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Political March Madness



By Marty Kaplan

Will Hillary be Obama's running mate, with Biden going to State if they win? Will Romney wrap things up on Super Tuesday, or will there be a brokered Republican convention, with Ron Paul as kingmaker? Will Democrats take back the House but lose the Senate?

Who knows? Who cares?

It makes sense, of course, to care about what actually happens. Who will pick the next Supreme Court Justices, whether people with pre-existing conditions will be able to get health insurance, if women will be kissing their reproductive rights goodbye: Plenty of crucial consequences will depend on who wins and who loses.

But predicting what will happen in November has to be one of the biggest wastes of time since the last Adam Sandler movie you saw. It really doesn't matter what any of us thinks.

OK, here's the exception: If a prediction motivates you to write a check or knock on doors, then the psychology of prophecy might make a difference to the outcome of an election. For some people, contributing time or money to a campaign — and that's what counts, not palaver — requires believing how some talk radio gasbag or cable "strategist" says it will all play out.

But for most people, speculating about what's going to happen next, imagining different scenarios, finding signs in Super PACs and portents in polls — it's pretty much all entertainment. Following politics is fun the way following sports is fun. No one really knows whether Wake Forest or UConn will make the Final Four, but half the enjoyment of March Madness is pretending that you do. Who you're rooting for or betting on will have no impact on who will win the championship, but that doesn't diminish the pleasure to be had from predictions. As long as you recognize that anticipating the twists and turns of the presidential race is the political equivalent of picking brackets, it's a harmless hobby.

On the other hand, the political media believe that their job is to make us ravenous for each new installment of the melodrama. Without campaign cliffhangers every 20 minutes, there's no reason to stay tuned to this channel or to refresh that Web page. Because ratings and clicks are what keep the news business in business, there's a premium on captivating our attention and an urgency to making everything seem urgent.

You'd think we'd wise up. After living through a few election cycles, you'd think we'd have figured out that the characters are more important than the plot. You'd think we'd demand more airtime for covering issues and less for hyping suspense. And by issue journalism, I don't mean stenography, I mean accountability. Journalism doesn't return the First Amendment's favor by giving campaigns a free megaphone. Citizens are bombarded by talking points incessantly; what's needed are more and better bullshit detectors. But what we get instead is, "Tonight is a make or break moment for Rick Perry." Looking back, it's easy to say, Herman Cain? Really? But which networks are now doing to "Obamacare is a government takeover of the healthcare system" what they failed to do to 9-9-9?

It's no mystery why we're suckers for stories. Our species loves narratives. Tell me "once upon a time," and I won't leave till I know the ending. Tell me "it was a dark and stormy night," and the neurons in my brain are on fire. Scheherazade saved her own life by embedding stories within stories. If she'd told "Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp" all the way to the end, at dawn the king would have had her killed like the thousand virgins before her. Instead, she nested "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" within "Aladdin," and "The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor" within "Ali Baba," and so on night after night, and the king was putty in her hands.

TV's *Road to the White House* soap opera is a pale substitute for *One Thousand and One Nights*, so it's impressive what a little brass and drum theme music and some you-won't-want-to-miss-this framing can do to turn another day of asinine campaign coverage into a thriller. Paying close attention to it gives us the illusion of doing our patriotic duty, adding a civic virtue to keeping current that watching NCAA hoops can't provide.

In that kind of media world, when we bump into one another at the real or virtual water cooler, it's perfectly natural to quiz each other about what's going to happen next. Do you think Romney's going to pick Rubio? What are the odds that Obama will wuss out on the Bush tax cuts? It's in the candidates' interests to spend their time selling messages, and it's in the networks' interests to spend their time selling audiences to advertisers. But I'm not sure it's in the public interest for the rest of us to be deputized as cable news anchors, and as guests on each other's imaginary shows.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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