

Kings Use Royal 'We,' But Candidates Can't Say 'Me'

by C.W. Gusewelle

The voters of America do not trust politicians who speak of themselves in the third person. At best, it is an affectation. At worst, it could be a symptom of a personality disorder.

People are reluctant to hand over power to someone for whom public office is an out-of-body experience.

"Barney P. Blather is the right man for the country."

It's all right if his campaign manager says that. Or even Mrs. Blather and the little Blathers. But when Barney himself says it, it sounds - well, weird. Why should we take his word for it, when he doesn't even know himself on a first-name basis?

Consider how some of history's great rhetorical moments would have been spoiled by the speaker trying to distance himself from himself.

"Nathan Hale only regrets that he has but one life to lose for his country."

Or, "Patrick Henry knows not what course others may take, but as for him, give him liberty, or give him death!"

Or, "Douglas MacArthur shall return." Avoidance of the first person would not have diminished those gentleman as patriots. But it's unlikely such stilted pronouncements would have found their way into Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.

It's a curious conceit, to which the truly great seldom if ever succumb.

From Old Testament prophets to George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa, there is no record of really remarkable people referring to themselves by name, as if they were speaking of someone they admired and would be pleased to get to know better.

I think I understand why ordinary folks find the mannerism so annoying.

Nearly all of us were children once. When we were small and powerless, people were always speaking to us in that screwy, condescending way.

"Do as Daddy says," Daddy would say - as if somehow we didn't know who Daddy was, or understand that because of his size his authority over us was absolute.

"Mommy would like for you to wash your hands before dinner," said

Mommy. It might be a stretch to call that slop dinner. But Mommy held all the cards. You washed your hands or you went hungry.

Kings, Popes and Siamese twins speak of themselves in the imperial we.

Some politicians, like parents, prefer the even greater majesty of the third person.

It enables them to ascribe to themselves qualities of excellence, foresight and statesmanship that modesty would not otherwise permit.

"Barney Blather knows what's best for America."

The words issue shamelessly from candidate Blather's own lips. It's the same patronizing tone of authority we remember from when we were children. But we are not small and powerless anymore.

And Barney, after all, is just old Barney - not a legend in his time. He can speak of himself as "I," or he can look for other work.



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