

## TRIBAL

“Put Vaseline on the edges. That slimes up the hands.”

Bart always has good ideas; everybody says so.

“But, if you really want to stick it to them, use deer repellent, and it will stink up their trunk. Smells like doo-doo that’s been baking in the sun.”

“Is all this legal?”

Bart is a lawyer—better than a slip-and-fall lawyer, but not too much better. His successful cases pay out pretty well. Or so he tells everybody.

“Of course. It’s your sign and your lawn. If some blockhead wants to trespass, they get what they deserve. Tearing a sign up or stealing it is a crime.”

“We can’t let these vandals win, Bart.”

It’s challenging to explain politely the visceral anger felt when someone defaces or steals a lawn sign you placed proudly on your front lawn. We are not talking about a sign advertising the services of your dopey plumber or electrician. We are talking about a sign for your candidate, the person who best reflects your values in government.

Another way of saying this is that you want your candidate to win and hope they will do what they say they will. As a bonus, you want the opposing candidate’s voters to be cowed and realize they are wrong in the policies they support.

With this frame of reference, can you see why it is infuriating to me that something has

happened to my sign?

You may not know the candidate you support personally, but the sign is a physical manifestation of your political tribe. A close comparison to the anger felt would be someone ripping the collar of your football jersey or throwing a valued signed baseball cap into the river. These feelings are hardwired in humans; at least that is what my research on the web has taught me. To survive, we need to be part of a group, and to be part of a group means you have to defend it.

Granted, you can blame some of my intensity on a degree in political science. Sadly, it is hardly ever evoked except when doomscrolling through the news. Perhaps pursuing a law degree would have been a better outlet for my passion for politics.

Bart volunteers with the committee, and his role is to herd voters. His being a lawyer comes in handy with the local political party. At the monthly meetings, plenty of debates require a legal viewpoint. Bart makes impassioned speeches on how we must fight back against the other side's efforts. He often says that we need to stand for something and not be afraid to act even if we anger some neighbors. "Is it our town or theirs?"

Bart convinces me it is worth the effort to post another sign. He leaves with the parting words, "It's your First Amendment right to display it."

My new sign stands alone on the lawn that night. It smells of poo.

Please don't take me as a follower. You can't hold it against me, my loyalty to the local party. Bart knows a lot about campaigns in our town. He is someone for me to look up to, but that doesn't mean his life is any better than mine. We live on the same block in a safe suburban town. My wife and kids are just as amazing as his, and that's not said out of obligation. Most

guys are incapable of being authentic in politics or life, but not me. After ten years of building a reputation as a trustworthy and get-it-done realtor, my home sales can pay the bills nicely.

Sometimes, like now, the market is slow, and we muddle through by relying on the goodwill people show toward my service. Everybody in town has seen my picture on a grocery cart or a bus stop bench. The motto under my face reads, “Trust begins with respect.”

The newly planted double-sided mylar sign is taken sometime during daylight hours of the next day. The iron frame remains: a warning to show others what may happen if they post my candidate’s sign.

Bart is called again; he is the help desk for local democracy. His workday schedule is as flexible as mine. He takes the sign wars seriously.

Bart immediately responds, “Let’s put up two signs in its place—the dandelion tactic. The more they steal, the more we put up in their place.”

“But if it happens over multiple days, my lawn will look like a cemetery.”

Bart could be a colonel in the Marines. He brooks no dissent. “You need to trust me. Nobody steals signs for more than three days; they tire of the game and move on.”

Bart has been tasked by the local party to coordinate the placing of signs at homes around town. While signs don’t vote, he tells me, they are a visible expression of support for a candidate.

“Voters vote for people they perceive as popular,” he continues. “I’ve read a ton of must-read stuff on the topic.”

While we are planting more signs, a vehicle drives past. The driver yells an alphabet of curse words. It is two weeks before the election—the animal spirits are rising.

