



RICHARD STANISLAW

Richard Stanislaw, professor of political theory, recipient of the 2011-2012 Outstanding Teaching Award and dual adviser to the College Republicans and the College Democrats (“it’s a lot of fun,” he says, not sarcastically), sits down with The Burr to talk race, religion and the future of the Republican Party.

INTERVIEW BY ANTHONY DOMINIC

AD: Let’s talk about the president coming to Kent State in September.

RS: OK.

AD: In an interview two days before [President Barack] Obama’s visit, [Kent State President] Lester Lefton told me the university “would and will” welcome [Mitt] Romney as warmly as it was welcoming Obama.

RS: Uh huh.

AD: I would safely assume Romney made a calculated decision to skip big public universities like Kent State. Then, a little over a month later, Obama won 60 percent of voters under [age] 30.

RS: Yes, these are demographic difficulties for the [Republican Party]. And you see the GOP right now wrestling with these sorts of things. Going back to [President Richard] Nixon, and even earlier, there was a decision that the GOP made — and it worked through a lot of election cycles — that they

were going to bet on white men, to a large extent. And southern white men and Catholic white men that were in labor unions and so on. Republicans believed, wrongly, 2008 was an outlier. That the turnout of the youth and minority voters was just an outlier and that they could continue with this southern, white America strategy. 2012, I think, should be seen as a coda to 2008.

AD: Perhaps the Tea Party in 2010 was the flash in the pan — which it certainly was not perceived as being so at the time.

RS: Yeah, and that was one of the things that confused Republicans. I think it was sloppy thinking, and there are other structural problems. Republicans have been so anti-intellectual and anti-“The Academy.” Republicans were discouraged from going to graduate school and into social sciences. And so all the people who did graduate school and social

sciences over the last 30 years — the vast majority are Democrats. So that means everyone out there who knows how to read a poll and do social science research — most of them are Democrats. And that’s also a problem.

AD: [In 2012] Obama secured 93 percent of the black vote, he secured 73 of the Asian vote, he secured 71 percent of the Hispanic vote — the last of which surprised some conservatives. The day after the election, Marco Rubio said, “The conservative movement should have particular appeal to people in minority and immigrant communities who are trying to make it. And Republicans need to work harder than ever to communicate our beliefs to them.” So which conservative beliefs will those who are trying to make it connect with?

RS: Oh, well, pull yourself up by the bootstraps and work hard and play by the rules, and that is rewarded. Those

are old conservative talking points, if not genuine philosophical [points]. For immigrant families, that can be appealing. By and large — gross oversimplification — [you] come to America to work hard and make your way. And if you work hard, you're going to be rewarded, and it's going to be better for your kids than it was for you. All that sort of come here tired, poor, huddled masses sort of stuff. That aspect of the Republican philosophy could definitely get traction in that community. Someone who is willing to be a migrant worker, or work in a factory, or open up a shop and work their ass off for 100 hours a week — that is not someone who is asking for handouts; that is not someone who wants to see taxes redistributed to people who aren't working. [President] George W. Bush understood this and tried to drag the Republican Party toward a friendly —

AD: He really did. He was sort of the last major GOP player to try and get that conversation moving forward.

RS: Yes. And he got —

AD: No support.

RS: No. And Marco Rubio — he can embody this. Although, as a Cuban American, this gets into complicated racial identity issues. A Cuban American from Florida in a lot of ways does not have a lot in common with a Mexican American who lives in Ohio. But the bigger problem I see for Republicans — Rubio's right — the demographics of the Republican party are such that the party activists — the people who are coming out to the precinct meetings and doing the work, the Tea Party folks — they are way more anti-immigrant than the party establishment wants them to be. So it's going to be hard for Marco Rubio and so on to convince Tea Party ilk in western states to reform their immigration policies. And America is welcoming to



immigrants — melting pot and all that — but xenophobia is also a big characteristic of our political culture.

AD: Right. In a conversation I had with Professor [Erik] Heidemann several weeks ago, he said that he didn't believe simply putting Rubio on the ticket in 2016 will guarantee Hispanic votes. Thoughts?

RS: Yeah, it might not even guarantee a win in Florida, in part because of the Cuban American aspect of it. For interesting reasons, the particular circumstances of Cuban Americans are politically different, and their political issues have been distinct from other Hispanic Americans. So one, just putting a brown face up is not really going to get a lot of traction because it's more complicated than that. But also, there are these things built in, and this is another of these real dangers for the Republican Party. The best predictor of how someone voted is how they voted last time. The Democrats have done an effective job and the Republicans have shot themselves in the foot, in terms of training Hispanics to be Democrats.

