

Obama's Greatest Asset: Clueless Americans

☒ H.L. Mencken made Andy Rooney look like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. Both gave curmudgeons a bad name. But Andy was shrewd; he played to Middle Americans. He would say something like, "Have you ever wondered why we collect string?" – and they would swoon. He was one of them, they thought. I knew Andy. He wasn't one of them and I suspect he didn't think much of them. Mencken, on the other hand, made no secret of his disdain for ordinary Americans, whom he saw as hopeless dolts.

Mencken, a Baltimore newspaperman, once said this about his fellow Americans:

"Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance. No one in this world, so far as I know—and I have researched the records for years, and employed agents to help me—has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people."

Pretty cold. But given that the great masses of plain people elected Barack Obama twice, maybe H.L. was onto something.

They elected him the first time because he was a historical figure. He wasn't Mondale or Dukakis or Gore or Kerry. He was young and cool and black and liberal. And Americans wanted to make history.

But the second time around? Unemployment was high, a big majority of Americans thought we were on the wrong track, the economic recovery was anemic, and most Americans had little confidence that things would get better anytime soon.

Yet he won again. So how do we explain it? Yes, you could pin it on a weak Republican candidate, but maybe Mencken was

right. Maybe Americans – or enough of them anyway – are just not that smart.

I've been thinking about this the past few days as I, along with everyone else, watched how the president has bungled the Syrian situation. First, during his campaign for re-election, he needlessly draws a red line, warning Syria that the use of chemical weapons is something the United States would not tolerate.

So far, there have been no repercussions.

Then, a week or so ago, after the world witnessed gruesome videos of dead children who had been exposed to poison gas, presumably the work of the Syrian regime, Secretary of State John Kerry makes a forceful statement about Bashar al-Assad's immorality and makes clear that military action is coming.

Twenty-four hours later the president, who said he didn't need Congressional approval for a military attack, decides he wants Congress in on the decision. The president says he still wants to attack Syria, but that there's no rush.

John Kerry, mindful that Congress is as war-weary as the American people, explains that any U.S. action would be an "unbelievably small, limited kind of effort," prompting groans and guffaws from all over the place.

Enter Vladimir Putin, who comes riding to Mr. Obama's rescue – rescue, that is, from a certain no vote in the House and perhaps another no vote in the Democratically-controlled Senate. Putin pushes the idea – originally put forth, tongue in check, by Secretary of State Kerry – that Russia would work with the Syrian regime to put their chemical arsenal under international control "for subsequent destruction."

The result of all this is a president who comes off looking like more like a community organizer than a commander-in-chief. I keep waiting for Ted Mack to come out and say:

Welcome friends to the latest edition of the Amateur Hour.

At heart, Mr. Obama may or may not be a nice guy. Reasonable people may disagree on that. But when it comes to being president, he's clearly in way over his head.

In a piece for Commentary that runs under the headline, "The Collapse of the Obama Presidency," Peter Wehner makes that very point. This is how he puts it:

"How bad has 2013 been for Barack Obama? Let us count the ways.

"In the first year of his second term, the president has failed on virtually every front. He put his prestige on the line to pass federal gun-control legislation—and lost. He made climate change a central part of his inaugural address—and nothing has happened. The president went head-to-head with Republicans on sequestration—and he failed. He's been forced to delay implementation of the employer mandate, a key feature of the Affordable Care Act. ObamaCare is more unpopular than ever, and it's turning out to be a 'train wreck' (to quote Democratic Senator Max Baucus) in practice. The most recent jobs report was the worst in a year, with the Obama recovery already qualifying as a historically weak one. Immigration reform is going nowhere. And then there's Syria, which has turned out to be an epic disaster."

Barack Obama is the man who told us that his candidacy would "ring out across this land as a hymn that will heal this nation, repair this world, make this time different than all the rest." No wonder his acolytes thought he was the messiah.

So why do I think that if he were constitutionally able to run for a third term, despite everything, there's a good chance he'd win? Let's turn again to Mr. Mencken and that observation he made many years ago for an answer.

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individual ignorance. No one in this world, so far as I know—and I have researched the records for years, and employed agents to help me—has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people.”

Or to put it in a slightly different way: Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups.

My Few Minutes with Andy Rooney

✘ Now that Andy Rooney is calling it quits after 1,097 TV essays on 60 Minutes, I thought I'd like to share a little story regarding something Andy said about Dan Rather, me, and liberal bias in the news.

