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Observation

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ZACHARY MICHAEL JACK

# Politics and Pleasure at the Iowa Straw Poll

A Participant Observation

We arrive at the famous Iowa Straw Poll SPF and UV protected, slipping into one of the last few dozen spots in lot S3, the remote tarmac usually reserved for freshmen at Iowa State University who draw the short stick in the annual parking lottery. Pam—let’s call her, to protect the innocent—my saintly friend and erstwhile University of Iowa political science major, has agreed to accompany me. Together we disembark on foot, heading in the general direction of a school bus painted red, white, and blue parked near the south edge of the Hilton Coliseum, the rendezvous point for most of the chartered coaches the candidates have commissioned to chariot their most ardent supporters to the polls.

The mammoth Chevy turns out to be the star spangled *Constitution Coach* driven here and parked by a home-school family of nine, the Keables, who have created their own URL for the occasion. They’ve merrily painted “Google Us!” on the driver’s side panel, just below the retractable octagonal stop sign requisite of any true school bus, though in this case the caution reads not simply *Stop*, but *Stop the IRS!* Additionally, the Keable clan has window-painted *Vote Ron Paul, Straw Poll* and, on the side panel, splashed Paul’s conservative credentials, beginning with “pro-home school” and “prolife” and ending with “No Amnesty” and “No NAFTA.”

Ron Paul is clearly today’s bus meister, his chartered coaches outnumbering the competition’s by far, among them Tim Pawlenty’s caravan, which for a mere schlep to cast one’s lot in today’s nonbinding vote required a signed pledge of support for the sponsoring candidate and a

photo ID. Not surprisingly, the freedom-loving Paul bused here just about anyone with the necessary state-issued ID and mischief in their eyes. Marcus Bachmann, on the other hand, used the bus stop as a public relations opp, reminding supporters as they stepped down onto the sizzling pavement that he had “married the right woman” and they were “voting for the right person.” As of 6:50 a.m. Politico had couched the day’s Bachmann vs. Pawlenty subplot as a grudge match: “It’s his organization . . . complete with the . . . innovation of shuttle buses . . . versus her energy, and neither will rest until the other is destroyed.”

The Ultimate Fighter-styled rhetoric of Politico and its ilk seems calculated to light fires under the young and politically apathetic—those that have already prejudged the straw poll as either hokey anachronism or big yawn—picnic populism for the white, old, male, relatively well-to-do, socially conservative evangelicals who political scientists claim attend such things. Two rural Iowans in their thirties, one of whose incomes falls below the poverty line, Pam and I are clearly not the sort political pundits would expect to take a weekend out of their busy lives to ensure they are spoken to—not at, or around, or through—in order to decide who will earn our vote come caucus night.

The notion of the Midwest as a sort of strategic reserve for the kind of artful and active citizenship seen as depleted elsewhere in the country is not, as wonks are wont to assume, a merely subjective or folkloric notion. My native Hawkeye State, for instance, in addition to being America’s first presidential proving ground for two generations running, perennially ranks in the top ten in citizenship. In fact, congressionally funded statistics substantiate the deeply held American belief in the Midwest as a kind of living laboratory for civility and political engagement. Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, and South Dakota dominate the top five spots in rates of volunteerism, while humble Minnesota, South Dakota, and North Dakota often occupy the top three spots nationally in percentage of voter turnout. Midwesterners rule the Census roost, too, with regional cities like Livonia, Michigan (eighty-eight percent return rate), Rochester, Minnesota (eighty-three percent), and Madison, Wisconsin (eighty-two percent), besting cosmopolitan New York City by a country mile where participation rates are concerned. The depth of this disparity prompted even National Public Radio to chastise the Big Apple in a dig headlined “New York’s Hipsters Too Cool for the Census.” Participation rates in the city itself at the time of Scott Simon’s interview hovered around fifty percent, with hipster neigh-

borhoods like Williamsburg in Brooklyn doing well to crack thirty percent. By contrast, Story County, Iowa, the site of today's nonbinding ballot and the kind of place viewed by many New Yorkers as far too provincial to be entrusted with the critical task of anointing a presidential frontrunner, registered a whopping eighty-three percent participation rate in 2000 and eighty-two percent in 2010.

