Simple Voting, Not Voting, and Anti-Democracy

Alex McNamara

The midterms, those uproarious contests ostensibly so important that they earned the honorary title of "elections to end all elections," are behind us. The blue wave has crashed down upon the crimson bastion of power, and, depending on whom you ask, either irreparable damage or far too little justice has been done. Surely, any minute now, the inundating political cycles will recede, allowing America to at last soothe her temples, catch her breath, and prepare for the holidays. Well, one can hope.

In the meantime, I draw your attention to single-issue voting. Animosity toward single-issue voting is both familiar and manifold in its sources. At its most basic, it may take the form of an assertion; something like: "That's dogmatic. It ignores the nuances of issue(s) X, Y, Z, the recent development in the news of W, and the candidate's other, reprehensible position on U." I'd be tempted to respond: "Politics is, by its nature, dogmatic. The nuances of such issues, while legitimate, are subordinate to the single most important issue to me, and that we vote for policy, never for candidates." But that response would also be mere assertion, and it ignores the deeper definitional problem.

At the heart of the matter, it remains painfully unclear what counts as an issue. If I vote for a Republican Senate solely based on my views of jurisprudence and the proper sphere of judicial power, that seems to be one issue outright. But suppose that my friend votes for a Democratic House only because of environmental policy, which wraps in its arms a slew of reforms targeted at businesses, various federal departments, and international diplomacy. Is that still a single issue? One can inflate or whittle down policy as much as possible, and I don't think a clean number ever pops up.

But suppose that it did; suppose that we suddenly knew exactly what one unit of an issue looked like and that we could parse out all policy into such units. Problems persist. Susy the voter has done her research and has drawn out 100 distinct issue-units into an admirable and cogent collection of policy. Each candidate can be measured by their compliance with these units, and while Candidate A scores a 27, Candidate B scores a 52 and thus earns her vote. Bob the voter, on the other hand, has done little research but has good reason to believe that Candidate B is a virulent anti-Semite. Bob accordingly votes for Candidate A. Who was correct? Does the differential of 25 units by Susy preclude the legitimacy of Bob's vote? Even if the definitional problem is bracketed, it remains entirely unclear how to adjudicate between types of policy. This pedantic example corroborates the familiar tug of war between social and economic policy for moral pre-eminence.

I think that the experiment above highlights the implication of opposition to single issue voting. It is safe to assume that most Americans recognize that "issue" is a slippery, if not entirely vacuous, concept. It is safer still to assume that the average American is not and should not be expected to become an expert on policy in order to vote. Beyond logistical hurdles, that is presumably why we have a representative government in the first place. Thus what is really being said in critiques of single-issue voting is that the single-issue voter has missed the mark. That is, the single-issue voter is allegedly missing what's important; it is not a matter of scope but a matter of adjudication. "Single-issue voter" is actually a deft shorthand for "wrong-issue voter." Of course, it's much easier to suggest that someone is oversimplifying things rather than argue that what they believe is important is unimportant, and that what you believe is important is important. But that's the whole point! Politics defined as conflict can only be resolved—or, for the pragmatist, clarified—when the relative importance of various issues is bluntly asserted and then debated. The preemptive censure of the single-issue voter circumvents the intense debate democratic government is meant to foster. So too do other election-time trademarks.

Observe the "get out the vote" movements. There are two plausible explanations for the omnipresent behest to vote. The first will appeal to those as cynical as myself. That is, when someone says "Did you vote? You should!" it can be easily translated to "Did you vote as I did? You should!" For this reason, many of the activists who encouraged me to vote would have done otherwise had they known that, given the various buttons on their backpacks and stickers on their shirts, my act of public service at their request would actually negate their vote. This familiar irony never loses its charm; imagine how a salesman would

react if he learned that a successful pitch had reduced rather than increased his commission.

It may be protested at this juncture that such pessimism ignores the legitimate and estimable conviction that voting is a civic duty, and that rather than pigeon hole get-out-and-vote promoters, I should give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that their interests are civic rather than partisan. But I'm afraid such noble intentions raise yet another difficult string of questions. First among them, what of not voting at all? Is it not reasonable to argue that, given the complexity of national politics, one feels as though he is not informed enough to cast a meaningful ballot one direction or the other? This sounds more like humility than apathy. Or what of the Kantian framework that prevents an ends-justify-the-means attitude that is dominant among the political climate, which today endorses voters "holding their noses" at the expense of principled candidates? Again, this seems to be as much of a legitimate value judgement as

the imperative to participate. Or what, dare I say, of the oft straw-manned libertarian who cries out at the top of her lungs, in a room with three people and two microphones, that voting is violence? It seems that these positions, while incorrect in my own view, are not so incorrect as to be dismissed out of hand with the simple "You have an absolute obligation to" defense. Upon closer examination, that defense by itself is about as satisfying as the parental "because I told you so."

