

ABOUT THE BOOK AND THE COVER

Democracy and the Common Wealth: Breaking the Stranglehold of the Special Interests, exposes the dirty secrets about our electoral system, and the policies that we have to endure as a result of corruption and poor representation. Part I explains how Americans can break the stranglehold of the special interests and create a more representative democracy.

Part II is a step-by-step guide to the kind of equitable and rational policies we should expect following electoral reform. Even though it was written in relation to my 2010 run for Florida Governor, the issues are universal. Additional subjects and more fully expanded arguments can be found in a forthcoming work, *The Labors of Hercules: Modern Solutions to 12 Herculean Problems*. Much of this book is derived from those two volumes, and from my quest to help bring the greatest good to the greatest number, in the most efficient manner, to this and future generations.

Strangler fig trees comprise several species of “strangling trees” that grow all over the tropical world, including in south Florida. These trees are often found smothering the stone ruins of ancient failed civilizations. A strangler fig seed is typically excreted or dropped by a bird high up on a building or in a host tree. The tree begins as an epiphyte, living off air and water. Its roots drop down the trunk of the host until it finds solid ground, while the branches reach skyward. Often the host tree dies and rots away entirely, leaving an empty core. Palms fare better as a host, and are sometimes able to outgrow the strangling trees, so I have represented them as a symbol of hope.

The strangler fig tree is a metaphor for what has happened to our government. A bald eagle innocently defecates on our governmental institution. Because the watchdogs have not been attentive, they do not notice when a parasitical tree emerges from the foul stew and drops its first small tendrils down to the ground. Instead, they lap up the sweet tempting figs (i.e., money, influence and power) on the ground and begin looking for more. A few of the figs fall into crevices so new trees take root. Before long, the seductive strangler fig trees have insinuated themselves throughout the structure.

The government and the special interests form a symbiosis

so complete it appears the strangling special interests are holding everything together. This is where we are today, and it seems normal because it has gone on for so long. Maintaining the status quo will allow the parasites to continue to dig in while we are preoccupied with picking up whatever leftover fruit the guardians have not gotten first. Removing the stranglehold of the special interests will require decisive but careful restoration work, so as not to bring down the whole structure. *Democracy and the Common Wealth* is about this restorative process, and how to get the leaders we need in order to rebuild the institutions, and have the policies we deserve.

PRAISE FOR MICHAEL E. ARTH

AMERICA'S PROBLEM SOLVER

There likely would not be a United States without Tom Paine. There is a new Paine among us, and his message is one of reform, not revolution.... The time has come for a more perfect union.

—Columnist William C. Hall, *The West Volusia Beacon*

Arth's a visionary. His dedicated efforts...represents a triumph of will over adversity.

—Daytona Beach News-Journal

Michael and I worked together for nearly two years making a documentary about him, *New Urban Cowboy*. He's the real deal. Big time dreamer, fun and well-informed ideas, always up for a debate, pragmatism learned the hard way, and just enough pluck to pull it off. Vote for him.

—Filmmaker Blake Wiers, who edited the award-winning documentary

Any of you who are in the know when it comes to New Urbanism have probably already heard of the New Urban Cowboy, aka Michael E. Arth. He's the mind behind New Pedestrianism, a more extreme form of New Urbanism in which pedestrian lanes instead of streets are the main connectors, with garages and car lanes relegated to the backs of buildings. Arth is also an idealist, a visionary, and an insanely hard worker—he's one of the (too few) idealists/visionaries that have the practical know-how and gumption to see their dream through to the end, to its absolute completion.... I'd advise anyone who is overly skeptical of solutions to the problems facing our civilization to see his movie, and to pay close attention. For that matter, anyone who is overly skeptical of our capacity to work together, create positive, major change, and to fulfill our dreams, ought to take a long look at what Michael Arth has done. You just might be inspired.

—I'On Group review of the documentary, *New Urban Cowboy*.

Michael E. Arth is a hero for the people....A true, modern-day David against the Goliath....

—Sydney Solis, author

ALSO BY MICHAEL E. ARTH

BOOKS

Michael E. Arth: Introspective 1972-1983 (1983)

The Labors of Hercules: Modern Solutions to 12 Herculean Problems
(forthcoming)

FEATURE DOCUMENTARIES

New Urban Cowboy: Toward a New Pedestrianism (2008)

With Blake Wiers, editor

Gov' nuh (forthcoming)

Visit www.michaelarth.com
and www.goldenapplesmedia.com
for more information

DEMOCRACY

and the

COMMON WEALTH

BREAKING THE STRANGLEHOLD OF THE SPECIAL INTERESTS



GOLDEN APPLES MEDIA

Copyright © 2010 by Michael E. Arth. All rights reserved.
Published by Golden Apples Media Inc.