“At least they didn’t try to run us over. A few years back, we had somebody accidentally smash a car through a fence because they wanted to roll over a sign,” Bart says.

My signs are stolen for the next two days with the frames left behind. On the third day, eight signs are needed to continue the escalation. Sign supplies town-wide are running low, and the number of stolen signs in the neighborhood is increasing daily. The local party debates whether it is worth the extra charge for a rush order. Would the new signs even arrive before election day? The party wanted to have a dense sign presence around town, but soliciting more donations in a short span of time would be problematic. A deadlock of opinion means no new signs.

Bart suggests that we have signs made at a quick turnaround print shop, which can make them in hours. He says we need to persist with our plan and buy as many signs as needed to show we are not intimidated. The neighborhood is watching this struggle play out in the open. Bart offers to split the cost for the new signs, which are three times as expensive as the mass-produced ones.

The next day, Bart is both right and wrong about the three-day appetite for sign stealing. The violator decided instead to modify the signs with pre-made stickers. My candidate’s last name is Tucker, and you can guess how the readable letters of the sign got perverted.

“Bart, this is getting out of hand. We need to call the police.”

“Sure, give it a try and file a police report. That’s what I tell everybody. If they happen to catch somebody and it goes to trial, there’s at least a paper trail.”

“You don’t sound enthusiastic about the idea.”

“They tell me they’ve better things to do and that it’s most likely kids playing at

mischief. We need to take it up a notch to catch them red-handed.”

Improving our tactics means installing hidden surveillance cameras in the bushes. Bart knows somebody across town with an old set they are not using anymore. Not spending the extra money is a relief, but it isn't as though we have much of a choice. It is the only viable alternative to buying more expensive fast-print signs.

For several days, my computer is crammed with bloated video files from the half-dozen cameras across my property. Then, a week before the election, the sign bandit strikes again. The camera picks up a tan minivan that stops in front of the house at 2:39 a.m. The car lights are off as it approaches. The interior lights are also off when a single person gets out wearing rubber gloves and carrying what looks like a contractor trash bag. They are a pro; the deer repellent is a useless deterrent.

Bart is disappointed, like me; the low resolution of the cameras denies us a clear image of both the villain's face and the license plate. Still, we spend a couple of hours with a few volunteers running through a list of suspects we think are capable of vandalous acts among the other party's committee people. We study the still frames to determine the model year and car type. More money is spent than my wife would appreciate on buying web reports to learn what sorts of vehicles are registered to our suspects. It is unsettling to discover the level of detail such reports can render to anybody who pays. Two frenemies rise on our radar to a high level of suspicion, but we don't have anything conclusive to present to the authorities.

My anger blinds me to rationality. “Bart, I'm getting better cameras—like spy level. This bad actor needs to go down hard. No doubt, they are the ones doing this all over town. The rubber gloves tell me they are a seasoned pro at taking signs.”

Bart smiles and gives me the name of a home spying gadget store three towns away. He orders more fast-print signs.

It requires the same volunteers who came over a few nights earlier to install the high-tech surveillance system. The equipment costs were high, and my ability to pay for next month's grocery cart and bus stop ads is demolished.

But Bart consoles me. "You will be in the party's pantheon of heroes when they get arrested." He nods with approval at the battalion of signs on my lawn.

Sleeping is difficult the night after the new installation. My thoughts run through all the scenarios of triumph pending our nemesis being caught, embarrassed, and shunned by the community. Our town does not tolerate such disrespectful behavior. It would be just desserts if their reckless disregard for others tipped some voters in favor of our candidate in a tight race.

The next day is filled with disbelief and a feeling of utter defeat. Not only are all the cameras stolen, but every sign too, including the iron frames.

Total war is upon us. A crime report for expensive cameras gone missing would get the police's attention, but we both know they will fail to find the culprit. What leads do they have?

"It's time to go commando," Bart says. "We'll take shifts, including nighttime, watching from that thicket of bushes over there. Just you and me. We can't trust anybody at this point."