It seems that opposition to single-issue voting and the pressure to vote both rely on contestable premises. They sneak in their back doors a view of the political process which is far from universal. By hampering debate with assertions that such truths are self-evident, they are anti-democratic in the worst sense. Opposition to single-issue voting is anti-democratic in that it tells its neighbor how to vote, or at the very least how to go about voting. Such opposition undermines the deference and respect that each citizen is given by enfranchisement. The pressure to vote is, albeit in a more limited sense, anti-democratic when it demands surrender from the increasingly plausible desire to abstain from the process altogether, which is an implicit gift freely given by our voluntary political processes.

What I love about politics, and what prompted this letter, is the gulf between principle and practice. Everyone can solemnly bob his or her head to declarations of popular sovereignty, limited government, and all those other principles which every civics class under this or yesterday's sun has covered. But in practice, voting shows its warts.

It shows that some people are horribly uninformed about the candidates and policies at stake, that some vote down-ballot without ever reading the names, that the vote of your professor counts only as much as mine does—which should make everybody shudder—and that, perhaps most devastatingly for the typical college student, just how little your vote matters. I love politics because no other discipline shatters the idealism of the armchair quite as quickly.

I have argued that various protests over single-issue voting, political abstinence, and even booth packing popular movements have an anti-democratic undergirding. Anti-democratic procedures which kill debate before it can begin are obviously undesirable. But that is quite different from the normative position that, given all the warts of voting, democracy may need some sort of moderation, or even eradication. Indeed, debate about whether America is at her best as a democratic republic or a republican democracy is much more than pointy-hatted academics bickering atop ivory towers. This sort of debate moves from the knocking down of paper tigers found in this writing to legitimate and deeply challenging questions about the desirable character of our government.

In sharp contrast, "exercise your right to vote!" and "don't be a single-issue voter" aren't compelling arguments; they aren't really arguments at all. They are platitudes. Democracy, love it or hate it, deserves better.

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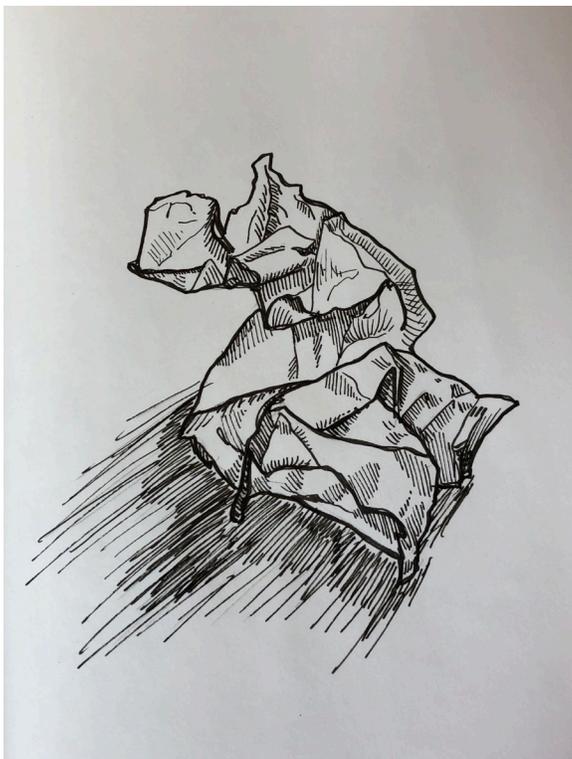
1. I'd imagine—and even hope—that some of you disagree with me. If you do, and you think that single-issue voting is painfully reductionist, political abstinence slothful, and/or anti-democratic leanings outright treasonous, then email a response to me at (mcnamaraa@smu.edu).

Understanding

Sarah Venables

She had just closed the door to her office when her phone rang . Seeing it was her daughter, she set down her purse, picked up the receiver, and said with a smile, "Hey! How's school been?"

"Good! I just got out of stats....How was the extra shift? That was this morning, right?"

The woman laughed warily. "Well..."

The crisp autumn morning was draped with a lattice of gauzy clouds dyed sunrise hues of rose pink, blood orange, and brilliant gold when the woman parked her car at the crumbling cement lot behind the St. Thomas Day School. With the sharp wind nipping at her face, she pulled her coat closed with a shiver while she waited for the car to lock with its signature beep-beep! Entering through the backdoor on her way to the front office, she passed through halls lined with students' colorful handiwork of projects over the likes of George Washington and stick-figure sketches of smiley-faced families. The heavyset woman with the steel-gray perm and teal bifocals was already sitting behind the desk, nursing what appeared to be her fifth cup of coffee as she read emails on a hulking monitor from 2009.

Glancing up at the light rap the woman tapped at the entryway, the administrator set down her travel mug and smiled. "Good morning, Officer. It's a mighty cold morning today, isn't it!"

The woman laughed. "That it is. Who knows, it might actually snow this winter!"

"Now wouldn't the kids get a trip out of that! You know the parents would pitch a fit about having to drive through it, though. No one here seems to know what a snow tire is!"

"They sure would," she agreed. "Well, I guess the kids will start getting here any minute now. Have a nice day!"

"You too!"