First published as a Golden Apples Media paperback in 2010. No part of this publication, except for those illustrations in the public domain, may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, contact the publisher through the email address at the web site, with “Attention: Permissions Coordinator” in your subject line. Book Design and illustrations are by the author, except where noted in the Index to Illustrations.

Limit of Liability / Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, and any related media, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book, or related media, and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. There are no warranties that extend beyond the descriptions contained in this paragraph. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not apply or be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. The accuracy and completeness of the information provided herein and the opinions stated herein are not guaranteed or warranted to produce any particular results, and the advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for every individual. You should consult a professional where appropriate and always do your own research. Neither the publisher nor the author shall be liable for any loss or loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Ordering Information: Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, including orders by U.S. trade bookstores and wholesalers contact the publisher, Golden Apples Media Inc. at www.goldenapplesmedia.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

This paperback edition: ISBN 978-0-912467-12-2 - FIRST EDITION

Electronic book edition: ISBN 978-0-912467-11-5

Trade cloth edition (forthcoming): ISBN 978-0-912467-13-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrightable materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

For my daughter, Sophia Evelyn Arth, and her generation. They will some day learn that well-known figures like Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Teddy Roosevelt; and lesser-known figures like Edward Bellamy, Smedley D. Butler and Doris “Granny D” Haddock, built a foundation upon which her father, and many others, can rebuild our democracy in order to enhance the common wealth.

CONTENTS

Introduction by Paul Lachelier	10
--------------------------------	----

PART I – RESTORING DEMOCRACY

1. The Goal of Politics	12
2. Gov’nuh	16
3. The Undemocratic Party	29
4. The Mommy Party and the Daddy Party	42
5. America’s Move to the Right	49
6. Blind Faith: “America: Love it or Leave It”	57
7. Reaching Voters	66
8. Institutionalized Corruption	72
9. Take Money Out of Politics	76
10. Democracy is Something We Do	87
11. Walkin’ Lawton	93
12. Biking Mike	97
13. Count the Votes	98
14. The Two Parties Are Like the NFL	106
15. Replace Winner-Take-All	108
16. Proposed Voting Rights Amendment	118

PART II – RESTORING THE COMMON WEALTH

17. My Hometown: A Microcosm of America	120
18. Equality	140
19. Monetary Reform	149
20. State Owned Banks	171
21. Foxes in the Henhouse	175
22. Tax the Rich and the Dead	183
23. Black Box Trading	197
24. Bottom Feeder	206
25. Prohibition Failed!	214

26. Gun Crazy	280
27. War is Still a Racket	289
28. The Big Lie	300
29. The Graveyard of Empires	308
30. Saddam Was Our S.O.B.	320
31. America Should be Israel's <i>Shabbos Goy</i>	322
32. A Regular Joe Blows His Stack	326
33. Let's Talk Trash	336
34. Global Warming	342
35. Overpopulation	352
36. Self-Driving Cars	363
37. Virtual Reality	342
38. New Pedestrianism	352
39. Growth Management	385
40. Less Meat = Less Heat	386
41. Energy in the Sunshine State	390
42. Health is Wealth	399
43. Homelessness	408
44. Idealism in Action	425
45. The Future	429
Acknowledgements	440
Illustrations	441
Notes	446
Index	469
Postscript	481

INTRODUCTION

Michael E. Arth for Governor

By Paul Lachelier

I imagine most people feel downright giddy at some point in their lives upon meeting someone exciting. Often, these are romantic encounters. Sometimes, it happens upon meeting a rock star, famous athlete, politician, or other celebrity. Rarely though do people seem to get downright giddy about someone they do not have a crush on, or admire as a celebrity. One of those rare moments happened to me recently, and now it has implications for Florida's future.

In April 2009, I was invited to co-facilitate a discussion at Stetson University following the viewing of a documentary film about a maverick urban designer and policy analyst. As a political sociologist with only an amateur interest in development and design, I knew next to nothing about the man going into this event. The documentary revealed how he transformed a dilapidated, crime-ridden neighborhood of DeLand, Florida known as "Cracktown" into what is now called the "Garden District," a beautiful place with trees, walkways, white picket fences, clean, brightly colored homes, and a charming courtyard with a fountain at its center. For those who do not know of whom I speak allow me to introduce you to Michael E. Arth.

Some argue that one must "pay one's dues" to become a viable candidate for higher office. Aspiring politicians should patiently, over years, work their way up the political ladder, commonly starting with school, city or county office. The trouble is that this prescription does not apply to the rich. From Ronald Reagan to Ross Perot to Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mitt Romney, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and current New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine, the list of rich people who have launched political careers without "paying their dues" is long. The grim reality is that nowadays winning high office is less about paying one's dues in the political trenches than having the support of a lot of rich and powerful people, and outspending your opponents.