Our very willingness to comply has lent my home region a concurrent reputation for niceness that makes us congenial places for campaign trial balloons and the sometimes green or foolish politicians who float them. Here, we nurturing citizens are characteristically willing to listen to you, feed you, and even bandage your bruised egos if you'll let us. Caucus states tend to be populated by older, more rural denizens, making us chock full of sweet, doting grandmothers with a soft spot for the strapping young men and winsome iron ladies who, from antiquity to John Edwards, have been pulling the wool over our eyes. But with the advent of the Internet and twenty-four hour news, coupled with the worst economy since the Great Depression, we, the proverbial lambs of the electoral process, are learning to conjure our inner wolves as circumstances dictate. In other words, just because we're willing to listen to you and to host you—feed and water you—doesn't mean we necessarily *believe* in you. If the Census Bureau calculated an Overall Tact Index, we would no doubt be the frontrunner, but we are also and emphatically a discerning people, accustomed to determining quality in everything from livestock to farm machinery to candidates for public office. Thus, Pam and I are quite happy to prove that when there's a political picnic on, you can count on an Iowan to show up early, with their appetite, ready to take the job of citizenry seriously, but not without a wry and, when necessary, rueful sense of humor.

Scarcely more than two hundred paces past the Keables' vehicle Pam and I are stopped and pumped for information by a reporter lurking at the stadium's front gate. *How far have we driven?* (Three hours.) *Why did we decide to make the trip?* (Growing up in Iowa, we'd always heard about the straw poll but sadly never participated.) Pam is rolling her eyes at me, a nonverbal reminder of my earlier pledge not to give into the temptation offered by what Newt Gingrich famously calls "the elite media." After her protestations become impossible to ignore, and after the guy with whom I've been chewing the fat has, well after the fact, identified himself as a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, I'm in the curious position of having to deliver unto him news of my stoical and solemn vow for the day to remain untouched

and unquoted by overzealous out of state media. He's aggrieved, visibly piqued, that I've not willingly complied with his urgent professional need for me to play, for expediency's sake, Token Iowa Voter. I figure I should be the one with the chip on my shoulder, having been waylaid before I'd so much as entered the gates of this political preseason Shangri-La—a pleasure, incidentally, for which I've paid \$30—by some left coast scribbler who figured it was okay to show up for work at one of the nation's most iconic political events wearing blue jeans. It was he, after all, who'd gone out of his way to cull me from the herd.

As its name implies, the Coliseum where today's nonbinding ballot will be held lends itself to the sort of political intrigue Romans made famous, the maximal potential for political drama here due in no small part to the utter absence of a map of the afternoon's proceedings or so much as a formal schedule of events. Alas, the straw poll is, true to its GOP roots, a *laissez faire* affair secure in the notion that its constituents will, via their God given sense and up-from-the-bootstraps pluck, sniff out the most promising political truffles, and, if all else fails, at least manage to graze the stadium campus on a full stomach.

*What is a Straw Poll?* qualifies as a bona fide FAQ even here in the civilly endowed Midwest, providing further evidence that the goodness of old school retail politics is increasingly dismissed in an age of social media. Such ignorance might be better framed as a question of political literacy, actually, as it's not so much that Gen X and Gen Y can't fathom what a straw poll is, but rather that, in an age of SurveyMonkey and Facebook, Vine and Instagram, many can't fathom how such a frankly old fashioned and fraught political free for all would be useful in the first place. The state Republican party has attempted to head off that very question, posting in advance of this weekend's festivities the following nutshell explanation: "Started in 1979 and held in the early fall the year before the caucus in contested presidential cycles, the Straw Poll serves as a first indicator of the strength of a candidate's organization and message. Though the Straw Poll results have no official or legal effect, nearly a thousand media outlets are expected to attend."

*Robert's Rules of Order* is particularly dismissive of straw polls like the one we have driven six roundtrip hours to attend, calling them "meaningless and dilatory," and the pundit class has lately viewed them as a punching bag, too. In fact, the straw poll, whose name derives from the quaintly agrarian and admittedly grandfatherly notion that one could cast a bit of

straw to the prairie zephyrs to see in which direction the winds were blowing, is sufficiently populist as to be regarded as practically folkloric.

But while the instant gratification and perceived precision of phone surveys and robocalls has largely supplanted the homespun straw poll in terms of so-called scientific accuracy, any political scientist worth their salt will tell you that the sweetly anachronistic straw poll may be better at avoiding the de facto nonresponse bias caused by the many Americans who either don't own a landline phone anymore or who are simply too busy assiduously avoiding telemarketers to bother answering the civic bell. Straw polls, by contrast, are all about getting anyone and everyone under the same roof to register their unvarnished opinion, hence the Keable bus and all of today's complimentary transportation. And unlike self-serving phone opinion surveys, straw polls give back to a weary electorate in the form of food, drink, and fellowship. The many fringe benefits offered by today's electoral hootenanny may seem shamefully transparent to sophisticates, but, viewed in a more culturally sensitive light, they actually help make it a fair piece more equitable. After all, isn't it the hard-pressed and oft-neglected electorate, the relatively unmonied demos, who ought to be wined, dined, and occasionally feted for their long-suffering and loyal service, not the national press corps, political advisors, strategist wonks, and Super PAC donors with their hefty expense accounts and prebooked rooms at the Marriott.