With that the officer re-emerged into the morning chill and took her post at the crosswalk in front of the school.

This was how her mornings—and recently, her afternoons—had gone for weeks. All she had to do was make sure the students and their parents entered and exited the school safely—a valid concern for the school considering a recent uptick in shootings. It was a simple job to supplement her work at the police department, and as the first students began trickling into the school with some parents nodding a tired 'hello,' she thought this morning wouldn't be any different.

It was when the morning rush was starting to pick up that she began to sense that something was off. Instead of the usual amicable smiles, waves, and nods, parents stared at her with a stifling air of contempt. Some would pick up their pace and rush headlong through the doors, their children tripping behind them. Then one young mother, a woman with stormy blue eyes and curls that sprung with each punctuated stamp of her heeled boots, approached the woman, dragging her groggy three-year-old son behind her.

"What have you been telling our children?" the mother hissed.

The officer's face twisted in confusion. "I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

"Why are you teaching my son about police officers and guns? Every day I pick him up all he talks about is guns!"

"Ma'am, I'm not sure if I understand—"

"Don't talk to my child about guns!" The mother then continued her aggressive march toward the school, her son stumbling to keep up. The officer, though a bit frustrated, wrote her off as a rude, disgruntled mother and carried on.

The rest of her shift was comparatively uneventful, until the principal walked out to greet her on her way back to the front office.

One look at his expression—a mix of concern and regret—told her all she needed to know, but she still followed him into his office at his request. After they both stepped into the room, he turned and said plainly, "We have to let you go."

"Okay, okay. Let me get this straight. They fired you because the parents think you're giving shooting lessons in the thirty seconds it takes to pass by you on the way to class?" The woman's daughter shrieked into the phone. "How could they fire you for something you didn't do?"

"I know, honey, but there's nothing I can really do about it. People are going to think what they want."

Although she knew it was due in part to the sentiments expressed to her by the angry young mother, the woman still asked in masked aggravation, "Why?"

The Headmaster—as was the title expressed on the plastic placard sitting on his cluttered mahogany desk—sighed and flopped into his overstuffed desk chair. "Look, we appreciate the work you've done, but several parents have been expressing concerns about having a police officer on school grounds. They think it is corrupting their children. I really can't afford to have parents coming at me with torches and pitchforks right now, so it's in our best interests to simply terminate the position."

"I just can't believe it. They would rather blame a police officer who's trying to protect their children than put two-and-two together and realize that listening to the latest mass shooting report on the news is what's really driving their curiosity. Seriously." A pause. "I can apply for a job on campus to help—"

"I already told you it was fine. Your dad and I can pay tuition; we just have to stick to a budget. Everything's fine, okay? Just focus on school right now."

"...Okay."

The Headmaster looked at her. "Surely you understand?"

She nodded tersely. "Of course."

How to Be a Successful Instagram Model

Destiny Rose Murphy

Everyone hates on Instagram models now. Social media is under attack, and so people like us, people who use social media platforms to create and profit off of our personal brands, are also under attack. So, if you want to stay relevant, you need to go on the attack, too. Luckily for you, I've cracked the code, and I'm here to tell you how to harness social media hate to increase your social media presence tenfold.

Here's what you need to do: start a second Instagram page with a related website. Make the title of this one something catchy and related to social media – mine is #HalfTheStory. The details can be vague, but the point of your new page needs to be calling attention to how bad social media is, via social media. Make sure the aesthetic on this page is perfect. Pretty much all the pictures on it should be flawlessly staged and in accordance with whatever color scheme you've got going. Now you may think such a page would be contradictory (calling attention to the false perfectionism of social media while maintaining that high level of visual perfectionism) but don't worry; no one will notice.

Link to this new page on your current personal social media platforms. Do NOT change the way you present yourself on your personal pages visually, but do change your captions slightly. A common mistake here is to post those icky photos where you aren't fashionably dressed and posing enough, which people think will show off your humanity. Don't make that mistake. No one likes ugly people.

Ensure that your photos remain well-constructed and designed to highlight your best features, but change the captions to include social media and mental health buzzwords. I personally like to use the brain emoji and to make references to taking "me time."

The last step, and this is admittedly the hardest one, is to build your secondary brand by giving talks and encouraging others to do outreach for you wherever you don't want to give talks. Don't worry, though; you can cut a lot of corners here. When giving these talks you can lean on audience participation and sweeping generalizations about connectivity and human nature. You will, of course, want to put a few statistics in there, but you don't need to work too hard for these. In my last talk at SMU I only cited one of the statistics I gave, and I actually quoted that statistic incorrectly to make it suit my argument better. I just said the rest of the numbers I talked were from "research" or "studies," and people loved it. Just make sure to make your audience feel good. I personally tell people during my talks, "If you are on social media and someone makes you feel bad, whether or not they're trying to, unfollow them." That'll make your listeners happy and probably shield them from Influencers that aren't you, which will increase their reliance on you. It's a perfect cycle.