Sadly, our media deepen this problem not only because candidates pay dearly for newspaper and TV ads, but also because news organizations have the self-fulfilling tendency to fetishize the richest or most famous while they ignore or minimize candidates without deep pockets. The result is often a stale choice between two establishment candidates, and an accordingly narrow political discourse that dulls debate and impoverishes our political imaginations. Yet just as the economy benefits from energetic innovators, so too does our democracy. This is why individuals like Michael E. Arth matter to Florida's future.

I talked with Michael for about half an hour after that event at Stetson back in April. What energized me then, and in subsequent interactions with him, is his remarkable combination of vision and pragmatism, intelligence and clarity, energy and focus, passion and caring. Michael has designed communities, built homes and neighborhoods with his own hands, confronted drug dealers and reduced crime, navigated government to get things done, and developed innovative and cost-efficient solutions to homelessness, poverty and pollution.

In a state so rich in sun, yet still so poor in solar energy, in a state so rich in commercial development, yet so poor in walkable communities, an urban planner with bright ideas and practical experience transforming crack towns into beautiful neighborhoods may be just what we need for governor of Florida. If an actor can become president, surely an urban planner and policy analyst with Michael E. Arth's broad experience can become governor. The question is: will we, as Florida's voters, give ourselves the chance?

Paul Lachelier, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of sociology at Stetson University in DeLand, FL. He can be reached at placheli@stetson.edu.

PART I – RESTORING DEMOCRACY

1 - The Goal of Politics

Politics is often said to be the struggle over who gets what, where and how. Many people are repelled by politics as it is played out on the governmental level, while still being deeply involved in everyday political decisions that govern their personal life. Politics can be a dirty business, both on a personal and societal level, but nothing could be more important. Politics affects everything in our lives—from the air we breathe, the food we eat, the shelter over our heads, and how we get along. A guiding principle to politics is rarely articulated, but it can be reduced to a simple formula: The goal of politics should be to bring the greatest good, to the greatest number, in the most efficient manner possible, to this and future generations.

Unfortunately, in this noble endeavor, our lawmakers have failed us in every way. Florida, like the rest of the country, is on a dead-end road. Our lawmakers are afraid to talk about the things that truly determine our quality of life. Our debt-based monetary system, with its inherent boom and bust cycles, helps the economic elite drain off the profits, while socializing the costs. Compared to the rest of the world, we pay more than twice as much for health care, yet we are far behind in coverage, quality of care, and life expectancy. Part of the reason that two-thirds of Americans are overweight is that they eat unhealthy food and live in sprawled-out cities that are hostile to pedestrians.

Our environment is polluted and, even though we Floridians live on a sun-drenched peninsula, in a delicate balance with nature, many of our leaders still want to drill off our beaches and spoil our waters. Cloudy, rainy, northerly Germany has the highest solar production in the world, while the Sunshine State's energy and water policies are based on the results of relentless corporate lobbying.

Our prisons were recently growing faster than any other state, but

our streets are still not safe for kids—or anyone else. Richard Nixon launched the War on Drugs as a cynical campaign ploy, and it is still with us a trillion dollars and forty years later. Drug prohibition has decimated the inner cities and created widespread contempt for the law that has loosened our social fabric and launched gang warfare in the streets. The drug war has increased irresponsible parenting, which is having horrific consequences on schools and society. The least responsible parents are having the most children, and everyone is paying the price.

According to the United Nations, the U.S., once considered the best place in the world to live, has dropped to thirteenth place. We are in eighteenth place in both quality of governance and perceived corruption among the world's countries.¹ In freedom of the press, we tie Slovenia at 24th place; and we rank thirty-seventh in health care, just after Slovenia.²

Much of this fall from grace can be blamed on the continuing transfer of wealth to the financial elite. Not since the Roaring Twenties, immediately preceding the Great Depression, have we seen such inequality. In this new Gilded Age, with its modern “robber barons” in charge of public policy, the U.S. is now in 91st place in income equality, just behind Mexico. At the same time, total U.S. debt (as a percentage of GDP) is far higher than at any time in history.³ Official unemployment among the lowest ten percent is almost ten times higher than among the richest ten percent (30.8% vs. 3.4%), and millions face the prospect of years without a job.⁴ In economic growth, we are 151st and we are 108th in employment.⁵ In the U.S. in 2007, the top 20% had 93% of all non-home financial wealth; the top 10% had 83%; and the richest 1% had 42.7% of the wealth.⁶ Because of the effect on our lives these figures represent, belief that our country is heading in the right direction is at an all time low.⁷

Because of greed, corruption and incompetence, polls show our trust in public and private institutions has also never been lower, and nearly all now operate under a veil of suspicion. Only about 29% of Americans believe that the news media gets its facts straight, and just 18% think it deals fairly with all sides.⁸ Whether it is the secretive, immensely wealthy Catholic Church that has harbored pedophiles within its hierarchy, or money-grubbing evangelicals and their wayward

preachers, the churches are losing respect. A 2008 Gallup poll showed only 12% of Americans now trust Congress to do its job.⁹ This is not surprising when we realize that only about 12% of eligible voters are now being represented.¹⁰

