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When politics goes primitive

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By Richard Cohen
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For a time earlier this year, I thought [Sen. Michael Bennet](#) had to be the biggest jerk in Washington. I had been spending some time in Colorado, daily ingesting Bennet's campaign commercials in which he presented himself as an anti-Washington provincial. In one commercial, he stood -- conventionally suited -- before the U.S. Capitol and denounced Washington. The spot then cut to a casually dressed Bennet standing in Washington County, Colo., which has real problems and real people who really know how to solve those real problems if only the other (non-real) Washington would just leave them alone. Click went the remote control. *Who is this jerk?*

After a while, I repaired to my laptop and summoned up information on this Bennet. He is the very new senator by virtue of being appointed to replace [Ken Salazar](#), drafted by President Obama for the thankless task of interior secretary. (Welcome to the gulf, Ken.)

But as I read on, I was *shocked* -- and I mean just that -- to discover that Bennet had been the much-admired superintendent of the Denver school system, a highly successful investment banker, chief of staff to the mayor of Denver, an aide to the governor of Ohio, a graduate of Wesleyan University and Yale Law School . . . and was raised, of all places, in Washington where his father, Douglas J. Bennet, had been a longtime public servant and diplomat. The senator was born in New Delhi, where his father served on the staff of the U.S. ambassador, the illustrious Chester Bowles. ("Birthers," take note.)

My jaw dropped. This was not the guy I had been seeing on the screen -- nothing about his education, his experience, his time abroad or that his grandparents survived the Warsaw Ghetto. He was, to my mind, the perfect senatorial candidate -- familiar with domestic and foreign affairs, well-traveled, well-educated and coming from a family whose accomplishments had to amount to a rich legacy. Yet, because Bennet faces a primary, and if he survives that, a general election, none of these things could be mentioned. In the current political environment, it behooves the wise candidate to hide his qualifications. We have come to value ignorance.

There was a time when a U.S. senator was supposed to both know and care about foreign affairs. There was a time when a U.S. senator was supposed to be a person of some sophistication, erudition and a more than modest amount of brain power. Colorado itself in the not-too-distant past was represented by Gary Hart, celebrated for his intellect and ideas, and the equally smart Tim Wirth and

Floyd Haskell. It was not considered scandalous to actually know something about how Washington works and to advocate ideas that were rooted in reality.

In contrast, we now have politicians who lack a child's knowledge of government. In Nevada, [Sharron Angle](#) has won the GOP Senate nomination espousing phasing out Social Security and repealing the income tax as well as abolishing that durable conservative target, the Education Department. Similarly, in Connecticut, [Linda McMahon](#), a former pro wrestling tycoon, is running commercials so adamantly anti-Washington you would think she's an anarchist. In Arizona, Andy Goss, a Republican congressional candidate, suggests requiring all members of Congress to live in a barracks. This might be tough on wives, children and the odd cocker spaniel, but what the hell. Nowadays, all ideas are equal.

Bennet's reticence about his stellar qualifications represents something sad: the collapse of the elite. People who should know better -- who, in fact, *do* know better -- slum with political primitives, thinking they can be wallflowers at the tea party and still go home with their integrity intact. The elite -- often wrong, often unwise -- are scorned not for their mistakes but for their very credentials. It is somehow better to know a little than a lot. In this way, the average person gets a government in his own image -- a standard no one would seek in a dentist.

Maybe Bennet has changed his TV persona since I was last in his state. I have since met him and found him personable, humorous -- and very, very smart. I would vote for him without hesitation. He has the knowledge, the experience and the proper -- which is to say, *my* -- values. I was wrong about him. He is not in the least bit a jerk. He just played one on television.

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