



THE BLOG 11/14/2011 11:58 am ET | Updated Jan 14, 2012

Keeping Up With the Candidates



By Marty Kaplan

“Are you not entertained?”

That was Jon Stewart’s response to Rick Perry’s brain freeze. He said it twice, maniacally. *“Are you not entertained?”* Stewart’s right about what’s happening. America is on track for the most amusing apocalypse ever. Things may be going to hell, but the campaign narrative unfolding in real time couldn’t be any more fun. It’s all entertainment, just grist for the media mill, and apparently there’s no bumper bad enough to shock us back to our senses.

Last week, for example, the International Energy Agency warned that the world is just a handful of years away from irreversible climate change. But with the Republican presidential field and GOP congressional leadership calling climate change a hoax, and with the energy industry pouring billions into lobbying and ad campaigns, the only thing standing between us and our planet’s catastrophic endgame is the delusion that it’s all just an episode of *America’s Got Tsuris*.

Also last week, Jack Abramoff provided a revolting insider’s account of the systemic corruption of our democratic institutions. But even his piercing whistle-blowing won’t reverse the takeover of our political process by a bunch of oligarchs and plutocrats who make the 1% look like Eleanor Roosevelt. Too bad - but who doesn’t enjoy *So You Think You Can Lobby?*

How obese does America have to get before we acknowledge that our food industry is bankrupting and killing us? We’ll eat ourselves to death before the morbidity and mortality statistics, or the health care cost curve, will get in the way of our addiction to sugar, salt, fat and somnolence. It may be fatal, but *The Biggest Loser* is undeniably terrific television.

How much do our schools need to fail before we figure out that there’s a terrible price to pay for being dumb? Kids in other countries race past us, but for decades the most we’ve been able to do about it is come up with new ways to declare a Sputnik moment. Surveys reveal our appalling ignorance about other countries, about science, about history, but the inalienable right to believe our own facts is the essence of popular culture.

When Rick Perry couldn’t count to three, not much attention was paid to one and two. His pledge to get rid of the Departments of Commerce and Education was given a free pass by the free press. What does he want to do with the National Weather Service — spin it off to the states? Does he want to abolish the U.S. Patent Office? Does he intend to privatize student aid? Replace Head Start with vouchers? Our method of vetting potential presidents has become so

cynical that the media don't even bother taking candidates' promises seriously. Their words are absolved of accountability, parsed only for their politics, presumed to be no more than pandering.

These debates aren't civic events. In another era, we might have called them circuses. Today, we call them reality television. For the networks and brands that sponsor them, they're cheap content. The prospect of something dramatic (a gaffe, a flub, a flare-up), or revealing (a roll of the eyes, a glance at a watch, an invasion of another candidate's space), or - best of all - suicidal: that's what keeps us watching, whether it's the Kardashians or the Hermanators.

When we watch this show, we're not citizens; we're an audience, and the more wacky the performers, the harder it is to take our eyes off them. The notion that there are serious stakes here is just part of the hype. All that red, white and blue packaging, all that faux-Copland theme music, all that moderator gravitas - they're just cues to prompt our civic high-mindedness, enabling us to pretend we're doing something more consequential than enjoying an infotainment freakshow.

We have finally arrived at the point that political campaigns are actually bad for America. The more we watch, the less we know. The more they spend, the less we notice. If you were to set out to design the process most likely to trivialize the toughest problems we face and least likely to build coalitions to solve them, you'd end up with pretty much what we have now. What's on our country's plate is really scary stuff, but we're behaving as though this were *Survivor*, not survival.

Yes, I know that voting is more emotional than rational. I realize that gut feelings about character count more than intellectual judgments about policy. I'm aware that the history of American politics teems with deceit, vulgarity, spectacle, corruption and know-nothingism. I recognize that partisanship and profit have been media motives since we were colonies. I acknowledge that Democrats are also no angels.

Still, I'm not ready to accept that *The Amazing Race* is no different from what American democracy has always been. The appropriation of politics by entertainment may be an old story. But the danger of surrendering to "reality" has never seemed so real.

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.

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan

Do you have information you want to share with HuffPost? Here's how.



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director