



Hitting Bottom with Al (Franken)

[New York, January 9, 2009]

Recovering addicts of drugs or alcohol would almost universally agree that their willingness to rise above their addiction did not occur until they hit bottom, an expression used to mean their arrival at the lowest point in a downward spiral of self-defeat. Admitting that we have hit bottom is cathartic, has the unique ability to be restorative, and may well serve as our last best opportunity to conquer what has been defeating us. To the addict in denial of his illness, reaching his particular bottom is largely avoided and/or delayed through illogically construed rationalizations arguing for his control over the situation, or why the problem is not with him but rather with all of his critics and detractors.

But when the bottom is finally reached (and accepted) it is an opportunity we must not ignore, a moment that cannot be dismissed for the outcome is all but certain should we allow inaction of both mind and body to prevail. The danger is that our bottom could also become a figurative top—the top of our own grave.

If our decline to this point has so far eluded us, we should thank Al Franken for (finally?) illuminating what most assuredly is the dark bottom of our long endured fall from meritorious political representation. We are not going to wait for the Minnesota recount debacle (for that's what it is) and subsequent court involvement to conclude before passing our judgment. The vote count controversy is not what has brought us to this particular nadir of our election process (although how we certify and count our ballots for positions of high office in a nation that pioneered nuclear fission and the internet must surely be on a to-do list for any incoming Congress.) And before the left side of the political spectrum raises arms against what they would incorrectly assume is a partisan attack, the words and sentiment used in this article would read exactly the same if Franken were Republican. Some of our favorite Presidents, Senators and Representatives have been Democrats, as is our favorite Mayor currently serving the city of New York (that is before he changed party affiliation—twice.)

No, we have reached the bottom of political representation—representation in a revered house of legislature in a nation whose government has been modeled across the globe in developing democracies—because Al Franken represents the punch line to the unfortunate joke that has become America's understanding of and respect for our representative government, its history, its intended design, and the learned men and women who have had the great privilege to walk the halls as elected participants. The great triumvirate of Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay; the integrity and leadership of Robert La Follette, George Norris, Robert Taft, Oliver Ellsworth, Thomas Hart Benton, and Arthur H. Vanderberg—there is a reason these figures are considered among the very best of our Senate history, and there is a reason all current and future Senators should aspire to such recognition when their own legislative record is reviewed by history. Are we to admit with a straight face that Al Franken deserves to call these individuals colleagues? What would the Famous Five of the Senate have said on the first day of their respective Senate terms if the local comic was sworn in alongside of them?

If comedian Al Franken wants to serve his country (if Minnesotans want to see Al Franken in elected office) with no legislative, policy, even management experience, he would find better parity with his occupational background at the local level, say State Senator or Comptroller. That is not to say Mr. Franken is not a professional or personable man, only—and we stress, only—that the United States Congress requires better, deserves better, should be better than what most of us have to offer. Otherwise, we should quickly alter our republic to a direct democracy and have



the entire population vote on every piece of legislation. Let's see how well we fare as a nation when we no longer presume that the greatest issues of our day are presided over by our most learned, esteemed, educated and worldly citizens—and instead by the general populace whose national math and science scores are no better than North Korea's.

A quick Wikipedia search yields the following breakdown of Congress's occupational background:

- 215 with a law background (180 holding *Juris Doctor* degrees)
- 180 come from private sector business
- 18 hold MBAs
- 10 were former Congressional pages
- 16 were former White House staff
- 24 come from the field of medicine
- 15 are former law enforcement
- 9 scientists

...and one comic.