While this transfer of the common wealth has been going on, America has remained number one in the defense and war-making business, which, while not quite as lucrative as the financial sector, is even more destructive and lethal. On the Global Peace Index, the U.S. was 83rd in 2009. With less than five percent of the world's population, we spend half of the world's defense budget, and our citizens are armed to the teeth out of fear for their personal safety. We have also become the world's number one jailer, with a new prison opening every week.¹¹ The "land of the free, home of the brave," has the highest incarceration rate in the world—12 to 13 times higher than the Scandinavian countries, which not coincidentally also happen to be the world's most equitable countries. The United States also has the world's largest foreign debt, thanks to its military spending and poor economic decisions.¹²

These figures should outrage Americans, but Floridians even more so. This is because Florida is 45th among the states in income growth, 47th in gross state product growth, and 45th in high school graduation rate.¹³ It is dead last in per capita education spending, and it got an "F" in an Education Week ranking of student readiness for college. We will need to implement state and federal reforms, covering a vast range of issues, in order to advance. Nothing less than a fundamental restructuring of our democracy will suffice.

The problems begin with our corrupt electoral system, which is based on the pay-to-play and winner-take-all schemes. One party wins, and then the other, but nothing really changes. The persistence of the status quo, despite Barack Obama winning the presidential election in 2008 with his promise of change, has demonstrated, yet again, the power of the special interests. To begin fixing our problems, we have to stop pretending we do not see them. Leaders in the future, if they are to be effective, should no longer be able to pick and choose among the less controversial issues like fashion accessories.

At present, our money supply and the debt-based fractional reserve

system are controlled by and for private interests. Interest-bearing securities, issued by the U.S. Treasury, increase the national debt at the rate of \$3 million a minute. One promising solution is to end the fractional reserve system and have the government take over the Federal Reserve. The Treasury could then spend money into existence on productive, non-inflationary, job-creating expenditures like infrastructure, energy, transportation, health, and other goods and services that promote the general welfare. This would eliminate bank runs, because banks would have to have a full reserve on demand deposits and they could not lend out about ten times more than they have, as they do now. The power to create money, without paying interest to the bankers, would then be under democratic, governmental control, as is our constitutional right.

In matters great and small, we have to find the best solutions, based on both honesty and maximum efficiency, in order to bring peace and sustainable bounty. Policies can change, but it will require systemic, institutional reform, driven by individuals who fully grasp what is at stake and who are willing to take the steps needed to fix it. No matter how bad the status quo, those who are gaining some benefit will stand in the way of reform. As H.L. Mencken once observed, "Never argue with a man whose job depends on not being convinced."

It will take many people with courage to question their role in society and ask themselves whether what they are doing serves the public interest over the special interest. Ordinary people, who will accept the short-term sacrifices necessary for change, can make a difference. It is our responsibility to learn about the problems and how we can become those individuals who bring solutions. Making these changes would utterly transform our state, our nation, and our world.

2 – Gov’nuh



Fig. 2.1. On the campaign trail in Kissimmee, on July 4, 2009, with family and volunteers Skyler Mann and Andrew Manning. Photo by volunteer Brian Hadden.

In addition to my work as a home and urban designer, builder, community activist and artist, I have also toiled for the last 16 years as a policy analyst. My goal was always to understand how to make things better in the simplest and most appealing way possible. I always believed that if I could understand what good governance was, then anyone could. Unfortunately, the more I learned about the American political system and the shortcomings of our governing policies, the more agitated and frustrated I became. I learned that people do not always act in their own best interest, and they rarely have the patience to find out what to do. I also discovered that voting is a rigged, money-driven system, skillfully manipulated by special interests. As a concerned citizen with a useless vote I realized I would have to use leverage and get involved. Unfortunately, becoming a so-called “public servant” really meant becoming a puppet in a system that actively works to preserve inefficiency and inequality. Sitting on the sidelines and complaining

was even worse, so I decided to find out what could be done.

In May 2009, after months of speculation, I read the news that Florida's incumbent governor, Charlie Crist, would not seek a second term. Instead he would campaign for the Senate seat of the vacating Mel Martinez, thus leaving the gubernatorial race wide open. Maybe I could help, I thought, even if it was only to expand the public debate. In these troubled times, more people are looking for answers. Even though I do not have all the answers, I know more than enough to challenge the candidates who are content to work a corrupt system. I knew what I had to do. I walked across the street from my office to our home and approached my wife, Maya, with the news. "I've decided to run for Governor of Florida," I said.

