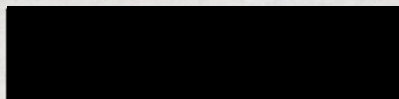


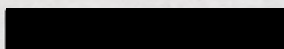
WITNESSING WITH C-SPAN:
NOTES FROM A VOTER'S CONSUMMATION

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I watch C-SPAN Public Network because when I came of voting age nothing happened. No poll takers banged on my door, no congressmen asked me my stand on ERA, and no one invited me to speak at a fundraiser on my social studies knowledge of "The Greenback Party." Everything stayed the same when I came of voting age. I was still nonpartisan suburbia, and the only tangible accessories of adulthood I was claiming were my obligations to Selective Service, and my desultory nights flashing my ID around bars.

Cable arrived to cut an expressway through my glass-domed suburb. At first I watched a lot of what my friends watched: music videos, R-rated movies, Australian rugby. It was fun stuff, but somehow I thought you were supposed to snub fun when you're waiting to be political. Still no one approached me, thus I reasoned that they, whoever "they" are, had bypassed me. Driven by Angst one Monday, I attended a city council meeting, but the subject was "Meals on Wheels", and I didn't know what that was, nor did I fit in very well with the hundreds of senior citizens vying for the 50 or so chairs.

Then C-SPAN consummated my voting status.

An accidental turn to channel 6 (C-SPAN) suddenly and curiously granted me a backstage pass to the political show so enigmatic to me. Staring incredulously, I soon realized that Congress wasn't that clandestine. Sure it had its esoteric argot and protocol, but it also had the kind of primary evidence I never got out of dated text books, terse news shows, and partisan editorialists. The fact is,

all along I just wanted the facts.

That's why I watch a lot of C-SPAN; I get to witness policy making before it is distilled by those who are in the know. Now I can decipher what used to seem so intellectually furtive and unattainable. I don't think I really know what democracy is— or ever will— but I do know that when I witness floor debates, sub-committee hearings, or my favorite: MC'd functions, I can hypostatize the American political entity and temporarily believe I know what's going on. Best of all, under a C-SPAN camera everyone appears to conduct business as usual without adopting that camera-conscious, documentary kind of reservation. Admittedly, my praise of C-SPAN is biased by my preference for realism.

The C-SPAN camera is undeniably a commercial precedent for the "Information Age", though more importantly it seems to be a legal precedent implicitly calling for the global emergence of creative, well-monitored democracies. To my mind, here is a first for constitutionalism. A ruling for cameras on Capital Hill has conceded that the body politic actually exists and is not a grandiloquent metaphor, but a serious reality— one capable of following statecraft.

I like to imagine the kind of C-SPANs that will be around in 25 years, still quietly and impartially recording leaders, still helping to explicate bipartisan democracy for nonpartisans like me.