

George the Marine

Under his baseball cap intense grey eyes avoided looking at me directly. They betrayed a burning disapproval of what I represented. He appeared to struggle with his self-control. He had never seen a Democrat here. Republicans had been the sole poll-watchers as long as he could remember. The unexpected intrusion was very unsettling. It was election day, 2008. I had been campaigning for Obama in the surrounding country and had found only a handful of sympathizers. The polling place in this part of the Shenandoah Valley of Western Virginia was located in the gym of the Fulks Run Elementary school. The one storey school building had a blacktop parking lot on one side from which a concrete footpath ran along the front of the building to the double doors of the main entrance. There was a semi-circle driveway for drop-off and pickup and the remaining space was covered by a well kept, green lawn. Nearby hills with browning fall colors lined the small valley. A few houses dotted the middle distance. George was sitting near a folding table on a camping chair at the confluence of footpath, lawn, and driveway. He was dressed in blue jeans and a green windbreaker jacket with the logo of a construction company. He wore high-laced leather boots and his baseball cap advertised another company. The table had a stack of ballots and brochures. Walking up to him I carried two chairs, some folded up Obama/Biden signs and a stack of Democratic sample ballots that were exactly the same light blue color as the Republican ones. Obviously he didn't know me but, expecting a fellow Republican to keep him company, he greeted me warmly. We shook hands and I introduced myself by name and campaign designation. What he had just heard sank in slowly – he hadn't been at all prepared for this. His eyes turned away and then his body. "Oh," he said. He sat back down on his camping chair and reached to take a few sample ballots off the table. He fingered them and, with his chair facing me, he deliberately looked away to his right hoping for voters so he didn't have to interact with me. In time a few voters arrived to help him out and he and I handed out sample ballots. I found the silence between us uncomfortable. In any case, it couldn't very well last. As I peddled my Democratic sample ballots I mentioned that George had the Republican ones and that both together formed a nice balance. After a few of these he proceeded to do the same and we started talking – not about political issues

but about the fact that this was the first time in many years that any Democrats had showed up at this polling place. George did most of the talking. All the while he avoided looking at me. But I could see the strong emotions in his eyes. I wasn't sure what to do or how to react to what he said other than to nod, smile, grunt, or say, "I see." He told me about his life in the hills. His house was way off the road on 20 acres of wooded hillsides and he lived by himself now that his kids were grown and his wife had left him. He admitted to being a hermit who preferred to see as few people as possible. The fact that he was here outside the polling place was an exception since his friend Bob had asked him and, "what Bob asks, I do," he added. George came across as an extremely loyal man. His Meyers-Briggs test would have shown a strong "F". It stands for "Feeling" and means that a person measures issues by an internal scale which always includes considerations for other people. For instance, the emotional interests of a friend may weigh much heavier than efficiency or monetary considerations. George talked about his long years with the Marines and how they had shaped his values. He mentioned several times abortion, guns, and gays – against, for, and against. He was upset with fellow Republicans who would vote for Obama. As I had urged many Republicans to do, I suggested that they were putting interest before emotion and that bad economic times plus expensive wars had made emotional issues a bit of a luxury. "Yes," he practically hissed, "they are sell-outs!" I decided to be a bit more careful with my remarks. I wasn't sure what would set him off but assessed that I might have come close. George was not a bad guy but his fuse could be short. His knightly passions had probably caused many a disappointment when subjects of his protection objected to his presumption. George was like Sir Galahad, son of Lancelot, knight of the Round Table and achiever of the Holy Grail. He was hopelessly romantic and with an unrealistic view of the world. He was a fourth generation Marine. He regarded it his duty, and that of his nation, to come to the rescue of all imperiled women and children. Since Saddam Hussein had killed many families in Iraq it was entirely correct to have gone in and depose or kill him. The cost in money was not at issue. Also the human toll of American soldiers was fine. Soldiers knew what they got themselves into. And, if they had joined the armed forces only to get an education, then that had been for the wrong reasons and they deserved to be shipped out and fight. The fact

that military families were left behind in sometimes poor circumstances didn't bother him either. He believed that the military brides had known in advance what the risks were – that frequent moves, long separations, and small pay-checks were par for the course – and that, if they didn't like it, they could leave just like his own wife had done long ago. By this time I was tempted to think that George was rather frustrated and angry with the world and up to a point he was. However, he also had come to terms with his own expectations and, as Eastwood's character dirty Harry Callahan liked to say, "A man's got to know his limitations," it became apparent that George had accepted his. Because his interactions with other people were so trying, because his needs and expectations always surpassed reality, he had retreated into his woody hills where he lived with his loyal dogs, his radio, and his guns. There he hunted, skinned, and harvested firewood and there he received the occasional visitor, on his terms. From the way he talked I expected that reception to be very friendly and lavish. While campaigning in the hills the previous weeks I had visited many people in remote homes and only once was I told to leave in language I will not repeat here. Most times people were friendly and hospitable and sometimes I was invited to come inside, stay a little longer, or given something to drink. I was tempted to suggest a visit to George but thought it too soon. He had done almost all the talking and he knew practically nothing about me except that I was the Democrat. Time had passed and we were both running out of sample ballots. He had told me of his recycling successes from the garbage bins so I stood up and went inside. I retrieved a lot of sample ballots but the vast majority was Republican. Back outside I handed those to him. He was a little surprised but then he smiled warmly and thanked me. I lamented the few Democratic ones I had found and complained that voters must have taken them home as souvenirs. George chuckled, "They are a bit of a rarity." A large man with a cowboy hat, boots, and a large moustache arrived. It was Bob, the guy who had asked George to be here. Bob was a state law enforcement officer and a big shot in the local Republican Party. He was equally surprised to see a Democrat but he was friendly. George folded up his chair and took his leave of Bob. As he was about to walk away he turned. He said, "Nice to talk to you." I acknowledged and, as we read each other's body language, we simultaneously held out our hands and shook

warmly. We each smiled, nodded. And then he turned away and left. I forgot to ask him for his address. I would have liked to look him up and maybe I will sometime. Bob was all business, I was out of ballots. So, I packed up my chairs, said goodbye, and left, too.

by Mau VanDuren author of the upcoming book "Taxation, Representation and Inalienable Rights,"