The GOP’s Cause Celebre(ity)

January 24, 2006

by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

Whether Lynn Swann becomes the Republican candidate for governor or not, his candidacy has sparked a major debate about the role celebrity plays in politics. Commentators have been quick to point out that gubernatorial voters in other states have elected celebrities like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jesse Ventura who had no prior political or elective office experience. This is true, but also somewhat misleading. In fact the complex role of celebrity in American politics needs examination before any sound assessment of the Swann candidacy can be offered.

In some parts of the country, celebrity politicians are common and even expected. California is notorious for running celebrities, but states as diverse as Minnesota, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Idaho, and New York have also fostered celebrity politicians.

Pennsylvania by contrast has little experience with celebrity candidacies---and absolutely none with celebrity candidates running for governor or U.S. senator. The closest we have come to having a genuine celebrity candidate was speculation---now decades old---that champion golfer Arnie Palmer might run for governor or that football coach Joe Paterno might give up racing around the sidelines for racing around the state as a candidate.

Given the dearth of celebrity candidacies in Pennsylvania, Swann’s run must be considered against the backdrop of national experience. Certainly he is not the first sports figure to tackle politics. Across the country, Swann’s predecessor celebrities cum politicians include a fair number of athletes. New Jersey’s former U.S. Senator (and former New York Knicks star) Bill Bradley is probably best known. Kentucky’s U.S Senator Jim Bunting was a Hall of Fame baseball player before politics. A number of former football players have succeeded in politics, including New York’s Jack Kemp, and Oklahoma’s J.C. Watts and Steve Largent.

Not surprisingly, entertainment has produced more celebrity candidates than any other field. The preeminent celebrity candidate was Ronald Reagan. In more recent times, Schwarzenegger epitomizes the "type." Other entertainers turned politicians include singer Sonny Bono (U.S. House), actor Fred Grandy who played "Gopher" on Love Boat (U.S. House), actor George Murphy (U.S. Senate), and actor Fred Thompson of Law and Order (U.S Senate).


Writers, particularly novelists, are particularly enthusiastic--and spectacularly unsuccessful candidates. The best known of these is probably novelist Upton Sinclair who ran successively and unsuccessfully for Congress, the Senate, and governor of California during the 1930’s. Novelist Gore Vidal has run and lost races for the U.S. House and the Senate. And Pennsylvania native and prolific writer James Michener ran and lost a race for Congress in 1962, though he did become Chairman of the Bucks County Democratic Party.
How does a Swann candidacy fit into this pattern? Certainly Pennsylvania is not California or Minnesota. And Swann is not an Arnold or Jesse-style celebrity turned politician.

But it is not celebrity so much as old-fashioned competitive two-party politics that has thrust Swann into prominence as a candidate. Normally first-term governors running for re-election don’t draw strong opponents. But this year, Republicans as the "out party" believe they can make history and defeat an incumbent governor. That hasn’t happened since governors could seek reelection in 1974. But, Ed Rendell, the current Governor, has his difficulties—in part because he is still viewed by many as the "Governor" of Philadelphia. This is backed up by his mediocre polling numbers outside of the Philadelphia media market. Equally ominous, an anti-incumbent mood is now evident in many parts of the state.

This prevailing mood has led some Republican leaders to support the politically unconventional Swann, whose celebrity status brings instant media attention and large and enthusiastic crowds at speeches. His conservative social views, supply side economics, and compelling personal story have also fueled his candidacy.

But Swann’s celebrity has its limits—he has shown to date little mastery of the complexities of state government and has provided little in the way of policy prescriptions to the problems of state government. No one really knows how Swann would fare in a primary against his main rival for the Republican nominee, the more experienced former Lt Governor Bill Scranton, or against one of the state’s most brilliant campaigners, Governor Rendell, should Swann become the nominee of his party.

Moreover, conventional wisdom holds that the political culture in the state is antagonistic to such candidacies. The electorate with its blue collar, rural and farm orientation is likely to be unimpressed with celebrity alone. Even Philadelphia, despite its haute culture and history, is still very much a city of working-class neighborhoods. In addition, Pennsylvanians have typically elected politicians who have spent years in the political and governmental vineyards, laboring over the most mundane issues of local and state government. Swann fits little of this profile.

The political pros touting Swann are well aware of these limitations. His obvious lack of government experience does cause doubts about his candidacy. But the skepticism is suppressed by the growing chorus of GOP supporters that believe Swann’s liabilities, whatever they may be, are trumped by one transcendent political asset: he, and maybe only he, can beat Rendell. Swann can win. They believe the personable and charming Swann will overcome voter reservations about his inexperience, with the same style and panache he exhibited in pro football, and for almost three decades in network broadcasting.

This is where the politics of celebrity now stand in Pennsylvania as we enter an election cycle some think could be a turning point in the state’s political history. Swann’s supporters believe fervently that he is a winner—and that winning matters most; indeed, may be all that matters. On the other side are the traditionalists who believe that the Swann candidacy is doomed in Pennsylvania’s anti-celebrity culture.

Neither side may represent a completely balanced view. It is true that unlike a number of other states, Pennsylvania has little history with celebrity candidates. But that does not imply, as some have concluded, that Pennsylvania is hostile to celebrity candidates; perhaps it is fairer to observe that there simply haven’t been that many of them. How a celebrity candidate running for major office might actually do in Pennsylvania is still an unanswered question. It’s not likely to remain unanswered much longer.
Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2006 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.