Take the omniscient view of the roped off press area from high in the rafters of Hilton Coliseum and one reason for the pervasive, and often unfair, cynicism surrounding today's nonbinding ballot becomes obvious. The Andrea Mitchells of political journalism exempted, the vast majority of the middling scribblers sitting at the fold-out tables in the back of the stadium are Gen X and Gen Y, the very group which, to hear the cultural analysts tell it, learned its craft in a post-Watergate funk. In a now infamous headline from the 1990s the *Washington Post* went so far as to call my age cohort "cry babies." The *Atlantic Monthly*, in an equally famous cover story, observed, "The 1990s opened with a frenzy of negative stereotyping of the roughly 50 million Americans born 1965 to 1978; they were slackers, cynics, whiners, drifters, malcontents." As recently as 1972, the *Atlantic* claimed in their expose, nearly fifty percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-four voted; by 1996, only thirty-two percent of us even bothered, further fueling the sour grapes claim that I and my age cohort were more likely to have a "negative attitude toward America" and to place "little im-

portance on citizenship and national identity.” We were America’s first techie generation, detractors pointed out, and if we’d spent our formative years watching *Dukes of Hazzard* and playing Donkey Kong until we drooled, small wonder the supposed lack of a joystick—which is to say real, tangible agency in the process—made us resistant to retail politics: the stump speeches, soapboxes, town halls, meet and greets, coffee klatches, and candidate dinners that were our parents’ and grandparents’ electoral bread and butter. We had come to view the candidates themselves as a kind of caricatured fiction—Super Marios only much less fun: less amenable to our consummate control, our pull of the lever and push of the button. In fact, when surveyed in the early 2000s, over sixty percent of Generation Slacker agreed with the statement: “Politicians and political leaders have failed my generation,” a self-fulfilling prophecy, if ever there was one.

And yet for all the hype about the revitalized millennial vote for Barack Obama in 2008, postelection analysis revealed a big surprise—eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year-olds had actually made up the lowest percentage of voters of any age range surveyed. Meanwhile, my slacker generation cast their ballots by the tens of millions, outstripping millennials in percentage voting 52.1 to 44.5 percent. Indeed, a smorgasbord of post-2008 voting data was slowly beginning to set the record straight. My so-called “Lost Generation,” the numbers showed, volunteered at virtually identical rates to their Boomer elders and Echo Boomer juniors, and fairly often outvoted them. The busting of the Gen X apathy myth sent pollsters scrambling for explanations, including the president of the venerable Pew Research Center, Andrew Kohut, who threw up his arms and declared, “They’re at a stage in the life cycle where they get into citizenship and voting in ways they weren’t four or even eight years ago.”

But for all the goodness and virtue inherent in my generation’s belated about face, pressing questions remained regarding our political and civic modus operandi. “A generation of leaders,” avowed Lakshmi Chaudry of CBS News, “is at the right age and moment, with the skills and knowledge required to change the political landscape, plus the gift of historical hindsight. It’s an important moment, but its outcome is uncertain.” Between the lines, Chaudry’s analysis hinted at what I myself had come to believe. Maybe, just maybe, only one in five of my otherwise underrated generation, when surveyed, reported trusting their national government because they’d never really sought grassroots agency in the political process: the give and take of the ground campaign—the flesh pressings, the feet-to-

the-fire questioning, the look-them-in-the-eye candidate appraisals. Like our grandfathers' bib overalls, or our grandmothers' pearlescent Jackie O. dresses, our civic inheritance and electoral stylings had been there waiting for us all along, asking only that we stop and try them on.

Especially where the straw poll is concerned, it's all too easy for a young midwesterner to turn cynical, especially as the liberal press critiques of GOP fundraisers like these have become more scathing by the year. While many states' political parties host a straw poll to identify their early frontrunners and galvanize their base, Iowa's, as the most famous political picnic and hootenanny of them all, takes its unfair share of the heat. "Those who deplore Iowa's outsize (but zealously defended) role in presidential politics often point to the straw poll as a monstrous extension of the distortions and parochialism imposed on the rest of the country by Heartland Hegemonism," Democratic strategist Edward Kilgore claimed in a highbrow critique in *Salon*. "The event has lengthened the campaign season, made ethanol subsidies a crucial issue in Republican presidential politics, increased the already formidable power of the Christian right, and in general complicated the lives of candidates and their strategists, who are forced either to propitiate or defy the Corn Idol months before the first real votes are cast." Brian Montopoli of CBS News one-upped Kilgore's rant in an article uncharitably entitled "An absurd, candidate-killing spectacle returns," wherein he floated his own diatribe: "The Iowa Straw Poll is something of a fraudulent affair, an alleged test of candidate support in which votes are bought and Iowans are bribed to attend with free barbecue and entertainment."