My first book, *Bias*, came out ten years ago and caused quite a stir. Liberal journalists hated it – and me! The book was an insider's story about how liberal bias at CBS News, where I had worked for 28 years, and at the rest of the mainstream media actually operated. I was on lots of radio and TV shows talking about the book, but one show I was not on was the Larry King Live on CNN.

Larry, or probably his liberal producer, had no interest in having me on. And since I have no constitutional right to be on Larry's show, or anyone else's, I had no problem with the decision. Besides, my book was number one on the New York Times bestseller list without any help from Larry.

But Larry did have a number of other journalists on over time

to talk about the news business in general and at some point Larry would inevitably ask what they thought of *Bias*. One of those journalists was Andy Rooney.

When Larry asked about my book and about liberal bias in the news, Andy was Andy – direct and to the point “There is no question that I – [Andy Rooney] – among others, have a liberal bias,” he said.

I didn’t care about Andy’s liberal bias. He was a commentator and was entitled to his opinions, no matter how liberal. But who were the “among others” who had a liberal bias? That remark had me leaning forward in my chair as I watched the interview.

Then Andy answered the question with this bombshell: “I think Dan [Rather] is transparently liberal. Now he may not like to hear me say that. I always agree with him, too. But I think he should be more careful.”

Wow! Andy Rooney – one of the elder statesmen of television journalism – had just acknowledged that conservatives had been right all along. He had just outed Dan Rather on national television. *Dan Rather was transparently liberal*. Even I had never said anything that inflammatory. This was news. Big news. Or so I thought.

The Washington Times, a conservative newspaper, ran the Rooney quote, but no other news organization did. No other newspaper, no television station, no news magazine, no nothing.

Not one media writer found it newsworthy that such a major TV news personality had just said that the anchor of the CBS Evening News was “transparently liberal” – a charge Rather had heard before, many times, but always from conservatives. It always made him fume.

These are the same media writers who had devoted columns to

Rather's haircut or his salary or Katie Couric's wardrobe. But this – liberal bias at CBS News – they simply ignored. Liberal bias in the so-called mainstream media was – and still is – a subject the media elites don't want to take too seriously; if they do, their whole house of cards might come tumbling down.

So the subject went out not with a bang, but with a pathetic whimper.

But before Andy went out, he had one more observation for Larry King, this one aimed right at me. He told Larry that I "just [had] a great knack for being a jerk." Hey, I'd been called a lot worse, so this shot didn't register on my give-a-crap meter. I just assumed Andy was covering his rear end, making sure the CBS News brass knew whose side he was on.

It wasn't enough. Not long after Rooney said what he said about Rather, the you-know-what hit the fan at CBS headquarters in New York. A top CBS News executive took Andy to the woodshed for daring to speak the truth. Andy later told me the executive said he was "disloyal" to say those things about Dan being transparently liberal.

But that isn't the end of the story. Not long after he went on Larry King's show and got his knuckles rapped, Rooney wrote this in his nationally syndicated column: "As a guest on the Larry King show a few weeks ago, I said some things in answer to his questions, that I would have been better off lying about or avoiding. It was not that the people who objected to what I said necessarily thought I was wrong. They thought I shouldn't have said it. In my own defense, I told a boss of mine that I thought if all the truth were known by everyone, it would be a better world. He scoffed. I think 'scoff' is what he did. I know he rejected the idea."

Translation: As far as Andy Rooney and his bosses at CBS News were concerned, when it came to talking about liberal bias in

the news, *dishonesty* was the best policy. Taking the Fifth and never uttering the words “liberal bias” was an even better policy.

And here’s the capper: After mulling it over for a while, Andy concludes right there in his column that his boss was right. “I’ve thought about it,” he wrote, “and in retrospect decided he was right in dismissing what I had to say. Our lives could not survive all the truth about everything.”

A while later I wrote Andy a letter. This is part of it:

“It’s really pretty simple, Andy: It’s not good for news guys to lie. Not even by omission. Not about the news anyway. If you want to lie about how many times a day Jennifer Lopez sneaks into your office and says she can’t live without you, no problem.

“But when you start to lie about the serious stuff – or *simply* “avoid” the subject – you cause real problems for honest journalists ...

“The bottom line, Andy, is not just whether a news media that behaves this way can survive. It’s whether it even deserves to.

Your pal,

Bernie Goldberg”