The best part about these talks is they'll pay you! Instead of putting money towards their own very underfunded counseling services, which would actually help students, they'll pay you money to stand in front of a room of about 40 students and tell them not to use social media, unless of course they're interacting with your social media. You can use a minuscule amount of the money they give you to make stickers for their students, which will make them feel like they got a little return on investment, even though the true opportunity cost of bringing you to their campus will be thousands of students who could have gotten access to real help via better training for existing health professionals or the promotion of correct and useful information regarding the effects of social media on mental health.

After just a few years of this grind you'll have an outstanding following, which you can use to promote your sponsors to get more money. I personally promote a candle company, several fashion brands, and a "non-alcoholic apoptogenic social alternative" on my Insta, and my engagement is really fantastic.

So, there you go, loyal fans. The secret to becoming a successful Instagram model is to pretend you aren't one, and to criticize the very platforms that you use to promote your message. Sure, you'll be bleeding all-too-critical resources from the mental health programs of any school you visit, but what's important is that you have a hashtag, right?

Kicked out the Window

Nick Whitaker

Despite Nick's choice to continue his studies at Brown University, he has stayed connected with SMU and Hilltopics through discourse and writing.

There is an incredibly important but too-little-discussed topic in political science called the Overton Window. Jonathan Overton theorized that the socially acceptable positions on a given issue are fewer than the possible positions. If a position is acceptable, it is within the window, and those unacceptable are considered outside.

Why do feminists keep becoming enraged every time someone says they are not a feminist? The mission of many feminists has become to move any position that is not feminism outside the Overton Window. This isn't nearly as conspiratorial as it sounds. Like all of us, most feminists are overconfident in their beliefs. They probably think there are no reasonable reasons someone would not choose to identify as a feminist. Those who don't identify as feminists are bigots and, as such, have no place in national discourse. I want to emphasize that we all are

victim to our own overconfidence in our beliefs and should consciously fight the tendency to believe our opinions with absolute certainty. Not all of us, though, try to push ideas that we are confident are wrong out the Window. For feminists, this begins by giving feminism an incredibly charitable definition: the belief in the equality of genders. But with any political or social label, it is never as simple as a definition. Like liberal, conservative, progressive, and really any broad political label, individual members of the label have incredibly

disparate ideas of what it means to be part of said group, or rather tribe. Really, all it means to be a conservative is to identify and associate with other conservatives. The same is true for feminism. The label signifies membership.

What if membership begins to mean being tied down to dozens of positions you would never endorse? I am comfortable identifying as a conservative as it is an incredibly broad term, and when sentences start with "a real conservative believes," I am more often than not in agreement. I also respect and agree with many of the great conservative thinkers: historically and currently. When someone isn't a conservative, I don't react by saying, "What? You aren't a conservative? A conservative is just someone who values the Constitution!" Instead, I accept that their values aren't in line with my ideology.

Now consider a movement like libertarianism. I respect and agree with many of the great libertarian thinkers, but also vehemently disagree with many of them. Enough so that even if someone came up to me and said, "What? You aren't a libertarian? A libertarian is just someone who believes in Freedom!" I wouldn't feel compelled to suddenly adopt the term.

Now consider feminism. I do accept the work of many feminists as incredibly important, but I disagree with the vast majority of ideas espoused by major feminist outlets and thinkers today. Thus, I don't consider myself a feminist. When someone comes up to me and says, "How can you not be a feminist? A feminist is just someone who believes in gender equality!" it leaves me unconvinced. But what if non-membership is pushed out the window?

They say you have to be a feminist if you believe in gender equality, and all of a sudden you are associated with, if not explicitly held to, positions you do not hold and frustrated because you didn't even want to be a part of all of this in the first place.

The existence of the Overton Window probably isn't a bad thing. There are select issues that society has overcome any reasonable debate on, like universal suffrage and the abolition of slavery. It's not that we need to avoid these issues because they are offensive, but because they are essentially solved issues. We don't debate the correctness of the Pythagorean Theorem in every Geometry class. We might prove it to remember why we know it's true, and if someone suddenly has a credible explanation of why every proof is wrong, we may re-engage in the debate; notwithstanding that, there is no reason for the issue to be constantly debated. If we lived in a world with unrestrained time and resources, it might make sense to constantly rehash issues, but in our world of trade-offs, this is a waste of time.

IF YOUR FEMINISM ISN'T...
FAT POSITIVE · ANTI RACIST · TRANS INCLUSIVE
PRO CHOICE · CHALLENGING ABLISM · OR AGAINST CLASSISM
SPARE change?
THEN WHO'S IT EVEN FOR?
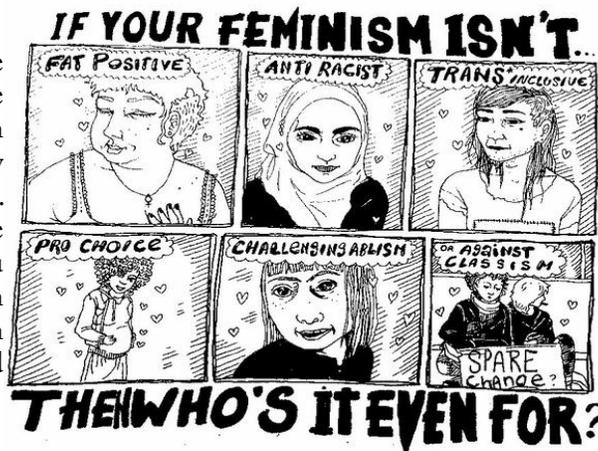
We do need to beware though. While there are issues that are sensibly kept outside, some groups try to systematically push reasonable positions outside the Overton Window, stopping potentially informative debates.