True, there's enough bald faced bribery here to make the Chicago mob John Deere-green with envy, but mostly it's of the harmlessly folksy variety. This time around, in fact, the Bachmann camp has made a science of what might euphemistically be called *incentivization* in the form of glossy leaflets luring pollgoers with the promise of "an air conditioned tent," "free carnival games," "your favorite Iowa State Fair-style foods," "refreshing beverages," and, for those willing to go the distance and pledge their vote to her, an afternoon of good looking, twangy, country artists headlined by Randy Travis, concerning whom the fine print reads, "Neither this flyer nor the August 13 musical performance constitute an endorsement of any political candidate by Randy Travis." But the real coup de grace, for which folks have already been willing to wait in line forty-five minutes, is the Bachmann hot beef sundae, a novelty meat and potatoes dish made of mashed potatoes, beef, gravy and topped with a cherry tomato. Fellow Minnesotan

Tim Pawlenty, meanwhile, has plied his guests with Famous Dave's Texas beef brisket, Georgia chopped pork, beans, coleslaw, and—best of all—Dairy Queen Blizzards.

Still and all, as even the Muppets-in-the-Balcony commentators are likely to concede after they get a badly needed beer in them, the straw poll can be an effective measuring stick when viewed in its properly agrarian context, which joins the fine art of political judging and jurying to the down-home scrutiny attending a high stakes livestock show.

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Pam and I plunge into the chaos, following our noses, and in less than fifteen minutes, rendezvous to inventory our booty. Our haul includes an Iowa Energy Forum handheld fan (batteries included) and matching blue tote, a glossy bumper sticker from the Every Child Matters education fund, a plastic fetus from Iowa Right to Life, and, last but not least, a bound copy of the United States Constitution and Declaration of Independence with a foreword by a revolutionary named Ron Paul. But by far our best catch is a photo snapped gratis at the *Your Right. Your Vote. Your Decision.* tent showing me with my arms thrown around lifesize cutouts of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush—the Great Communicator, the Great Decider, and me, Cheshire-grinned with evidence of the complimentary Panera crumb cake still clinging sweetly to the edge of my lips.

As in most bewitching temples, the kitsch immediately inside the gates is mostly excitatory and/or gustatory, carefully planned to whet the appetites of the politically hungry in preparation for the real dish. Thus while earlier in the summer the average price of the state's farm ground hit an all time high of \$7,000 an acre, Ron Paul “won” the straw poll auction with a bid of \$31,000 for an approximately quarter acre plot in the pole position just inside the entrance to this glorious political circus. The then-vice chairman of Paul's Iowa campaign had rationalized the hefty sticker price by saying that “Iowans have a very special position in the presidential process” and that the Congressman was interested in “getting in front of Iowans”—a phrase which Pam and I now realize ought to have been taken literally, as we try to navigate our way around the busy, sprawling campus of what might be called Ron Paul U.

Keeping the Paul encampment on our flank, we light out for the Land of Cain, waving at the divine Michele Bachmann en route, who waves back, seeming to recognize us, as she bounces along, riding shotgun in a

golf cart. Herman Cain's tent turns out to be in the proverbial wilderness, on the somewhat deserted northwest side of the Coliseum campus, the amount of cash a candidate has pretty much ascertainable at glance based on the location and size of his tent. It is, after all, the Midwest Republican way—no apologies for success or largesse—and may the man with the most acreage win. In fact, early this morning all of us had pretty much pledged our allegiance to these basic tenets upon entry in taking the “I am a Republican Because” card disseminated by the state party, whose climactic statement reads, “I believe America's greatness comes from God, freedom, and free enterprise.”

Everywhere in this bright, hot, crowded universe of special interests are t-shirts. It's political pomp meets Dr. Seuss meets ROY G. BIV—we Sneetches with slogans on our chests are basically the Sneetches with Stars Upon Thars. Thus do I spy with my little political eye carefully silkscreened cotton tees posing questions intended to beget the kind of substantive political dialogue unlikely to happen in the catch-as-catch-can world outside the gates of this medieval tent city. Our most pressing political questions are rhetorical. *Cut Waste? Ask Me How*, one shirt wonders aloud, while another calmly asserts *Cool Conservative*. Mostly the sport of t-shirt sloganeering exists to distinguish us Iowans, we who did not have to pack a suitcase for our political day in the sun, we the lucky citizens who the overlords of the Republican party have decreed exclusively eligible to vote in today's exercise in citizenry.

