

First Streetlight

by Kevin John Phillips

What I'm going to do is grab this eight-year-old fellow down the block, and declare him a candidate for this Presidential campaign. I'll be his campaign manager, and our whole message will be based on the First Streetlight platform. It's old school but very effective. If you didn't grow up in a big city, you may not know about First Streetlight. If that's the case find someone who did and they'll tell you all about it. For me, it went something like this.

When I was a kid, my friends and I played hard all day. The spark of bright blue afternoon pushed the thermometer past eighty and five, and tempers tended to flare a bit while we played ball or tag or superheroes. Someone would get mad, a scuffle would follow, and just as the thing really came to a boil, we'd all get called to supper. It only took one call to get us to supper. One call, three big gulps, and for dessert a luscious helping of tease for the little sister. After supper there was a three-course bath — much scrubbing with a side of giggles, washed down with enough water to cover the entire bathroom.

Later, as orange-sky early evening poured onto our block, we'd dribble out of our houses; little men with hair slicked back, finger wiggling in one ear trying to get the bath water out, and dressed only in a pair of cut-offs. Once again we were an effervescent entourage of smiling, smirking, mischief-makers.

The two main scufflers from earlier would be the last to come out, briskly scrubbed and scolded by their mothers, mildly scolded and secretly questioned by their Dads. As anger from the afternoon gurgled down bathtub drains, laughter and jokes about swinging like a sissy bubbled up. The concoction finished with terrible hollers at each other all having to do with various body functions, parts, and assorted nonsense followed by the word "head." We'd stand around, clean and relieved of the dust and dirt of the day and before long, sunset would officially arrive. As dusk lazily drifted in and around, a streetlight would burst into glow. The second light would sizzle to

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life, then the third way down the block, and so on. The first to notice would yell, "First Streetlight!" and with smug satisfaction assume his roll as Big Stuff for the remainder of the evening. Second Streetlight was not as good as first, but in the value system that made up our competitive childhood, fairly respectable. Third was better than a stick in your eye, but not much. If anyone was foolish enough to yell out "Fourth Streetlight," they were subject to immediate and bitter ridicule. Someone usually, foolishly, yelled it.

In that moment, we'd unconsciously pause to lick our lips over everything that day had been, take a big bite and enjoy the evening's things that were, and relish the promises yet to come. The hot bath and summer breeze cooked up goosebumps and giggles in the approaching night. As our parents perched on the porch or dallied in the driveway watering brown laws, we'd savor precious minutes stolen past our usual bedtimes. If you drove down our block you'd probably drive past ten boys patting their bellies at you while they pretended to pick their noses, and if you were really lucky we'd pass a little gas your way. This day was joyously in the bag, and "First Streetlight!" was the stamp of approval on the whole thing.

The heat of the day — be it winter or summer — gives birth to battles, and this happens on a city street, at a town council meeting, and in Washington. Always will. In my candidate's administration, the workday won't start until around eleven. This means scuffles can't really get serious until late in the day, and that means suppertime can come before anything really stupid happens. Tough, forgiving, appreciative of all things, maybe even little sisters; that's what you'll have to be to succeed in this administration.

After supper, my candidate will encourage all of Washington to take a bath, and he'll require it if it's been a particularly nasty day. As the night begins to fall, everyone will stand outside the capitol wiggling a finger in their ear, enjoying the goosebumps the air produces. As the day closes, someone will acknowledge it with a resounding cry of "First Streetlight!" as they forgive and forget and make funny faces at the cars passing by. They'll wake the next day ready to do it all over again. Soon enough, stuff will start getting

done and we'll all be better off. All that other stuff; economy, foreign relations, the Middle East? Maybe we'll just have to teach the world about First Streetlight.

