

Confessions of a Politician

by Paul Steven Stone

Forgive me father for I have sinned.”

“Tell me how you have sinned, my son?”

Lies, father. I have told lie after lie in pursuit of my personal gain. I have lied to my family, my friends, to thousands of people who desired nothing from me but the truth.”

“And when did you first enter politics, my son?”

“Many years ago, father, I was a mere child, an innocent. I believed in heroes. Believed in the power of being right and doing good works. I believed I could change things, could make a difference in the lives of the people I represented. I believed politics was much more than a bunch of self-important, privileged men dividing up the spoils of life-in-the-public-arena. I thought the system embraced everyone who had a stake in the outcome of every law considered and every vote taken. We had not yet been blessed by the work of the finest Supreme Court money could buy, where every decision had been paid for and lobbied by billionaires and millionaires, who understandably believe they're entitled to more representation than the single vote everyone else gets.”

“And when did you learn the truth, my son? When did you find out what a shmuck you've been?”

“In that first year, father. And how swift an education that was! No sooner was I sitting in a seat of elected power than I discovered how weak and ineffective I was. I saw that power was most effective when it furthered its own ends rather than the needs of the voters. To get along in the world of politics one quickly learns to go along. To sleep with the ugly as well as the beautiful...Ha!

"Forgive the coarse example, father, but that's what politics does to you...either you're kissing a thousand asses and spreading your legs a thousand times a day for short dollars, or sleeping with an occasional millionaire now and again. What would you do, right? So, you start 'Shtupping for Millionaires' and you get your life back, and you stop feeling like a 24 hour fundraising prostitute."

But I was speaking about...power. Do you know the secret of power, father? I'll tell you. To become powerful, one simply hangs on to power longer than the next guy. To hang on longer than the next guys means forging strategic alliances with those who hold the power, even if it goes against the vested interests of your constituents, from whom you won't hear anything for another two years, anyway. But like I said, power is most effective when it's furthering its own ends. That was a simple lesson taught to all of us when we entered public office.

"But that seems so self-serving, my son. Surely there are those in public life who set their course with greater integrity and resolve?"

"Yes, father. They're called one-term politicians."

"This is all so very curious, my son."

"It's *Strange*, father. I'm constantly trying to understand how things could get so bad. When I first entered office, it was understood you weren't to get caught breaking the law or stealing from the cookie jar. Everything was fair game, but you weren't allowed to get caught. That was the cardinal rule. Steal from the poor, the blind, the crippled, but don't get caught.

"Nowadays, it seems that our government is in charge of payoffs for criminal deeds of catastrophic dimensions. The greedy son-of-bitches who brought down the financial system and triggered a

worldwide recession are saved, kept in their jobs, and even allowed to collect bonuses, while the taxpayers pick up the tab.

"Just think, father, Halliburton and its subsidiaries are allowed to fraudulently overbill the US Army for shoddy work in IRAQ (How many soldiers were electrocuted in their poorly constructed showers?) and we just pay the bills.

"And, today, every one of those Grand Old Pigs whose political party ran us into an endless war in Iraq for no good reason, voted in tax cuts for yacht-owners, billionaires and oil company executives, and fathered a prescription drug benefit where the USA **isn't allowed** to use its buying power to lower prices (and, thus, decrease the deficit). If they're so worried about deficits how could they have voted for renewing Bush's Tax cuts for millionaires, father. How could they, I ask you that?"

"It is all a mystery to me, my son."

"Yeah, me too, father. Me too. Like how could I have become a cynical and jaded politician so quickly? Without even noticing.! Oh, there was much truth in the promises I made, father. I intended to do as much as was humanly possible for my constituents; meant to deliver as many jobs, as many laws and, especially, as many government contracts for my constituents as I could."

"So where are the lies you feel you must confess, my son?"

"It was all lies, father. There wasn't one job, or law or one government contract I promised to deliver which I wouldn't have sacrificed to help further my own position as an elected official. When everything you promise is secondary to feathering your own nest, you're making promises to no one but yourself.

"I am impressed by your contrition, my son, is there not time for you to make things right?"

"How do you mean, father. By reciting sacred names or saying my rosary?"

"No, by following your conscience instead of your weaknesses. By pursuing a course of action dictated by what you have promised, and by what you believe."

"A novel idea, father, but it would never work. You see, in the interest of getting elected, I have endeavored to be all things to all people. That, of course, meant taking stands on issues that offended the least number of eligible voters. We call that taking a 'prudent' approach to electioneering, so that hopefully you end up looking good to supporters on both sides of an issue. A good example is my stated position on welfare reform, father.

"Do you support it or oppose it, my son?"

"The question is, father, how can I both support and oppose it at the same time. That's 'prudent' electioneering. The way it works, you develop simple answers to complex issues. Ask me my position on welfare reform, I'll tell you I plan to seek reform without seeking retribution.

That answer, simple as it appears, will be interpreted by each side as providing a measure of my support, while ultimately requiring nothing from me except an occasional newspaper quote. The net result, of course, is a non-binding promise to do nothing."

"I am beginning to see the problem, my son."

"I have become a master of maintaining a 'prudent' approach to most issues, father. When it comes to conservation and land-use

issues, I am for "responsible development" and "controlled growth." Ask me my view on capital punishment and I'll declare myself "morally opposed to the death penalty except under certain conditions." Question my position on gun control and I'll tell you the problem isn't with criminals being too well armed, but with people like you and me being too poorly armed."

"You are being unfair to yourself, my son."

"You think so? Go ahead, ask me my stand on any issue!"

"Aid to Afghanistan?"

"I'll support it, but only after the Afghanni's put their house in order."

"Continuing price supports for U.S. farmers?"

"I'll vote to eliminate price supports as soon as we figure out a better way to level the playing field in the international market."

"American corporations' usage of child laborers in third world nations?"

"It's outrageous, immoral and barbarous; but what gives us the right to dictate morality to the rest of the world?"

And tax cuts for the wealthy?"

Ah, yes. That's the Million Dollar Question, father, because the right answer will open the door to millions of dollars in campaign donations! Ask me my position on taxing the rich, so their obligations are commensurate with the privileges they enjoy as millionaires and billionaires., and I'll agree that, "Yes, everyone

should pay their fair share". But I'll also note that "raising taxes now could jeopardize the entire economic recovery." Or I'll pretend this is part of a larger tax event that also hits small businesses and middle class taxpayers. I'll say whatever I have to say to keep the public's eye off the ball so they don't figure out for themselves that these millionaires are getting away with murder."

"Surely, you must have taken a firm stand on some issues, my son?"

"Absolutely, father. Those are the issues we politicians call "no brainers", meaning you don't need a brain to vote for tougher laws against child molesters, or for American independence from foreign-produced energy, or for a couple of hundred other issues that have nothing to do with the goals of your fellow politicians or the lives of your constituents back home.

"Well, my son, there doesn't seem to be much that I can do for you, other than grant forgiveness for your sins."

"That may be true or not, father. But tell me—only because I'm curious—are you a registered voter...?"