Indeed, the straw poll is, in many ways, the single most parochial international political event ever cooked up, boiling down to the retail political exercise of citizen talking to citizen with the national and international press listening in. It's refreshing, this turn of the tables, because the straw poll uniquely offers us a chance to *communicate*, whether at several of today's scheduled open mikes or via our clothing. This basic truth gets reflected in the subtextual signifying of our t-shirts in ways it would take a PhD in semiotics to fully understand. Already I've seen the classic “Is this heaven?” the answer to which, if you've seen the movie *Field of Dreams*, is of course: “No, it's Iowa.” And then there's our version of identity politics—t-shirts whose entire *raison d'être* is to make a matter of fact declaration rather than to ask a question. There's *Fathers 4 Justice* and *These Colors Don't Run or Burn* printed across many a man breast. And impressed on at least one impressive bosom is the wholesome sobriquet *Farm Girl*.

As a consequence of the Sneetch Theory, it's painfully easy to pick out the out of state political tourists—the political junkies, reporters, bloggers,

roadtrippers, consultants, and curiosity seekers who've descended on our quiet university town of around fifty thousand. The outsiders mostly sport designer jeans or slacks snug in all the right places and sensible, button-down, breathable Oxfords. The tourists mostly give us Iowans a wide but respectful berth, the home folks apparently better viewed at ironic distance. They smile wryly as our children haplessly attempt to scoop ice cream from cups with tiny spoons better suited as tongue depressors, point with whispered incredulity at the occasional real life farmer in his unironic bib overalls, and of course comment favorably on the wit and wisdom of our homespun sloganeering. For a whole day, we, the unassuming citizens of this most unassuming of regions, are allowed to be, if not the main attraction, then at least an important sideshow. To tell you the truth, it's refreshing when for once the attention arrives at least partly on our terms.

Cameron, a self-proclaimed Gen X "political tourist" down for the day from the Twin Cities, stops me, wanting a picture of the two of us together, me wearing a homemade t-shirt bearing my own provocatively tailored political statement. I oblige, reaching up to grasp him around his broad shoulder, our happy moment of cross-border diplomacy taking place directly opposite the VOICES of Conservative Women tent, where the volunteers womanning the Corn Poll bless our interstate union and who, after Cameron takes his good spirited and grateful leave, beckon Pam and me over to cast our lot. Here we find slipped into our hands a complimentary kernel of Midwest corn to be dropped into a Mason jar bearing the name of our candidate of choice. The first kernel is free, though a ballot stuffing supply can be purchased for a mere \$1 for five kernels or \$5 per ladle-full. "Kids can vote, too. It's very unscientific," the good Sams staffing the booth chirp to the children leaving their mother's side for this, their first object lesson in American politics.

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Afternoon finds Pam and me mustering our courage to make a still bigger plunge—this one into the holding tank inside the Coliseum itself, where we plan to listen to a series of rock star stadium speeches. Beside us an adult man dressed as Patrick Henry shares with the idling crowd the latest news of the war between the Crown and the colonies:

Up with revolution! Down with kings! Down with the lords of Congress! Let's vote for the first woman president! We'll make her Mother-

in-Chief. . . . Up with revolution! Up with the Constitution! Down with tyrants in the White House! When he first announced the health care bill, the first act of tyranny since the revolution! Down with tyrants! Up with the Constitution! No more amendments on the Constitution. It was only four pages long, not 2,500. Down with kings!

The straw poll is organized, paradoxically, for maximum efficiency and at the same time maximum chaos. The machine processed ballot happens continuously, inside the Coliseum, throughout the milky morning and into the withering heat of afternoon, but mostly we stay outdoors. We don't come here to hole up inside the cavernous, largely lifeless stadium, thoughtfully listening to the candidates and the special interest group pitches over the Oz-like PA system. We're far too busy out on the grounds being uncharacteristically extroverted—grandstanding, chewing the fat, and signing petitions willy nilly, grooving to cover bands like Rick Santorum's, who's got the Crickets and "The Big Bopper Jr." Today, for one day only, we're too preoccupied with invoking the gods of hedonism to sit ourselves down in a folding stadium chair for an hours-long marathon of listening to politicians giving stump speeches. Instead we mostly wait for the politicians to come down from the bully pulpit and step outside into our sweaty, greasy, sun-fried environs, our political commons, where it's perfectly impractical to wear a tie and even harder to keep a pants suit clean and dry.

It's only when a candidate you're curious about, or even potentially considering, heads inside the showroom/livestock pavilion that you dutifully follow them inside. Thus Pam and I find a pair of seats inside the air conditioned stadium just in time to catch the closing arguments of former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty. Cries of T-Paw, T-Paw, T-Paw raise the roof as the ex-gov, speech concluded, exits stage left, and we ready ourselves for a brief word from our very own senator for life, Charles Grassley, who's repped the Hawkeye State since 1981 and who, each and every six years, soundly defeats whatever Democratic Sad Sac is drafted to oppose him. Sitting next to us is a burly, red faced guy in his twenties, Joel, who's been mumbling his own ongoing commentary as the political intrigue plays out on the Coliseum floor beneath us. It's a strangely natural thing to do in the balcony of this colossal amphitheater where We the People are invoked in each and every presidential stump and yet lack any means of answering back short of barbaric yalps and smuggled-in air horns. "I really like

Pawlenty,” Joel enthuses, stoked as only a twenty-something can be. “I like Santorum. I actually voted for Santorum. But I like Bachmann, too.”