Larry Summers knows this too well. When Summers publicly mentioned the possibility of a reasonable position endorsed by many scientists and economists alike—that neurological differences could possibly partially explain the gender gap in STEM careers—he felt how cold it is outside the Overton Window.

I'm not going to take a position on the specific issue, but it is surely fair

to say the scientific community has not conclusively ruled on this debate. But because of the efforts of some to taboo the discussion of possible neurological differences, public figures cannot publicly discuss them without fear for their job. This is a misuse of the Overton Window.

We see attempts to shove perfectly reasonable positions out the Overton Window often. For example, after an ISIS associated terrorist attack, any suggestion that Islam could be even a partial motivator is tabooed. On social media, people are quick to proclaim that it is inconceivable that terrorism could be connected to any religion, especially Islam. And this stands true even if the perpetrators emphasize that their religion motivated their actions. These proclamations in themselves should at least make us consider the possibility. It is becoming taboo to even say that the Islamic State is connected to Islam when there is a reasonable case to say that it is.

The Overton Window should not be used as a political weapon. It should not be a tool we use to avoid tough arguments. The Overton Window is a tool to avoid wasting time on easy arguments, so we have the time and energy to have the hard, pressing debates. Used incorrectly, the Window is detrimental to our national discourse. We lose exposure to potentially interesting and persuasive ideas. We build off possibly false presumptions. In some ways, the Rise of Trump is the story of part of the country prematurely pushing beliefs out the Window that large groups of people still hold. By not finishing the national debate on these issues first, we leave them to be embraced by an opportunistic politician. Then American media is surprised when debates over racism and xenophobia resurface.

So, when you ask me whether or not I'm a feminist, one reason I will be saying no is to fight to keep non-association safely inside the Overton Window.

The Scapular

LORIEN MELNICK

When I was growing up, my mama used to sneak out of bed in the middle of the night to go to church. The church was closed at night, but Mama would sit in our old Honda minivan and pray where she felt close to her Lord and Savior. She said Jesus didn't close just because it was nighttime. Once, when I was seven, she took me with her, and it felt like an adventure, being alive so late, seeing the world painted in indigos and blacks in between the yellow street lights. I sat on my hands, holding my breath as if Jesus himself might come walking across the parking lot, while Mama crossed herself over and over. She made the sign of the cross in front of me, too, and said, "I know what your sins will be, Rebecca."

Of course, when I was a child, I thought my mama knew everything and so I didn't think much of it, but now that I am wandering around a gas station convenience store at four a.m. in an old sorority t-shirt, I say to myself, I understand. My sins are the same as my mama's. My sins are the dull thrumming behind my eyes and the muttered gibberish I repeat like a lullaby, trying to soothe myself to sleep. My sins are the endless nights I spend with a wide-awake mind inside a heavy body, trudging through the nearly empty streets in the sunken world of sleeplessness.

I pause in front of the lottery tickets, contemplating. Gambling, Mama always said, is the pagan form of prayer. I know I will not scratch off the lottery ticket, but I want to go through the checkout line. The 80s music comes grooving through the speakers, and I pick a lottery ticket with a redheaded man on the front and head to the checkout. A handsome older man with blue eyes and a curly gray beard smiles at me, and he is missing his two front teeth and wearing a nametag that reads Antione and he is my regular.

"Well, how you doin'?" says Antione, with the same tone of surprise he had when I first came here two months ago, dressed like an overgrown college girl buying random small things to keep herself occupied. "If it isn't my night owl."

"Hi," I say, smiling back and fiddling with the string of the scapular around my neck. Mama always said that if you're not wearing your scapular when you die, you'll go straight to hell. "Just this." I slide the lottery ticket onto the counter.

"Nothin' in your pockets?"

I smile again. "Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow." Tomorrow is Wednesday, Antione's day off. I don't come here on Wednesdays. Without the comfort of Antione's checkered shirt, his ever-present Sudoku book, and his slightly-too-high voice, the gas station convenience store feels like the rest of the world during the middle of the night: open and scary. A world for a different kind of people.

Antione scans the lottery ticket, glancing at my hands and then peering up at me under twitching gray eyebrows. "No ring yet?"

It's a joke. I can tell from his crow's-feet, his dimpled smile. "I'm too young," I tell him.

"You crazy people," says Antione, shaking his head, still grinning. "What's this 'too young'? There was no 'too young' when I was a boy."

