. I'm talking about who should be next in line for the Presidency. I am not talking about who would be fun to camp with; I am talking about entering the Washington DC boiler when the country is in crisis. This is not hockey. Hockey is not important. Governing is important.

It is not a great fault for a public figure to mess up syntax or mispronounce certain words. There are plenty of intelligent people who aren't very good at diagramming sentences. It is often pointed out that Einstein could not spell. What's missing from Mrs. Palin is content. Often enough, when she finishes a tumbling, bumpy paragraph, she comes out of the last sentence having said absolutely nothing. That's not because she is unintelligent. It's because she has nothing to say. So the allotted space is filled with nouns, adjectives and modifiers but no meaning.

Sarah Palin said this during the debate, "Well, our founding fathers were very wise there in allowing through the Constitution much flexibility there in the office of the vice president. And we will do what is best for the American people in tapping into that position and ushering in an agenda that is supportive and cooperative with the president's agenda in that position." Sarah Palin meant what she said but what she said meant nothing.

As I was saying before, we have become too accustomed to the empty common touch, too ready to bash the intellectual. One good reason for that is the enormous failure of very articulate, very exceptional leaders of the past. It's true that the best and the brightest have messed up royally. McNamara and Rusk gave us Vietnam. Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Cheney gave us Iraq. The list is much longer. It is entirely understandable that there should be skepticism towards the well heeled smart guys who always find a way to say that they have the goods and that the American public doesn't.

But it's gone too far. Skepticism of intellectuals has become hero worship of the vacant. We are replacing the unfeeling egghead with the noisy know nothing. The know nothing revels in the notion that everything you need to know is learned at home before the age of seven. The know nothing thinks the world begins and ends within American borders. The know nothing believes that all decisions must be intuitive rather than deliberative. The know nothing stopped listening to other voices sometime before high school and hasn't looked back since.

The Sarah Palins of the world have dignified and exalted their own empty-headedness and have tried to convince us instead, that they possess the common touch.