Bachmann is up next, in fact, but the woman who has declared herself the only “true conservative” in the field must wait in the wings as a speaker for the NRA hastily takes the stage to read from a canned speech that begins, “Take a piece of straw and throw it into the air. You may see why daddy said, ‘That’s which way the wind is.’ That may have been the first straw poll, but Iowa’s was the biggest. Congratulations,” he continues, “and thank you for participating in this event and in our democracy. As the winds of campaign politics begin to stir, let this day mark the beginning of a political storm that blows the current occupant out of the White House.”

All this is mere foreplay, a corny commercial break to buy the audio guys time to load Bachmann’s rock star video. Overhead, the Jumbotron screen flickers to life and the deep, rich voice of the Movie Trailer Guy rumbles through the stadium while the crowd chants, *Mi-chele Mi-chele, Mi-chele*. “Six generations ago a hardworking Norwegian family settled in north-east Iowa to begin a new life. Their legacy continues today. Born in April of 1956 Michele Marie learned the lessons of her pioneering ancestors; work hard and overcome every obstacle. Her name is Michele Bachmann.” As my seatmate grimaces, Elvis’s “A Little Less Conversation” (“A little more action please”) fills the hall at eardrum shattering volumes, and the candidate enters, resplendent in an ivory blazer and a prom-worthy up-do, looking very Jackie O. The applause is deafening, as she leads us through the little routine she perfected at the *Des Moines Register* Soapbox at the state fair yesterday, the one where she goes, “We’re going to make Barack Obama a *One. Term. President.*” Bachmann continues:

From one Iowan to another, Iowa will be the pace car, if you will, to set the tone and set the pace for bringing this country back to its greatness that it was intended for and that it was meant for. It’s in Iowa where we’re going to see the greatness once again begin. . . . I was born in Waterloo and born and raised in Waterloo and Cedar Falls. And in this wonderful part of our state what I saw were reasonable, fairminded people who loved me and poured themselves into me. That’s the voice that I heard growing up of common sense and moral value. That set the tone, and I tell people everything that I needed to learn in life I learned in Iowa. My mother and father always taught us to love Iowa. They said, “Be grateful you’re from Iowa. Iowa is the

breadbasket of the world. We feed millions of people. Be grateful.” I’ve always been grateful that I’m an Iowan, and I believe it’s time to have an Iowan in the White House.

It’s not that we’ve come to support Bachmann—Pam, for instance, can’t stand her—but that she is clearly the debutante of this year’s GOP ball, and by birthright and for better and worse, Michele is one of us, a point she ceaselessly drives home:

In the last forty-eight days I’ve been everywhere from Spencer to Storm Lake. You name it, we have been there, and Ames as well. As we’ve been all over the state what we’ve seen is a restoration of that dream, and you have restored in me my faith in America. I see on the television destruction all across the country, but not in Iowa. It doesn’t matter what city I’m in. I see happy, confident, optimistic people. The crops are growing. You’ve got a wonderful season, and people are more energized than ever before because they know we can do this. They know if we stick together this will happen. They know we can secure the promise of the future for our children. How do I know that? Because I have seen all across Iowa wonderful people who believe this. They believe that life is precious that from conception to natural death we stand for human life. That’s Iowa. That’s all from Iowa. I’ve seen a marvelous appreciation for marriage as one man and one woman. You showed the world when you did not retain those three justices. . . . And as President of the United States I will only appoint justices that follow the Constitution and don’t legislate from the bench.

The family is the foundational unit of this country, candidate Bachmann convinces us before confessing the less than idyllic household of her childhood. “I was raised by a single mother. We went to below poverty overnight. But my mother said something to us, she said, ‘It won’t always be this way. It’s going to get better.’ And while families aren’t always perfect—mine wasn’t—one thing I learned from my great family is that we did stick together. . . . Because I saw that in Iowa we are social conservatives, and we’ll never be ashamed to be social conservatives.” The candidate pauses to acknowledge the love she’s receiving from an auditorium of folks who quite literally know where she’s coming from. There’s more energy, more juice here than for any of the other candidates, and we’re feeling it in large

part because we're here, in the house, rather than at home watching on the boob tube. It's the subtle yet elemental difference between true electricity and mere buzz.

