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Will Mean Politics Scare Off Good Women?

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Veteran political reporter Sam Donaldson once said "Only the amateurs stay mad."

For the times, it was a nice summary of the bare-knuckles rules of politics. You give, you get, you move on. But as we close this mean season of pandemic political nastiness, I wonder if his statement still stands. Or have we crossed some threshold of incivility to a place where everybody stays mad, nobody moves on, and we're locked into a perpetual cycle of political blood feuds. Payback's a bitch? No. It's an obligation.

With the smoke still rising from the debris field of trashed reputations and dashed hopes for cooperation, it's time to ask a question: "What able person -- able, that is, to do anything else -- would choose this?"

It's a question that may add another dimension to the long-standing question: why don't more women run for office?

It looks like representation of women in Congress will, at best, hold steady. But when 17 percent of the Senate and a little over 16 percent in the House represents 50 percent of the population, what are a few seats here or there anyway?

The real issue is going forward. The United States still trails much of the world in female representation. Quoted recently in the Christian Science Monitor, Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women in Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey said, "There's a misconception about where we are when it comes to women and politics. Because we have the Hillary Clintons, the Nancy Pelosis, the Sarah Palins, it gives the sense that these women are everywhere. But women make up a really small proportion of our elected officials."

Most studies say there are some clear reasons for that. Compared to male office seekers, women are less likely to run because they don't think they're worthy, they don't get enough encouragement, and they don't think they can win.

While evidence is scarce, I think we can at least contemplate adding to that list a reluctance to wade into the toxic swamp that is American politics.

Scrape away enough of the muck, and you could find hope that the current nastiness is simply a reflection of the times -- angry campaigns looped with an angry electorate. Maybe when things get a little better, reason will return and we'll find a way to work together on problems that are undermining the country and threatening the future.

More likely, however, mean politics is here to stay.

One reason is: it works. Studies show that Americans have never been more disconnected, disaffected and down right dumb when it comes to the issues. It takes a lot more effort to research each candidate's record and positions than it does to listen to what an opponent says about them.

Women have a special vulnerability in the slime-fest. Writing on the Website, The Women's Media Center, Jill Miller Zimon argues that "The biggest bugaboo out there right now -- I often think it's being manipulated specifically to scare off women -- is the media bias, sexism and stereotyping, all rolled-up into one multi-layered systemic problem."

Pick your point of attack: hair, fashion, parenting, experience, toughness, past lovers. Any woman can be painted as too hard, too soft, or too stupid. What would happen to a woman who succumbed to John Boehner's serial blubbering -- the post-election speech being only his latest breakdown. She would wear the tag "weeper of the House" to the end of her political days.

There is little doubt -- particularly in the current climate -- sexualized coverage and attacks will remain a factor in political races. The question is whether being a woman running for office is something that the country needs and fairness demands -- or something you must rise above.