With a cocked eyebrow, her look told me immediately she was taking me much less seriously than I was taking myself. Maya is Bulgarian, and she has an instinctive Eastern European cynicism about Big Ideas. Trying to lighten the mood I said, in my best Cockney accent, "Just call me gov'nuh."

She laughed even more sardonically than usual. "Did you know that in Bulgarian the word *govno* means 'shit'? They are going to cut you up and eat you. Then you really will end up as *govno*, if you get what I mean."

I knew what she meant all right, and I also knew that I would have to turn the bullshit of politics into compost. I said to my lovely bride of ten years, "Even if I lose, we all win because important ideas will get out there and be discussed."

Tears came to her eyes. "Yeah right. You can forget the ideas. What is going to get discussed is every dirty little thing you or I, or anyone connected with us ever said or did, whether true or not."

"I can't live my life in a quiet corner not speaking out about what I feel is right," I said. "It's my moral and ethical duty to fight the good fight, even if politics stinks. The system obviously needs to be changed. Only those willing to take risks can help do that."

I imagined myself as Jimmy Stewart's Mr. Smith in the film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. "There's no place out there for graft or greed or lies, or compromise with human liberties."

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Maya said, not convinced at all. Over and over she ran through all the reasons I should not run: The housing bubble, which had deflated the year before and rendered our assets worthless, will be replaced with a bubble of public scrutiny. I will probably not be taken seriously because I am not already famous, rich, or well connected. On the other hand, if the important issues do catch on, I will become the target of malicious attacks in order to discredit the ideas by association. The whole process will be embarrassing and I will learn why most decent people avoid getting mixed up in politics. In the end, both me—and my quaint notions about democracy and the common wealth—will be stomped into *govno* dust.

After a few days of her pleading, interspersed with more tears, Maya saw that I was determined. Just like when we moved from an idyllic Spanish villa in the mountains above Santa Barbara to a decrepit slum in DeLand, Florida, she reluctantly decided to take a chance and go along with it. What finally convinced her was her conviction that I would lose, and our lives might get back to normal after the primary.

My next job was to tell her father, who had left Bulgaria because of corruption and economic ruin caused by poor governance.

“Are you crazy?” Vladimir said in his thick Bulgarian accent. He explained that to run for elected office in his country simply means you are applying for a job in the mafia. I told him that it is not quite that bad in our country—at least not yet.

However, after entering the race and seeing how things work from the inside, I see that Vladimir was at least partly right. To that point, a professor friend of mine recently asked me if I was worried about being “taken out.” It was not the first time someone had brought up the subject of assassination. I gave him my standard answer, “They kill presidents, not governors, or candidates for governor.” He said that governors, or other candidates, are not a threat to the power brokers and they do not say the kinds of things I am saying.

One of my renters told me, “I think that after Obama got into office, a group of the guys who are really in charge sat him down and told him how it’s gonna be or *else*. That’s why we aren’t seeing all that much change.”

I also spoke with Barb Shepherd, the editor of *The West Volusia Beacon*, my hometown newspaper. Off the record, I told her I was about to announce my run for Governor. She was dumbfounded, but finally sputtered, “Do you have backers? How can you possibly win?”

“The Internet will help,” I suggested hopefully, and then set out to find out if it was true. My web designer and I worked for several weeks, getting the campaign web site just right. On the first draft of the website my campaign slogan was “The status quo has got to go.”

I made the mistake of telling some fellow Democrats about it, and a few days later I read in the paper that my Democratic opponent’s supporters were chanting it at her rally. The next day Alex Sink put this up on her website as one of *her* campaign slogans. Whether it was coincidental or intentional, it was an act that was annoying, ironic, hypocritical and even Orwellian, all at the same time. If it was intentional, a charter member of the status quo was co-opting my own slogan in an apparent attempt to neutralize me before I could use it myself.



Fig. 2.2. My earlier website banner with the slogan “The status quo has got to go.”

We saw this tactic at work on a national scale in the 2008 presidential election. McCain and Palin, spirited but dedicated servants of the plutocracy, painted themselves as mavericks when they saw that people were fed up with business-as-usual. Obama had won the election with his promise of progressive change, but he began to lose support when people saw that the change was less than audacious. I remembered how hopeful people had been when Carter was elected in 1976, and Clinton was elected in 1992, and how disappointed many of us felt later. There

is already another big letdown occurring because the systemic conditions that bring out the worst in politicians are not being addressed. American voters were ready for change, but their leaders are still bound up in the old ways of doing things.

It now appears that Obama is not willing, or able, to dig into what is causing the country to be led astray. Politicians who give great speeches that hide a lack of conviction are rewarded in our system. Those who show some spine either do not make it into office, or they get filleted soon after they enter the halls of power. I wish President Obama would prove himself different in this regard and get on the right side of history. There is still time. Instead of being the lesser of two evils, and looking good only by comparison to his predecessor, he could be great. He has got that silky baritone, but we are still waiting to hear if he can stand and deliver on the solutions we all long to hear. I have been advised to be a stealthy, insurgent candidate, and wait until I am elected before talking about controversial issues. How many sincere people have been told this only to give up or turn into slippery fish? Is this what happened to Obama?