"So join me," Bachmann says after exhorting her Tea Party base. "I'm headed over to the voting booth right now. Maybe you still have not voted. Come with me now. . . . I'm asking for your vote to be the next president of the United States of America and take your voice to the White House. God bless you! God bless the United States of America!" On stage the candidate of the hour lingers a moment, motioning us toward the concourse, where we're being beckoned to come with her, to cast our vote together. The gesture is motherly, and at the same time come hither, and I'm stuck to my seat, riveted by the push-pull in my politi-fried lizard brain. In parting, Joel, the youthful, maybe Bachmann, maybe Santorum supporter next to us, offers Pam and me VIP tickets he's unable to use, good for entry into the restricted tent where in a few short minutes Bachmann's headliner, country musician Randy Travis, is supposed to cut loose. "Promise me you'll get some good use out of these," he says with a broad grin, as he slips the tix into our hands.

After hearing Bachmann unceremoniously trash the President, after watching as she's whirled around on the stage by husband Marcus as Randy Travis croons, "I'm gonna love you forever, forever and ever, amen," Pam and I eventually tire of playing voyeurs in the standing room only Bachmann tent, of feeling as if we're looking in on one of the popular kids' too-perfect prom night. Outside the big top, campaign staffers are already working the musically stimulated crowd, making the casting of a vote in the straw poll sound simple as child's play. "We're gonna have the signs that say 'follow me,' and they will escort you to the Hilton Coliseum," a young man wielding a megaphone calls out. "Those of you who have not voted yet, please come back to where the volunteers are on the south side of the tents. Volunteers are holding the signs that say 'follow me,' and we will escort you to vote for Michele. . . . You have until four o'clock to cast your vote for Michele."

Despite the fact that the voting booths are located a mere one hundred yards away, back inside the stadium, the Bachmann camp has seen fit to rev up its well oiled get-out-the-vote machine. While the Paul campaign had fed the members of its constituency, entertained them with a Big Band, then left them to their own voterly discretion, the Bachmann juggernaut is making it virtually impossible for supporters to avoid casting their ballots.

The music in the tent is brought to an abrupt halt around 3:30, and suddenly it's last call at the Cinderella ball. Those who moments before had been happily grooving to Randy Travis's drawl-ful stylings are now shunted out of the tent through two possible exits and into the waiting arms of volunteers carrying the aforementioned "Follow Me" signs. It's like Caucus night in miniature—gratis transport, bullhorns and signage and plenty of herding along with copious amounts of pure animal influence masquerading as peer pressure—all euphemistically falling under the heading of a well organized campaign. We Iowans recognize it for what it is, though—a cattle call—and it's all perfectly legal.

Pam and I predictably buck, choosing the moment to duck back inside the Coliseum, where the serious political junkies and diehard supporters have begun to gather for real time results. By four o'clock, the end of the day's voting, most of the early to arrive, early to leave folks have vamoosed, content to watch the tallies at home. They're the sensible souls who don't mind leaving plum seats at the game early to beat the traffic. Still, by a quarter after five, even we stalwarts are willing to admit we're getting antsy, the characteristically careful GOP a little slower than usual in computing the returns. Below us several hundred of what had been 700 credentialed national and international reporters mill about an overcrowded press area, the more nubile among them sitting cross-legged on the floor to peck out stories on their laptops, stopping only for the occasional conversation with a colleague or bathroom break. Immediately in front of us, atop a make-shift set, Fox News's Bret Baier kills some airtime by eliciting the soul-sucking political ruminations of GOP presidential candidate and Michigan congressman Thaddeus McCotter. By 5:40, when NBC's Andrea Mitchell, bedecked in a fire engine red Nancy Reaganesque blazer and dress, begins to primp on the media risers, we sense the political witching hour is nigh.

Of course all of this, when viewed through the darkly ironic glasses favored by my generation, is mere political circus, a chintzy but not cheap dog and pony show or fundamentalist tent show revival. Still I, for one, am on the edge of my seat. Had I stayed home on the farm to watch events unfold on FOX, I would no doubt be multitasking to my detriment right now, doing the dishes, say, or (not quite) balancing the checkbook while, in the background, Andrea Mitchell vamped. The announcement of the winner, when it arrived, would have been drowned out by the sound of running water or pasta on the boil. Maybe Gen X's critics have been right all along.

Maybe we have grown spoiled, ungrateful, complacent—content to watch on screen a proxy version of what we ourselves might have participated in with a little less Debbie Downerism and a little more ginger. In politics, as in sport, I'm finding there is an exponential experiential difference between being on the edge of my stadium seat and collapsed on the living room couch, a truism to which any Big Ten sports fan will gladly attest.

Moments later our patience is rewarded when the state GOP chair strides confidently to the podium to end the suspense. "Welcome back, everyone, and on behalf of over 600,000 Iowa Republicans and the Iowa Republican State Central Committee, I want to thank everyone for an incredible day. . . . I also want to announce . . . with 16,892 Iowans voting, the winner of the Iowa Straw Poll is . . . Congresswoman Michele Bachmann!" The loudspeaker blares Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'," as the candidate pecking order, reduced to mere numbers, appears on the Jumbotron.