I smile again, ducking my head. I see my bitten-down fingernails resting on the counter and slide my hand away, reaching into my purse for my card. A different kind of world, for a different kind of people. Sleeplessness is a sin I inherited from my mama, but she is dead now, gone to her heaven because she died with her scapular on. She always said nobody sleeps in heaven. They don't have time.

"Maybe tomorrow," I say again, as if this is possible, as if I could come here tomorrow and show Antione an engagement ring when Antione won't even be here tomorrow. I hand him my credit card, the one with a picture of my dog on it, a normal exchange in a surreal world. Perhaps this is heaven, I think, and I almost cross myself.

Beach Life-In-Death

DREW SNEED

Last year a woman got a text from her ex-boyfriend that read: "I love you too babe. Oh sorry wrong number." All in one message. The text went viral because the woman, and everyone else, realized that the ex-boyfriend must have noticed his "mistake" before he sent the text. In a world with a backspace key it makes no sense for someone to correct themselves using more English.

Car Seat Headrest's song "Beach Life-In-Death" almost falls down this same pit when frontman Will Toledo uses contradiction to capture the tempestuousness inherent in youth and heartbreak. In the same manner as in the viral text, Toledo contradicts himself throughout the song, often immediately.

For instance, Toledo muses: "[That song I wrote] … wasn't about you / But it could have been—well no, it couldn't have."

As listeners, we hear this line and wonder why Toledo didn't just throw the lyric out entirely when he realized that the song couldn't have been about that person. It seems strange that Toledo, just like the author of the viral text, uses more English to correct his mistake. And this is where it gets interesting: While the ex-boyfriend's contradiction comes across as completely ingenuine, Toledo's comes across as wholly genuine, and I'll explain why.

From the bong hit that opens the song to the skipping CD that ends it, Toledo takes his listeners through lyrical and musical highs and lows, seemingly constructed from many separate yet interconnected poems. The aforementioned tempestuousness runs like a current underneath it all. Listeners get their first hint of this current from the music itself. Those familiar with basic music theory know that the I-iii-IV-V chord progression is one of the most common in pop music (if you didn't know that before, you do now; if you don't care, please bear with me). "Beach Life-In-Death" follows this progression— almost. Toledo begins the song halfway through this progression; i.e.

"Beach Life-In-Death" has a IV-V-I-iii progression. Starting the song with the IV chord rather than the I chord creates an interesting effect: Upon hearing the opening C, those familiar with pop music, even those unconscious of the theory behind it, expect that the next chord will be one that would typically follow in the key of C; perhaps a G, an F, or an A minor. The D chord Toledo furiously strums instead is the first indication of the raw uncertainty that washes over the remainder of the song.

Adding to the song's tempestuous sound, Toledo recorded "Beach Life-In-Death" in about the most raw and unpolished way possible: at the age of 19, on his laptop, in his bedroom. And these seeming constraints hardly detract from the music. Steve Reich, widely held to be one of the greatest composers of all time, insists that it's not musicians' equipment that defines them; it's their musical creativity. This certainly holds true for the original 2011 recording of "Beach Life-In-Death," where the song's raw, unpolished soundscapes match the song's raw, unpolished lyrics, yet expanse and beauty shine through.

Beauty shines through lyrically because, as previously mentioned, we don't feel suspicious of Toledo when he pens raw, unpolished, and intentionally contradictory lyrics. We don't feel suspicious because he writes, not with ulterior motives, but to capture an aspect of humanity we all know well. "Beach Life-in-Death" reminds us that tempestuousness and contradictory feelings are the starter-pack for trudging through youth, teenage heartbreak, and more broadly, life. Older generations often complain that younger generations struggle socially because they've grown up with social media and texting as major means of communication. While I do wish I could dismiss this claim, I think there's a good deal of truth to it. For instance, my generation has increasingly made texting a large part of pursuing a romantic interest. Our main reason is simple: Texting is safe. Over text you can edit, calculate, and show an even more carefully selected version of yourself than you could ever do face to face or over the phone. Every reasonable possibility of, "But it could have been—well no, it couldn't have" is removed. And a large part of being human is removed with it.

Later in the song, a frustrated Toledo shouts: "I am incapable of being human! / I am incapable of being inhuman!" This seeming contradiction plays into the aforementioned dance of calculation and fraudulence, a dance exacerbated by texting and social media. As David Foster Wallace puts it, the dance of spending your whole life "try[ing] to create a certain impression of [yourself] in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired." Creating such an edited and calculated version of yourself in other people's minds feels so inhuman, yet giving it up seems so impossible. And although he says he feels incapable of being human, it seems that Toledo identifies being human as the nobler than being inhuman, and he pursues raw, unpolished humanity by riddling his song with human contradictions and uncertainties.