More recently I have seen this process in action up close. After spending some time trying to find out what my Democratic opponent's positions on the issues were, I finally asked one of her staffers to explain where Alex Sink stood on something, *anything*. This was three years into her job as chief financial officer of the state, and six months after she announced that she wanted to be Florida's next governor. He said that she and the staff were talking to various groups to formulate policies. "Listening to the people" is necessary, but usually it is a cynical cover for gently testing the political waters to find out what people want to hear. Because of fear that an unguarded thought will sink her, Sink's slick, corporate campaign can only produce the most carefully vetted and tested statements. A few months after I tried to find out where she stood, there was a column by Mike Thomas in the Orlando Sentinel titled, "Sink is sunk if she keeps dodging issues." Thomas wrote about a Miami Herald video titled, "Alex Sink ducking and dodging."

In it, a reporter begins by asking about her state-paid health-

insurance policy. Sink didn't just duck the question. She sprinted off camera. It was like watching Road Runner: Beep-beep. Poof. Empty screen. In a later segment, reporters also asked her about the public option. Her lips sealed, her face grim, she walked off camera looking like my youngest daughter confronted with broccoli. Confronted with fight or flight, Sink skedaddles. What we have here is a candidate who hasn't mastered the art of sounding persuasive while saying nothing for 90 seconds. That's commendable for a bank president, which she was, but a big problem for a political candidate.

It is beside the point whether Sink, or anyone else, learns to rise to the top in a system already rigged against the public interest. Despite her surname, Sink is floating along with the help of the party, without having to give away anything, not even an opinion. Other politicians, such as the leading Republican candidate, do not even make a pretense of wanting equality and democracy. To many on the right, supporting the status quo gives away too much to the masses, and they would like to roll back the economic gains of the middle class even more. Among the Republicans, and many of the Democrats, *sincere* talk about really helping the middle class or giving the poor a fighting chance is viewed as political suicide in terms of fundraising. Candidates from either party do not have to be wise or forthright, they only have to count on the dwindling number of voters who still bother choosing between the lesser of two evils.

Politicians are merely following the rules of American politics. Our leaders are not rewarded for telling people what they need to hear, even if in doing this people would get more of what they really want. True leadership and wide-ranging public debate is out of the question in this tightly corralled environment, and that is why Sink, the current governor, or the Republican front-runner, Bill McCollum, will not debate me unless they are forced to. This is why I ended up debating cardboard cutouts of Florida's top three leaders at a Democratic Club meeting after they either refused to show or ignored the event altogether.

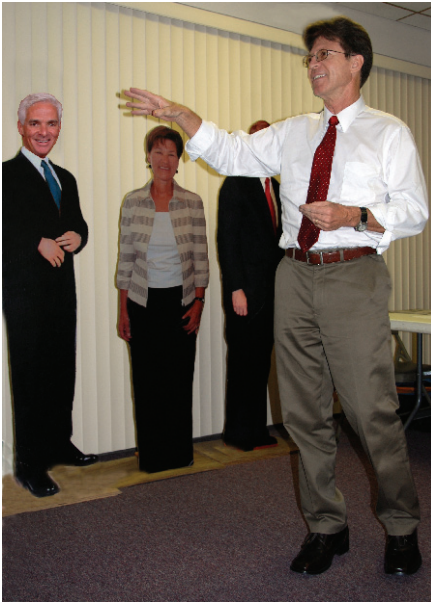


Fig. 2.3. Me “debating” with Florida’s top three leaders, who would not have been much more forthcoming than the cutouts if they had showed up. (Photo by Brian Hadden.)

It will be interesting to see what happens at *Decision 2010: Before You Vote*. These are the statewide, televised debates, which will take place before and after the August primary. Two independent, non-profit associations, the Florida Press Association and Leadership Florida, are sponsoring the de-

bates in the gubernatorial and senatorial races. The two parties will supposedly not be able to interfere. However, based on previous experience, I expect shenanigans. If I am not barred from the primary debates, the other candidates may be praying for a hurricane so they can declare a state emergency and cancel the whole show. Why? Because if I am allowed to debate, and they do show up, there will be a different kind of hurricane. Stay tuned.

This unwillingness to talk about the issues is a direct consequence of our political system, and it is an unspoken rule that you have to demonstrate your willingness to play along in order to become a viable candidate. I resolved to put the issues out first and not try to sneak my way into office with a campaign based on my personality, or the ability to give empty but inspiring speeches. During the early stages of the campaign I heard many of these formulaic speeches from candidates for the various open seats. The most successful politicians flatter the audience and get them to clap after every few sentences, while never bringing up anything controversial.