Republicans campaigned hard against getting into World War II, and Jews have been Democrats ever since. And Republicans tried to stop the Civil Rights Act, and African Americans are loyal Democrats. And Republicans have been harsh on immigration and won't even consider the DREAM Act.¹ And they maybe have already crossed that event horizon where Hispanics just are Democrats now. And we can chip away at that a bit, but putting [Supreme Court Justice] Clarence Thomas up on the Supreme Court did not move African Americans to become Republican. And if Herman Cain had gotten the nomination it would not have moved that needle very much at all.

¹An acronym for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors, the DREAM Act is a Senate bill that would provide residency to illegal aliens of "good moral character" who arrived in the U.S. as minors, graduated from U.S. high schools and lived in the country for at least five years prior to the bill's enactment.

AD: Address this assumption that whites vote for Obama for his policies and blacks vote for Obama because he's black. Slate was really pushing [this] the day after the election: Michael Dukakis received 89 percent of the black vote in 1988. This was happening 20 years ago.

RS: Yeah. It's just wrong, I would say. And there were a couple good Slate pieces on whites voting for Mitt Romney. That is just as racialized, and arguably more racialized, than blacks voting for Obama because of the way the numbers moved. And we have historic and real reasons why blacks are Democrats. And that Barack Obama is black did not move the needle that much. And Mitt Romney being white did seem to move the needle. I mean, we should talk about race. These are aspects of the American republic. But to sort of take as a normative starting point that white is neutral somehow is wrong-headed.

AD: And bouncing off of what you were saying about Rubio and the Hispanic vote, Dukakis also got 70 percent of the Hispanic vote — and that was 20 years ago. Obama got 71 [percent]. This hasn't changed.

RS: Yeah. And at some point those things lock in. You know, not locking in forever. But people, ethnic groups, regions of the country get into these habits of voting. And party I.D. is one of these things that are inscribed into us from a young age and over generations. And the Republicans have been betting on the white vote for several generations, and Democrats put in with African Americans and [the] Civil Rights act, and so on — from the early '60s on. And that is the explanation, not that whites somehow are enlightened.

AD: This is something you and I spoke about before: Was Jon Huntsman [Jr.] the presidential candidate the GOP wasn't ready for?



I think that anti-science is a problem beyond party identification. That's a large cultural threat. Those are genuine, deep threats to the American republic."

- Richard Stanislaw

RS: Yes, in a sense. He would be that sort of thoughtful, moderate, Rockefeller sort of —

AD: I mean, certainly, you can look at his record as governor — he's fiscally conservative. But he also said the GOP has "zero substance," are "too far to the right" and have a "serious problem in becoming the anti-science party."

RS: Yes. And I think that anti-science aspect, the anti-intellectual, Huntsman saw that as a problem. But that gets back to this postmodern dilemma.² [Science and intellect] — that's not what we want. And Huntsman, by insisting that we all do honest math in these postmodern times — that's a loser. We don't want to do honest math. So, Huntsman loses. I think it would be possible to construct a character around Huntsman, but he was not

²"In the modern, the value of things, the truth of things, were connected to something real. We believed that facts were true, for instance. In the postmodern, the notion that facts are true is contested. Truth is entirely up for grabs. This is where we get the post-factual aspects of postmodernity. In the old days, if politicians said something that was factually untrue they would lose their credibility. Now, in fact, politicians can say things that are factually untrue and in many instances they actually are rewarded."

— Richard Stanislaw

a good candidate. His rollout — all these different things — he did not understand how to cultivate an image in the way of a Rick Santorum or Herman Cain.

AD: A fiscally conservative approach is one matter, but these greater social issues that Huntsman was referring to — the positions on gay marriage, scientific research, secularism — would you argue that these are seriously threatening the GOP's long-term existence?

RS: [Pauses.] I think that they are larger threats than that. I think that anti-science is a problem beyond party identification. That's a large cultural threat. Those are genuine, deep threats to the American republic. And for this democratic republic to exist — at least its current form — it requires rational discourse.

AD: How important is it that this discourse and our political decisions are based upon universal values, not religion-specific values?

RS: Part of it goes to the very nature of representation. If it's a member of the House of Representatives, they're charged mostly with representing, in a pretty close way, the interests of their districts. A senator and then the president or a Supreme Court justice — they are more deliberative by design. They're more deliberate offices. And so, therefore they are drawing upon their expertise, their experience — which could include their religious convictions. And I

think the important thing is that the candidates are upfront about those things. So if someone is going to be making decisions based upon their religious convictions, the voters ought to know that. And if the citizens of the seventh district of Mississippi want a member from the House of Representative who makes all of their decisions based on what the Easter Bunny tells them, then so be it. That's not how I would choose my representative, but —

AD: Right. So, for re-election's sake, many conservatives may have to face this sort of call — that they have to make political decisions that directly conflict with their personal values. For example, in the “The Epistle to the Romans” it's established that in God's eyes homosexuals are deserving of death. So, an elected official who self-identifies as a Christian — likely meaning he or she recognizes the Bible as divine word — is accepting of this passage. Is he or she capable of supporting legislation in support of gay marriage?