In 2018, Toledo released a remastered version of "Beach Life-In-Death." And although it may appear so, I'd argue that remastering the song is not as contradictory to its themes as it might seem. After all, Toledo didn't embark on a cover-up job à la George Lucas. Toledo didn't remaster the song to show a more polished and edited version of himself; he did it to more accurately express the feelings and thoughts behind the music through few and meticulous alterations, both production-wise and lyrically. The 2018 version of "Beach Life-In-Death" is just as human as its 2011 counterpart, the main difference being that it doesn't sound like it was recorded on a laptop.

There are many more praiseworthy aspects of this song that I don't have room to dive into. To name a few examples, the opening verse masterfully immerses the listener in space, time, and scenery. The drums remain interesting throughout, and the vocal delivery is often manic and always full of life. In truth, it's almost embarrassingly hard to begin to grasp all the meanings packed into "Beach Life-In-Death," a song, once again, written by a 19-year-old. After every session spent grasping at the song's lyrics and composition, trying to understand and explain every aspect of its greatness, it seems right to succumb to the song's power the same way Toledo succumbs to the greatness of a movie scene, singing: "And it was my favorite scene / I couldn't tell you what it means / But it meant something to me."

Although the song's audience expanded significantly following its 2018 remaster, and even though I maintain a strong distaste for calling art underrated, I'd argue that this song is severely underrated. Underrated because the remaster of "Beach Life-In-Death" has less than 2 million plays on Spotify, and it's truly one of 2018's top 10 songs. After scratching the surface in this article, I'll admit that I can't begin to tell you what "Beach Life-In-Death" means, but if you put on your headphones and let Will Toledo introduce you to his world for the next 13 and a half minutes, I'll wager that the song will mean something to you, too.

How Studying War Can Make You Better at What You Do

Corey Rogan

Facing challenging tasks is simply part of life. Each day produces its own set of troubles, and the long term usually promises even more. Sometimes, overcoming these challenges is easy; persistence, focus, and guts can carry the day. Most of the time, though, a challenging task can loom over one's mind until overwhelming stress consumes all hope of getting the job done.

To better understand why certain tasks can seem so daunting, consider this: perhaps a challenging task is simply one for which a person doesn't know what to do. An overwhelming job is simply one for which a person cannot develop a plan of action.

What separates a walk around the block from a mountain excursion? What separates a brief text message from a final semester essay? The answer is one of degree; while both activities are similar in nature, one requires much more planning and preparation than the other. This is the distinguishing characteristic between a routine duty and a challenging task. If a person does not have to think too hard, develop a plan, or prepare in advance, the task seems easy. If, on the other hand, the task does require such efforts, it can feel challenging, daunting, and even overwhelming. The responsibility thus seems like a big task…because it is one, indeed!

Fear not! Though trials are inevitable, and though tribulation is an integral part of life, successful leaders across history have developed an approach that shrinks these large tasks into simpler activities. To explore this approach, we must turn to what is perhaps the most challenging, most daunting, and most overwhelming task faced by human beings: war.

From the victories of Alexander the Great to the conquests of Napoleon, from the triumphs of Washington to the "old blood and guts" of Patton, a model for winning war has emerged from the epic conflicts of history. This model can be found in use amongst military historians and Pentagon planners alike. It is a generalized understanding of how wars are fought, and few voices today attempt to refute it. Simply put, the model just makes sense.

The model is as follows:

Mission -> Strategy ->

Operation <- Tactics

In common jargon, this model is called the "Four Levels of War." Every military action has a mission, a strategy, an operation, and a set of tactics used in order to triumph over the enemy. Notice how every arrow points toward the operation; the operation is the physical manifestation of the mission and the strategy, while tactics ensure that the operation continues smoothly.

Before continuing any further, it is necessary to define each element. Here is the author's interpretation of each aspect of the Four-Levels Model:

Mission: the manifestation of values into a measurable goal. Having a mission is usually straightforward, and it's often assigned. A mission needs to reflect the creator's values, or else it demands action taken for the wrong purposes. The mission must be measurable; otherwise the creator will never know if it has been accomplished.

Strategy: the resource-based fulfillment of all conditions necessary for the mission to be accomplished. The accomplishment of any mission requires certain conditions to be met. These conditions can only be fulfilled through accurate information, careful analysis, and effective resource-procurement.

For example, suppose a military strategist was tasked with rescuing hostages. In order to rescue the hostages, his troops would need to infiltrate the enemy facility with the appropriate tools to break open the prison cells—condition #1. Before that action could be taken, however, the enemy security system would need to be rendered ineffective—condition #2.

Condition #1 cannot be accomplished successfully without condition #2 first being fulfilled, and condition #1 requires the strategist to examine his resources to determine what tools could be used to break open the cells. Therefore, the strategy for this scenario would be to fulfill condition #2 before using, for example, an available hydraulic saw to fulfill condition #1.

Operation: the logistical manifestation of the strategy as a winning paradigm. The operation is the actual plan of action that brings the strategy to life. It is a physical, real-world devotion of time toward fulfilling the strategy's conditions, which in turn accomplishes the mission. The operation answers the question: WHO needs to be WHERE/WHEN, and WHAT do they need? In order for the

strategy's conditions to be successfully fulfilled, the operational planner must avoid situations in which the adversary would have a who, a where/when, or a what advantage, and instead emphasize his own strengths. This is the winning paradigm.