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Leaving the darkened Coliseum feels like entering the world again after a gripping, if too long, matinee. We're surprised to discover it's a winsome summer night, cool where once it was hot. On our way back to the remote lot, Pam and I pass a spent but still somehow jazzed Rick Santorum giving an interview in his khakis and denim blue long sleeved shirt. He's finished a distant fourth and, as expected, he chalks up Bachmann's strong performance to "showmanship rather than leadership."

"I've got seven kids here," Santorum sighs, weariness creeping into even his indefatigable voice as he sings the soulful blues of retail politics. "We drove out from Pennsylvania, so we're gonna pack up and get everybody together in the morning, and we're gonna head back to Pennsylvania. . . . I'm a dad. . . . I don't have any bus with my name on it. I've got a couple of cars, and I'll be driving one and Karen will be driving the other. . . . Hopefully, with this finish, people will start listening to what we're having to say and put us out there with everybody else instead of burying us below folks below us in the polls. . . . I feel great. I really do feel great. We came within just a few hundred votes of third place."

Santorum is sticking with the race, and so too are we. Outside the stadium a few dozen diehard event staff occupy the bleachers set up to face a humongous outdoor TV screen. As we watch, the oversized display goes blank, and the remaining IowaEnergy.org staffers in their matching, powder blue t-shirts turn to their similarly clad Sneetch leader, who calls out to

them, “Be sure to see Sarah on your way out to pick up your check.” Pam sighs, “So much for volunteerism.”

And, oh, how tempted we are to turn cynics again, Pam and I, having already commenced morose speculation on tomorrow’s misleading headlines, which we feel certain will miss the point of the day’s momentous events in favor of some pabulum like “Bachmann wins, Paul second.” Such reductionist fodder, of course, turns out to be far simpler to digest than the real roughage of today’s jarring verdict: a libertarian coming within one hundred fifty votes of winning the whole shootin’ match in what most observers have labeled a socially conservative, evangelical state. And we’re concerned, too, about the reactionary venom of the armchair and couch potato politicians on the coasts, who will once again question the value of the straw poll, portraying it, wrongly, as a pageant of Middle American evangelicals. It’s a wait-for-the-shoe-to-fall feeling Iowans have known since the straw poll began in 1979, awaiting the damned if you do, damned if you don’t judgment forever forthcoming from a patronizing, paternalistic East that views the Middle West as just so many naïve, high fructose corn syrup-addled children.

The way home is a long one, driven atop the roller coaster hills that come as such a pleasant surprise to first time visitors to Iowa. The political bubble we’ve been living in seems, for a brief, blissful moment, to have dissolved into something much larger. *Our fellow citizens*, a phrase that sometimes seemed a hollow platitude when issued from the mouths of overzealous candidates an hour earlier at the Coliseum, once more holds real meaning. Outside the car windows, our fellow citizens are busy voting with their feet for a Saturday night fish fry with the family, a ball game, or a barn dance.

We’re lucky, Pam and I realize, to be at ground zero of the world’s most important pre-presidential ballot on a night when the entire Corn Belt is a verdant garden, an endless vegetable kingdom exhaling fertility into a periwinkle sky, corn tasseled out and turning the high hills golden, cool blue air filtering down from Canada—that distant commonwealth where those who don’t know better assume the political pastures are greener.

“Gone are the days,” veteran midwestern political reporter David Yepsen opined recently, “when journalists . . . would slip into the kitchen to hear what was happening in the living room.” Still, what if Yepsen’s sour grapes concerning the loss of up close reporting amount, like so many of our cultural lamentations, to self-fulfilling prophecy? And if we resusci-

tated the more serendipitous face to face political exchange offered by the kitchen table and the straw poll in lieu of the carefully managed presser and pre-vetted email blast, of real people talking in real time as an alternative to the controlled spin of public relations and the cool silicon glow of social media, mightn't we actually recapture the more humane, less mediated, less sanitized election process we all seem to pine for.

Tonight, Pam and I are more convinced than ever of the wisdom of our newfound vow to ditch the TV talking heads in favor of meeting the candidates and their constituencies ourselves, in person, on the Yellow Brick Road that is the uniquely accessible middle American campaign trail. No longer will we allow ourselves to bewail and bemoan the state of American politics at a convenient "woe is me" distance. Political agency, after all, is our birthright, and, as being a midwesterner doesn't confer copious or cosmopolitan advantages—certainly not wealth nor good weather nor good coffee—I for one feel justified in cashing in, however belatedly, citizenship's ultimate golden ticket.

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