While the members of the House of Representatives are, by design, more numerous than Senators, and represent a more finite population within their respective states, an additional screen or radio personality we do not need in either house of our bicameral system. Do we really want a professional comedian participating in the impeachment trial of a US President; or having the power to consent to treaties; or confirming Cabinet secretaries, federal judges and military officers? And what experience does Mr. Franken bring to the Senate? He was one of the original writers at Saturday Night Live where he admitted to using cocaine; starred in such films as *One More Saturday Night*, *Stuart Saves His Family* and *Al Franken: God Spoke* (yeah, we haven't heard of any of them either); wrote a New York Times bestseller titled *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations*; and since 2005 has been a contributing blogger at *The Huffington Post* (that point excited half of our own staff now that "blogging" has been deemed an acceptable qualification for Senatorial aspirations). A career comprised entirely of the utterance of liberal counterpoints to conservative ideals, of feuding with conservative radio and television personalities, of talking—nothing but talking (and acting)—has been accepted by 1.2 million Americans as being sufficient experience to serve as a United States Senator.

The US Senate was modeled after the ancient Roman Senate, its name coming from the Latin *senatus* meaning *council of elders*. Al Franken an elder of the United States, learned in government affairs and wise in his application of legislation as it pertains to States' representation? (The recovering alcoholic is right now saying, "That's exactly how I felt when I hit bottom.")

When did our decline to this bleak level begin? When did we take our first metaphorical hit of representative ineptitude, our first drink from the inebriating waters of political mediocrity? When did every two-bit Hollywood resident start to believe that their right to free expression as well as presence on television, the radio or the internet extends to the delusion that s/he could make an adept legislator? Like the teenagers who walk out of the theater at every martial arts movie believing that they too could perform the same artistry as the actor on screen, that by merely watching it somehow qualified them to do the same off screen, Americans must now see legislators appearing on television, commenting on legislation on the radio, and having their legislation quoted on the internet by millions of bloggers, and believe that because actors spend their own workday on television, radio talk show



hosts spend their own workday on the radio, and bloggers spend their day and night within the world wide web's blogosphere, that actual legislating must be an easy crossover? It would be akin to arguing Tom Cruise's role as an SS Officer in Bryan Singer's *Valkyrie* qualifies him to plot the assassination of Germany's Chancellor Merkel; or more specifically, that Martin Sheen is qualified to be President of the United States because he played one on television for the equivalent length of two presidential administrations. What a failed state we are in when the adults of our society start playing adolescent in their failure to discern the differences between television and reality. Our future Secretary of State, former NY Senator, and First Lady Hillary Clinton correctly asserted that the Office of the President does not lend itself to on the job training. Her assertion would have been equally as prescient if applied to the positions of US Senator or US Representative (or Vice President, *read* Sarah Palin's nomination.)

It is said that in a democracy the people get the government they deserve. The reality is that people get the government they elect—no more and no less. When the New York Giants take the field against the Philadelphia Eagles in a playoff matchup this Sunday afternoon it will be first string quarterback Eli Manning who America will see run each and every offensive play, not a backup quarterback. A Super Bowl ring will be at stake, the Giants want to defend their championship, and the Eagles are a formidable opponent. And so only the very best will see action, only the most seasoned, tested players are elected to play. Are the issues facing our government less important than a football playoff game? Is the outcome of the performance of the people's branch of government less enduring than a win or loss by the Giants Sunday afternoon? Giants fans, football fans, the Giants offensive line all deserve to have Eli Manning—the very best of the Giants if not the NFC—in the position of quarterback. The stakes are too high to not see him in the game. Our government, the American people, our future generations all deserve to have the very best in our positions of representative government. The stakes are too high to have anyone less. When we fail to elect to government the individuals we need, we get a government we don't want. While the Giants may of course lose on Sunday—for their competition is fierce—their fans do not doubt that Eli Manning will offer them his very best. They harbor no doubts of this because of the skills Mr. Manning brings to his position. Mr. Franken may prove to be an able legislator. But don't the American people deserve to have him prove that in a less nationally consequential position? After all, Eli Manning is in his current position only because of his proven worth over several years and settings of trials and challenges. Is not the efficacy of our government representation worthy of the same confidence?

What we do having reached this bottom is entirely of our choosing. Anything less than admitting we have reached a bottom and require immediate help, and we may fare just as the addict does who ignores arrival at his own bottom—he ultimately expires.