When George Washington bravely crossed the Delaware for the Battle of Trenton, he did not have a who advantage; his troops were vastly outnumbered by the Hessian force they faced. He did not have a what advantage, as the muskets with which his soldiers were equipped were no better than those of the Hessians. What he did have going for him, however, was his ability to exploit the where/when aspect of the engagement. Washington chose to initiate battle at the enemy's sleeping quarters—the where—as a surprise attack during Christmas—the when. This sneaky maneuver negated the Hessians' who advantage, as most of them were not prepared to fight, and it was at least equal in terms of the what, as both sides used the same weaponry. When Washington could not win a who engagement, he chose to initiate a where/when battle instead. He won.

Tactics: actions taken to maintain operational initiative. During the execution of any operation, things will go wrong; such is life. Unexpected obstacles will present a threat to the entire mission; such is the nature of contest. As the old saying goes, "no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy."

While the strategy and its resulting operation account for expected obstacles, a leader must be prepared to overcome unexpected ones. In order to do that, the team needs a "tool-box" of predetermined actions which can be taken to avoid losing control of unexpected situations; these actions are called tactics.

Initiative is defined as the ability of a team to act without being forced to react. When an unexpected obstacle disrupts the execution of an operation, the team is reacting, and it has lost initiative. The operation is thus endangered. In order to regain control of the situation – or preferably, to avoid losing control of a situation in the first place – a team must effectively utilize tactics.

Tactics can take many forms. They can be as simple and pre-emptive as having troops tape their dog-tags together to avoid making too much noise, or they can be as complex and reactionary as a well-choreographed "react to contact" drill performed by terrified soldiers under unexpected fire. Regardless, tactics are always drawn from a team's "tool-box" of premeditated actions designed to overcome unexpected situations.

The above descriptions of a mission, a strategy, an operation, and tactics might sound extremely complex, but they are actually quite straightforward when understood in context of the Four-Levels Model. To accomplish a mission, a leader needs a strategy that addresses all conditions required for the mission's accomplishment. That strategy is logistically manifested as an operation, which answers the question, "WHO needs to be WHERE/WHEN, and WHAT do they need?" while determining which of those logistical aspects is a strength or a weakness. Finally, a leader must be prepared to draw from a "tool-box" of tactics to maintain initiative – the freedom to act – despite unexpected obstacles.

But what does the Four-Levels Model have to do with everyday life? Isn't it designed for war?

As it turns out, the model has quite a bit to do with everyday life. The Four-Levels Model converts the horrifying implications of violent conflict— arguably the most challenging task faced by humans—into an organized endeavor. Accordingly, the model can also be used to convert overwhelming and stressful tasks into manageable steps.

When it's time to overcome that which is overwhelming, be it a daunting assignment or an emergency situation, remember to organize a plan of action. Develop a mission. Analyze information and resources to create a strategy. Carry out that strategy according to logistical advantages, and have tactics prepared to deal with unexpected obstacles along the way.

Master life's trials and tribulations like a general would master his enemy. Overcome insurmountable odds by knowing what to do. To carry on in this manner is to carry on as a knowledgeable leader; it is to continue on in the tradition of Washington, of Patton, and of many others. When life presents a battle, follow the model of victory. No earthly force will be able to stop you.

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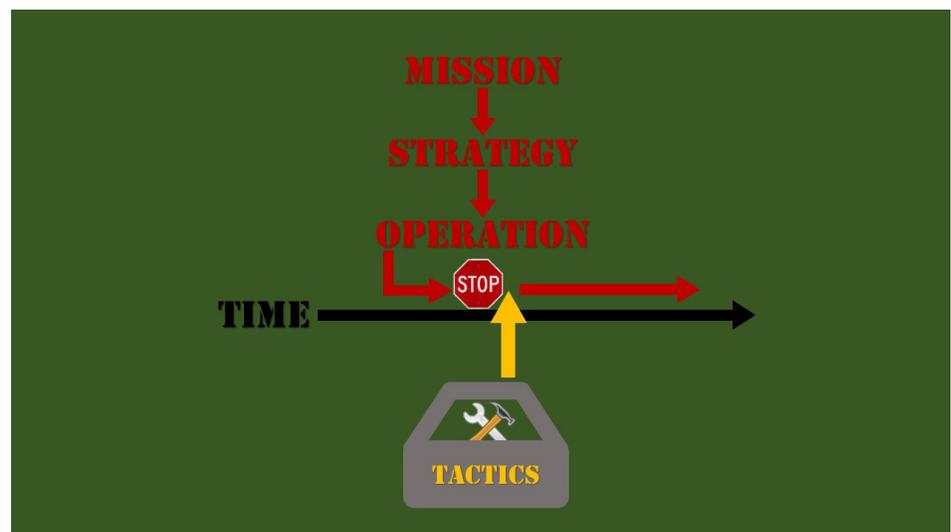
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