

Finally, an Honest Con Game

By Dr. Marvin Folkertsma

"This is not funny, this is serious stuff!" intones a flock of furrow-browed politicians about that well-dressed couple who conned their way into a White House shindig. Yes and no, in that order, because some of us think this incident is more than a little funny and really not all that serious. "They could have smuggled a toxic substance in the guise of a perfume, or even an explosive!" someone exclaimed on MSN-Please-Take-Me-Seriously-BC. Well, okay, I suppose so; that might have happened in an "NCIS" episode; or was it "Loaded Weapon" or "The Naked Gun?" Can't remember. At all events, my guess is that most Americans are more amused than upset.

The reason for this is that the romp of Mr. and Mrs. Coiffed-to-Perfection is the most amusing story to pop out of the ideological fever swamp of D.C. since Jimmy Carter confessed to lust in his heart, complained about killer rabbits, and deferred to his daughter's profound reflections on nuclear war. Perhaps what shocks those in the political class is that White House intruders committed a genuinely honest con, as opposed to the heaps of dishonest ones they have inflicted on the American people over the decades.

One does not have to be a Mensa member to grasp the difference between an honest and dishonest con, or to appreciate the former's subtle humor. An honest con is carried out by those who know they are conning people, and who also know that the con needs to last only long enough to achieve one's goal, which in this case was to gain entry to the White House. Without question, the most brilliant exposition of honest conning is Herman Melville's, "The Confidence Man." Melville, along with Mark Twain, were America's most insightful writers, in that they could smell a con game a continent away. To Melville, the great con was religion or religious-type quests; to Twain, it was the grand kaleidoscope of human affairs, but for a particularly well known example, read "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." For both, gullible Americans suckered into believing the con's oily ruses may be victims, but they are also pathetic.

Melville and Twain were especially repulsed by a dishonest con—which is committed by those who lie to themselves as well as to others—in that the con artists refuse to acknowledge that what is being perpetrated is in fact a con game. American politics offers so many examples that it is sometimes hard to determine when a con is NOT being played. Still, several really big ones are going on right now, and their perpetrators are hoping that by the time Americans smoke out details of the swindles, it will be too late for anyone to repair the damage; the cons would have succeeded.

At least one, however, has finally been brought to light—the theory of man-made global warming. For instance, any quick check on CO₂ emissions turns up an embarrassing fact about its role in the Great Greenhouse Gas Crisis, which is that man-made carbon dioxide is a trivial contributor to the total amount of this gas generated by the planet; that is, some 97 percent of such emissions is "natural." Which means that ghastly EPA scenarios of humanity carbon-dioxidizing itself to levels of Darth Vader rasping—"Luke! Sounding like me is our destiny!"—are a bit overdrawn. Still, well-funded apocalyptomaniacs will likely continue their feverish diatribes; facing facts is never pleasant, particularly when your livelihood depends on a massive con.

An even greater swindle centers on healthcare reform, whose managers have been trying to manipulate a number of cons simultaneously. First, that a new one to two trillion dollar entitlement is “deficit-neutral,” and second, that Medicare can achieve “savings” of some half trillion dollars over the next decade—and third, that all of this can be predicted about as well, as, say, Enviro-Cons can predict the weather a half century or so into the future. This massive con depends further on a number of “sub-cons,” so to speak, such as the insistence that Americans will not have to relinquish their present insurance plans, that everyone’s insurance costs magically will go down, and that illegal aliens will not be covered.

The upshot of all this is that not all cons are equal, and the larger the con, the greater the commitment of its perpetrators to keep it going; massive cons are literally “too big to fail.” This suggests a profound moral difference, as well. The “Oceans Eleven” con of White House crashers is trivial and entertaining, with few significant consequences beyond its discovery. Political cons belong to a different moral category altogether, in that they build huge constituencies to keep them going, even after they have been exposed. Which is as much to say that, in politics, it is possible to con most people most of the time, and that’s all our political con artists think they have to do.

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