If you are losing, however, you can take risks, and this will increase

the chances of an upset due to unforeseen circumstances that might prick the public's interest. If there is an interesting debate in an election, it usually involves an underdog willing to step slightly outside the unspoken boundaries. In troubled times, people are also more willing to listen to alternative ideas. This is why telling the truth might actually work this time. Ideally, we could have reforms that would make our system receptive to full-time honesty and transparency.

In this book, as in life, I believe in putting myself out there without fear of new data that may force me to revise my assumptions. For this reason, my campaign website focuses heavily on the issues and calling them as the facts present themselves. Politics is about what is going to happen next, and new information will change the next forecast. To be effective, we have to think ahead, and be willing to admit mistakes. Before we get rid of the status quo, we also have to know what to replace it with, and not be afraid of trying out new ideas that may still need further tinkering in the future. This involves thinking and talking a lot about where we are going. With these issues in mind, my new slogans were "Bringing the Future to Florida," and "We want our democracy back!"

On June 3, 2009 I sent an email to Karen Thurman, the chair of the Florida Democratic Party, informing her of my candidacy and asking her what I should do next. The next day I sent out announcements to the press and to friends. There was no response from Thurman—even after the announcement—so I called up party headquarters. Staffers were busy at the moment, so it was almost by accident that communications director Eric Jotkoff picked up the phone. Jotkoff was quite put out that I would dare to run against their pre-selected choice, Alex Sink, in a race that still had 17 months to go.

He pulled my campaign website up on the screen and clicked through the pages. "You focus too much on the issues," he said finally. "Unfortunately, voters do not pay much attention to that. Only 45% of the voters even bother to follow the news....It's not about the issues. It's about the money."

He said that he spent a lot of time writing candidate position statements that no one seemed to care about. I was startled for a second

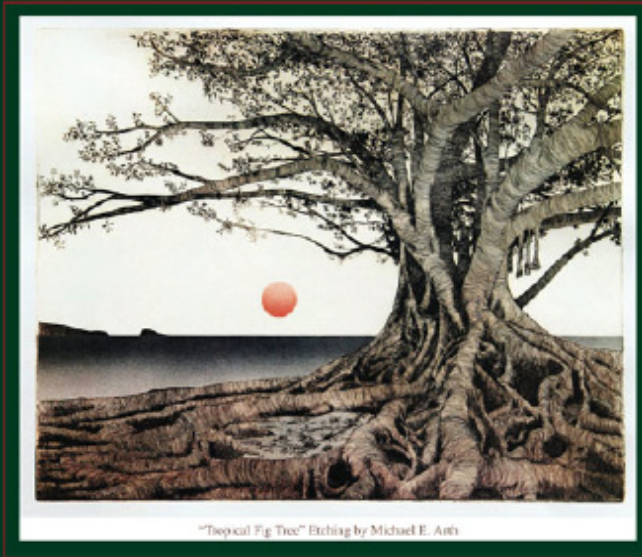


Fig. 2.4. Campaign poster with my etching of a well-behaved, non-strangling type of tropical fig tree.

when he said this, but then I realized all over again that it was the job of the communications director to tell the candidate what the public wants and to tell the public what it wants to hear.

Jotkoff also admitted that he did not work as a fundraiser because it would destroy whatever “shred of idealism” he had left. “Unless you

have \$3 million to start and spend \$1.3 million a week, you have no chance of winning,” he said. “Anyway, the media will not write a single word about you unless you have the money.”

The next day, despite my press release, there was no announcement in the paper. News trucks were not outside my office. Perhaps Jotkoff was right, I thought. Maya looked through every page of our local newspaper. “I can’t believe this,” she said. They’ll write about a lost cat but nothing about you running. Is a lost cat more important than the future of Florida?”

In frustration, I sent emails to several top Florida newspapers that recounted my conversation with Jotkoff, and asked:

Is it really true that your paper will not write a word about me, even if I am a viable and sincere Democratic candidate for governor, but I do not have \$3 million to spend on geegaws, posters, buttons, banners, mailers, flyers and other campaign litter? Is it really true that you would be loathe to tell the public about my campaign website at www.michaelearth.org, or report that I actually propose a wide range of practical solutions to the problems besetting our society?

A few more days went by. There was still no mention of my candidacy in the papers. I asked Barb Shepherd why her paper had not covered it. She said, “We have every intention of writing about your campaign. We were just in shock that you were running. When you first told me, I didn’t think you had a chance—and I still don’t. But times are changing because of the Internet and recession, and clearly our campaign financing system is flawed. Maybe this is the time to confront these and other issues.”