RS: They ought to be. And this goes back to the very nature of our government. Individuals are religious, but we have an explicitly secular Constitution. This is not to say there isn't religion in America or the religious history in America is not important. And in many ways you can describe America as a Christian nation, in the sense that it was founded on this whole Puritan sort of thing. But the Constitution, on the other hand, is a godless document. And the way the Constitution functions is based on reason, based on precedent, based on the Constitution as the highest law. No less than John Locke³ argued that to make any sort of claims about someone's superiority, or to condemn someone on morality, that's playing God. I'm not directly familiar with

³John Locke, known as the Father of Classical Liberalism, wrote “A Letter Concerning Toleration” in 1689, in which he advocated for religious tolerance and the separation of church and state.

that passage in Romans, but the way you describe it is: God condemns. Well, John Locke would say let God condemn, and these are civil matters. And we need to run society. And just because America allows gay marriage, does that compel God to?

AD: God's jurisdiction?

RS: If God's going to condemn gay people, God's going to condemn gay people — whether or not the state of Washington grants gay marriage. I'm sure those Christians think their god is more powerful than the Supreme Court. So, one, they shouldn't be threatened by it. This is the way many pro-choice Catholics deal with it. So, [Andrew] Cuomo, and others who are other prominent practicing Catholics who are pro-choice —

AD: Especially Cuomo.

RS: Yeah. Their responsibility is to the Constitution, to their constituents, and the civic law is that we treat people equally. And that we have a right to privacy. And these are our civil principles. And whatever person does not want to get gay married, they should not get gay married. But that's a wholly different concern than the civic authority.

AD: What's your responsibility as an educator in terms of how you shape this discourse in the classroom?

RS: Part of the charter, the purpose of Kent State as a public university, is cultivating good citizens and so on. And arguably, in political science, we even have an even more acute responsibility in that sense. I want people in my classes and more broadly to be good, careful

thinkers, to cultivate some skills of reading and writing and speaking and rationality, and some analytical analysis. I think that people who teach a policy class, there may be some areas of policy that we need to be focusing on. Clearly climate change is one of these huge things that we need serious discourse about. We have one political party that refuses to talk about it. It lets the other party off the hook. Democrats just automatically win the argument because they are actually reading the science. And Republicans are officially refusing. And that's no good for any of us. If we're going to come up with good policy solutions to this real problem, we need to have an honest full debate.

AD: In your experience, where do students go wrong in their approach to political thought?

RS: Where do they go wrong? [Pauses.] I would say the biggest failure period is not reading enough. This is from [First Year Experience] sort of advice [and] throughout one's academic career. People should be reading more. The minimal requirements professors make in classes? That should be the bare minimum that someone, like — in my sort of classes? One read of the things I assign is insufficient. I don't know if that's a cop out [laughs].

AD: No, I don't think so. You can't Sparknotes your way through “City of God.”⁴

RS: No. But one of the problems is that you sort of can Sparknotes your

⁴Augustine of Hippo wrote “City of God” in the 5th century to analyze Christianity's relationship with competing philosophies, as well as its relationship with Roman government. It is an assigned reading in Professor Stanislaw's Political Thought course.



way through “City of God.” But the fact that you can pass a class or fake your way through, such that you get a grade that is accessible to you, that’s entirely the wrong way to look at it. And that’s unfortunate. But that doesn’t kill the material. That doesn’t kill the text.

AD: You’re now the adviser to the College Republicans. What do you say to the conflicted young conservative?

RS: Conflicted. How so?

AD: Conflicted over party leadership, party values —

RS: I think this is an interesting

moment to be a Republican. Politics is fascinating. The Republicans need to sort out what kind of party they are, and who they think America is becoming, and there are a lot of ways forward. This ought to be an exciting, fun time. Because young people can get involved in remaking the Republican Party for at least the next cycle or two.

AD: You look like you’re really struggling to hold back a smile.

RS: [Laughs.] Well, yes. Well, I enjoy it. I enjoy watching it. There is a little bit of schadenfreude in the pleasure I derive from watching

them inflict pain on each other.

AD: Do you foresee a future in which a Republican candidate can come to big public university like Kent State and entertain an audience of nearly 7,000 people?

RS: I think — no, not really. Not in the Midwest. Maybe somewhere. **B**

Visit TheBurr.com to continue our conversation with Professor Stanislaw.
