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David Macaray

# 50 Shades of Populism

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Like a bad penny that keeps turning up, we can't seem to get rid of Samuel Wurzelbacher (aka Joe the Plumber). Introduced at a Republican rally in 2008 by candidate John McCain, who saw him as a metaphor for the Common Man, Joe liked to talk about what a great country America was, and how sad it would be if "socialists" like Barack Obama were allowed to ruin it. The audience loved him. He was "real." He was "honest." He was one of us. As tricky as "populism" is to define, Joe became its new poster boy.

But along with the notoriety came scrutiny. Once Joe became a celebrity, reporters began peppering him with questions. It didn't go well. Early on he made a fool of himself by showing that he woefully misunderstood Obama's tax plan (which would increase taxes on those earning more than \$250,000), claiming that it was people in his tax bracket (\$40,000) who would be most hurt by it. When the facts were explained to him, he appeared more confused than embarrassed.

Then it was revealed that he wasn't really a plumber, but a "plumber's helper." There's a big difference between the two, sort of like the difference between a jockey and a stable boy. And the reason Joe was a helper and not a plumber was because he couldn't pass the journeyman's test. Then more bad news. It was revealed that even though Joe displayed the prestigious union plumbers logo on his website, he didn't belong to any union. He was forced to remove it.

After McCain lost to Obama, Joe faced a dilemma. What does a working stiff who's tasted fame do for an encore? Clearly, going back to a dreary life of plugged drains and pipe wrenches was out of the question. But Joe wasn't gifted; he wasn't well-informed, he wasn't well-schooled, and he wasn't particularly eloquent. What to do? This being America, he did what any other ambitious show-off would do. He wrote a book (*Joe the Plumber: Fighting for the American Dream*) and went on tour as a motivational speaker.

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Fast-forward to the present. After book sales dwindled and the lecture circuit more or less dried up, Joe faced yet another decision. Still relatively young (he's 38) and full of save-the-world ambition, he wondered what his next step should be. What should a patriotic, super-confident fellow like himself do next? Answer: Run for Congress. Accordingly, in November, Joe will be the Republican candidate in Ohio's 9th district, facing Democrat Marcy Kaptur (who beat Dennis Kucinich in a redistricting run-off).

When I was a union president, I once ran against a "populist" candidate. I'd been in office four terms and was seeking a fifth. My opponent ("Fred") proudly ran as a union "outsider," a guy who claimed to have loads of common sense and street smarts but who, unlike me and my ilk, wasn't tainted or corrupted or numbed-out by being part of "the system." Fred was a genuinely nice man, older than I by about 10 years, who reminded people of the actor Wilford Brimley.

Alas, his campaign was a mess. He portrayed me as being simultaneously too militant (I'd taken us out on a 57-day strike) and too timid (I'd allowed the company to introduce HMOs), of being too irreverent (while editor of the union newspaper I'd embarrassed the Local by exceeding the limits of "good taste") and too conventional (I had opposed

allowing a group of undisciplined Young Turks to gain traction in the Local). Etc.

Although I won big, I had no illusions about being irreplaceable. While I had many supporters, I also had many detractors. You don't serve four terms in office without saying "No" to a lot of people who want to hear "Yes," and those people don't forget. But it was never personal. It was all politics. *Grown-up politics*. I can honestly say that I respected every person who ever ran against me. If you can't accept the realities of elected office, you don't belong in the game.

And it was politics that made the difference in my contest with Fred. For one thing, incumbents usually have a huge advantage. For another, because I'd already served four terms, I not only knew infinitely more about the issues than he did, I could talk about them in ways he couldn't. For another, as a seasoned pro, I knew how to run a campaign, and the well-meaning and utterly sincere Fred clearly did not.

Nice man or not, Fred would've been a disaster. Given that he knew nothing of the current grievances, nothing of their provenance, nothing of the company's personalities, nothing of the procedures that smoothed the way to getting favorable decisions, nothing of how to read the mood of the membership, nothing of the contractual barriers that faced him, and nothing of how to handle a spirited and independent Executive Board, the company would've eaten his lunch.

All his populist, down-home talk about applying old-fashioned "common sense" to labor relations would have been exposed for the meaningless rhetoric it was. The company was already drooling at the prospect of Fred running the union. Within three months of him taking office, management would've snipped off his gonads and, with Lutheresque flair, nailed them to the church door.

Which is one of the problems with populism. While most of us would love to replace our entrenched, gutless, slick-talking, nest-feathering politicians with new blood, the people who step forward and offer themselves as alternatives are very often more frightening than the people they're seeking to replace. Not frightening in the same way, but *frightening* nonetheless.

In truth, do we really want an "ordinary guy" to lead us? Some man we met at the donut shop? Personally, my idea of a populist would be a non-parochial "elite." How could he be both populist and elite? Because I'd want him to be "uncommon" in ability and yet "a man of the people." I'd want him to be like Ralph Nader—smart, educated and wise, and with a clear vision of how to put us back on the road originally laid out by the Enlightenment.

And speaking of the Enlightenment, here's a straightforward question for the Tea Party folks: Who do you think our Founding Fathers (Jefferson, Adams, Madison, et al), most closely resembled—Joe the Plumber's Helper or the Harvard-educated Ralph Nader?

PS:

David Macaray, an LA playwright and author (*"It's Never Been Easy: Essays on Modern Labor"*), was a former union rep. He is a contributor to *Hopeless: Barack Obama and the Politics of Illusion*, published by AK Press. *Hopeless* is also available in a Kindle edition. He can be reached at dmacaray at earthlink.net

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