Money and verbal support began to trickle in—especially from progressives. To my surprise, most of the initial contributions were from conservatives who were also fed up with anti-democratic, autocratic, and irresponsible governance. A 30-year Republican committeewoman and former officeholder called to offer her support. Her endorsement soon followed. I also began to get encouragement from people across

the political spectrum who were dissatisfied with a two-party system that has put party and power above principles.

The Daytona Beach News-Journal was the first major Florida newspaper to take up the challenge over whether a viable candidate without major party backing could get any ink. They ran a front page, top-to-bottom article with four photographs that continued on page two. It had two headlines: “He turned ‘Cracktown’ into a gem. Now he wants to remake Florida,” and “Amid successes here, Arth sets sights on governor run.” Columnist Pamela Hasterok, wrote about my campaign in a piece called “Political underdogs might win in these difficult times.”



My two primary websites got almost 22,000 hits that day and it began to put people on notice that, despite being called an “underdog” and a “dark horse,” I had no intention of running a dog and pony show. A few days later a Mason-Dixon poll showed that I had 9% name recognition among Democrats in Florida, and that 45% of them would vote for me if the primary were held that day. The West Volusia Beacon followed with another front-page story, and the Orlando Sentinel wrote a major feature. A PBS affiliate had a half-hour interview with me they had filmed in 2008.

Fig. 2.5. The Daytona Beach News-Journal ran a front-page story which kick-started the campaign.

They ran it dozens of times throughout the campaign. The local Fox News affiliate did a two-minute news feature that ended with, “One final note: *Arth is running as a Democrat.*”

Fox ran it once before I was replaced with a news story where someone was bleeding, as opposed to thinking. While it was encouraging to get some “earned media,” everyone still seemed quite sure I had no chance against a party machine that continued to crank away. I was a mere annoyance or curiosity, jousting away while the blade of the machine could at any moment knock me off my high, dark horse. For the most part, however, Jotkoff was right about the media. Even though there were at least four Democrats running for governor, the Miami Herald/St. Petersburg Times reported, as late as November 2009, that Sink was running unopposed in the primary. This happened even after both newspapers had acknowledged receiving my large, spiral-bound press kits and I had been written about in their own blogs.

On July 25th I had a table at the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Florida Council 79 union convention in Orlando. This was an important campaign stop for Sink because she, the other Trustees, and the State Board of Administration had sorely mismanaged the state pension funds, and some of the news had trickled out. Union members needed reassurance that their pensions were safe. Sink was there to give the keynote address. I had never met her before, but I wanted to discuss with her how the party was behaving undemocratically, unethically—and possibly in violation of its own bylaws—by endorsing her and fundraising on her behalf before the primary. By this time, I had written and called party chair Karen Thurman several times, leaving messages regarding these issues. On the day before, I had even sent Thurman a certified letter, asking for fair treatment, or at least a return call.

I approached Sink and introduced myself. I gave her an envelope (which is visible in my pocket in the photo) and said to her, “This is my written pledge to run an open, honest, and ethical campaign. Can I expect the same pledge from you?”



Fig. 2.6. First meeting with Alex Sink, where I pledged to run an ethical campaign.

She stammered around a bit, but would not give me a straight answer. She finally gave a rather Clintonian response, “depends on what you mean by ethical.”

I had thought it was a simple question. “The reason I ask is because your fundraising ads are in violation of the Democratic Party bylaws.”

“What ads?” She said icily.

“The fund-raising ads that the Florida Democratic Party has been

running for you at their expense. They are in violation of the neutrality clause...”

She had heard enough, and she signaled her handler to shoo me away. I had foolishly thought she and I could have a conversation with her about these matters, but it became clear in that moment that neither Sink nor the party wanted a fair election. They also did not even want to have a discussion about what a fair election would constitute.

3 – The Undemocratic Party

We are moving toward an oligarchic society where a relatively small handful of the rich decide, with their money, who will run, who will win, and how they will govern. The defenders of the present system will fight hard to hold on to their privilege, and they write the rules. Nothing short of an aroused public can change things, nothing less than democracy is at stake.

—Bill Moyers from *Moyers on America: A Journalist and His Times*

On August 25, 2009, after three months of failing to get a response from the Democratic Party regarding my candidacy, and continuing to witness the party leadership’s blatant disregard of party neutrality before the primary, I filed an official grievance. It was roundly ignored, as had been my previous calls, letters, and faxes. The party leaders, doing the unwritten bidding of the oligarchs, had written the rules to exclude themselves from having to respect democracy. Through their silence, their allocation of funds and mailing lists, and their anointing of one of their own, they were doing whatever they could to shut me out. As Bill Moyers had suggested in his book, my only hope was to arouse the public. Here is the text of the grievance:

*Florida Democratic Party - Rules Committee and Judicial Council
Karen Thurman, Party Chair
214 South Bronough Street
Tallahassee, FL 32301*