With only a few days left before the election, we place 128 signs on my lawn—there is hardly open grass to spare. It costs an outrageous amount of money and is paid on a credit card—at least the bank will be happy. We feel we need to win this; too much effort has been expended not to catch the perpetrator. Losing is not an option.

My shift begins at ten that night. In the darkness, beneath bushes starting to lose their

seasonal leaves, my muscles and back ache in discomfort. However, the pain is motivating, and it feels as though the undertaken cause is noble. A difference is being made in politics—albeit very small. Some fight social media’s bush war, while others demonstrate or donate to action groups; my fight is in the sign wars in a suburban town—lying in the dirt.

After a couple of hours pass, it happens.

There is no car this time. They move stealthily across the side yard, keeping to the shadows, avoiding areas illuminated by the streetlamps. At first, the figure seems imagined—a trick of my anxious mind, but upon hearing the first soft noise of a razor blade cutting mylar, the illusion breaks. The vandal moves among the signs with mechanical precision until they’ve collected about two dozen signs, and their contractor bag is plump full.

The vandal retreats the way they came, returning to the sidewalk. Without making a sound, my body slips from beneath the tangle of bushes to follow the sign thief.

My heart pounds hard in my chest. Not once does the thief turn around to see if they are being followed; it seems they are confident that, again, they are successful in malice. After a five-block zigzag between streets, they arrive at their house, a three-story Victorian, roughly the same design as mine.

They enter their detached garage from a side door and throw the bag inside. Moments later, they enter their darkened house through a rear deck door. The time is a few minutes past 3 a.m.

The house belongs to one of our top two suspects from the other party’s committee. It was so obvious it was them, but we could not prove anything, that is, until now. If you were to go to Central Casting to select an obnoxious person capable of irritating you even if all they are

doing is reading a list of vegetables, then this person fits the bill—their intensity to win rivals all others’. True to form in being a lawyer, they are also a vicious competitor to Bart.

Quickly, a text is sent to Bart.

His reply is immediate. *Your call whether to get a guilty-as-hell picture of the signs in their garage.*

Without thinking and spurred on by righteousness, my hand tests the doorknob of the side entrance into the culprit’s garage. It is open; none of us in the neighborhood locks these doors in our garages. In the meager light from my cell phone, the treasure trove of stolen signs is visible near a row of bikes in the back corner of the space. There are dozens upon dozens of our campaign signs, mostly stuffed into bags; the rest are collected with their rusty frames attached and leaning against the wall.

We’ve got them. We won. It all seems worth it.

A dozen evidence photos are texted to Bart. Behind me, my ears catch the grinding of gears and the snaps of wires against pulleys before the garage is flooded with light.

Behind the searchlight comes a voice. “Smile—this is being filmed for our social media. Attention, viewers: I discovered this person planting stolen signs in my garage. Will the other side stop at nothing?”

The decision to video him in turn is immediate: my only chance to survive the politics of the situation. Everything involving their party must be documented and shown to our voters.

“This clown has been stealing signs all over town, and they’re all in his garage now. I followed him back to his house. A citizen’s arrest is hereby called.”

“My wife is calling the real cops for a real arrest,” he says.



A call to Bart may make the legal aspects of the situation a détente of sorts between my trespassing and their thievery. Hopefully, the district attorney will throw up their hands and ask the two political parties to play nicely rather than press charges against squabbling, well-heeled suburban neighbors.

It is useless to suppose that the threat of mutual destruction on social media between our two local political parties will stop the thief from posting his videos. Neither of us cares if we come off poorly in terms of public opinion, just so long as we come off slightly better than the other side.

Once enough money is saved for my grocery cart and bus stop ads to run again, the motto will have to be reworked. “Trust begins with respect” won’t quite do it anymore. The thing to think of will be a marketing motto that 51 percent of the town can get behind.