

DIALOGUE

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"But They Didn't Win": Politics and Integrity

Ross C. Anderson

"WHY WOULD YOU EVER WANT TO GET INVOLVED in politics? Politicians are nothing but self-serving sleazeballs who will do anything to win. Nothing's ever going to change that!"

That was the sort of wisdom I received from many friends and acquaintances about two years ago, when I was deciding if I should seek the Democratic nomination for U.S. Representative in Utah's Second Congressional District in 1996.

CYNICISM VS. ACTIVISM

These were people who had my best interests at heart. They knew I had never before entered the political arena and wanted to disabuse me of my "naive" view that politics is an honorable calling. I was cautioned that integrity in politics occurs too rarely to justify becoming involved.

Although I was heartened by their concern for *me*, I was disheartened by their cynicism about electoral politics—and by their cynicism about their own politics. After all, such cynicism (and fatalism) often leads to apathy: "It won't make any difference; *why* should *I* care?" often evolves into "I really *don't* give a damn."

On a personal level, politics is one's own approach to public affairs. It is an application of our values—ethical, spiritual, and humanitarian—to the issues of how we should treat each other and what role our communities and governments should play. Unfortunately, the view of many, if not most, toward public affairs is basically, "Let the self-serving keep ahold of the reins, because that's what happens anyway—no matter how we would like it to be different and no matter what we might do to change things."

I have never been able to see it that way—as much as I might try when I get discouraged. Instead, I believe that each of us is an important

moral actor, with the responsibility—an unavoidable duty—to make things better.

There is no way out. Just as the person witnessing a rape should do whatever possible to stop it, and just as a person with access to food should feed a starving child, so too do each of us bear a moral imperative to help prevent wrongdoing and promote good. Our apathy ("I don't care what happens to the homeless"), our ignorance ("We didn't know our country was sponsoring death squads in Central America"), our failure or refusal to take action in the face of wrong-doing ("I am upset that the factory's pollution is causing cancer, but I can't break away to do anything about it") make us participants in the wrong-doing. We meet our moral responsibility only by saying "No" to wrongdoing and taking action to defeat it.

Although I had found ways to serve my community, I wanted to do more. I hoped to get in a position where I could more effectively work to end the corrupt influence of money in our political system, to help tap the potential of children who are otherwise destined to fail in our public schools, to fight for the elimination of the waste in paying billions of dollars in interest on our nation's debt, and to work to protect our environment and open lands against the forces of short-term greed and exploitation.

That's why I chose to run for Congress.

POLITICS-AS-USUAL

What comes to mind when we think about electoral politics and politicians? All too often we picture men and women who will abandon principle in the pursuit of victory, listening not to their consciences but to what pollsters tell them they must say and do to get elected. We recall politicians mud-slinging and lying about their opponents. We assume that hotly-contested elections must entail deception and dirty tricks. And we know the media distorts and simplifies to a point where the public frequently doesn't know whom or what to believe. I saw all of that, and more, during my race for Congress.

The Pollster's Profile

When I explored with others the prospect of running for Congress, I was surprised at the resistance by several political insiders who, I had thought, shared many of the views I held. Several Democrats tried to convince me not to run for office, saying I was "too liberal." When I asked what they meant, I was told, "You know, your involvement with the American Civil Liberties Union, your opposition to U.S. policy in Nic-

aragua in the 1980s, and your opposi-

I was astounded. "You mean years, on his own time, for the pro rights is unfit to run for office as a Democrat? And opposition to the death penalty in such a discriminatory way, uneducated, disqualifies someone as 'too liberal'?"

Unmoved, these Democrats repeated their argument. I was a professor, following the routing of a Democrat in the Congressional District would be a "white, male, conservative" candidate that made me more determined than ever to make race, gender, "conservative" a candidate!

Groveling to Win

During the primary election, I was told I was not a Democrat. I was a Democratic party that I would be. I held controversial views, such as my opposition to equal rights for people regardless of race, and of a woman's right to choose when and where to have a child. The message was that I was asking questions about those issues or that I was not what I really believed.

After a televised debate, my opponent told me that my opposition to the latest federal funding for the high-minded-sounding title IX, by itself, guarantee my defeat in the general election. I didn't think that caving in to attacks by my opponent wasn't like politicians in the past. Their bigotry against African Americans was not their bigoted stood up for the civil rights of African Americans. It was an unpopular thing to do?" I asked.

"But they didn't win elections,"

With that comment I was nervous. My opponent would lose. Although he was a Democrat, I was in his sleeve during the campaign, I would shift according to the political winds. My position on abortion after having learned the position of the Utah State Legislature had learned to suspect in so many

aragua in the 1980s, and your opposition to the death penalty."

I was astounded. "You mean that someone who has fought for years, on his own time, for the protection of civil liberties and human rights is unfit to run for office as a Democrat because he is 'too liberal'? And opposition to the death penalty, particularly when it is applied in such a discriminatory fashion against the poor and uneducated, disqualifies someone from running for office because he is 'too liberal'?"

Unmoved, these Democrats replied that a Brigham Young University professor, following the routing of Democrats in the 1994 election, had told them that the only Democrat who could win the Second Congressional District would be a "white, male, conservative Mormon." Hearing that made me more determined than ever. Democratic "leaders" were making race, gender, "conservatism," and religion the criteria for their candidate!

Groveling to Win

During the primary election, I was repeatedly told by leaders of the Democratic party that I would be defeated if I expressed certain controversial views, such as my opposition to the death penalty, my support for equal rights for people regardless of sexual orientation, and my support of a woman's right to choose whether to have an abortion in the early stages of pregnancy. The message was that I should avoid answering questions about those issues or that I should say something other than what I really believed.

After a televised debate, my opponent in the primary election opined that my opposition to the latest federal gay-bashing legislation, draped with the high-minded-sounding title "Defense of Marriage Act," would, by itself, guarantee my defeat in the general election. Later I asked if he didn't think that caving in to attacks on our gay brothers and lesbian sisters wasn't like politicians in the old South who profited politically from their bigotry against African Americans. "Don't you admire those who stood up for the civil rights of African Americans, even when it was an unpopular thing to do?" I asked.

"But *they* didn't win elections," he responded.

POLITICS-AS-UNUSUAL

Harry S. Truman, in his plain-spoken way, made the following, frequently-quoted comment about the environment of politicians: "My choice early in life was either to be a piano player in a whorehouse or a politician. And to tell the truth, there's hardly any difference."

However, politicians do not have to abandon their values or principles, and politics does not have to be a den of iniquity. There is perhaps no greater calling than public service, and no higher service than to lead in a manner that is honest, competent, and compassionate. Cynicism often blinds us to the fact that there are significant opportunities to serve our fellow men and women, and numerous examples of courageous, sincere, and ethical political leaders who have done much in the service of others.

However, to serve in a significant, moral way, we need not enter the "political" world. In fact, not much would get done if we all were involved in that world. In terms of our contributions to others, the real questions for each of us are What is our role? and How will we serve?

ACTIVISM AND INTEGRITY

Addressing the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1961, John F. Kennedy spoke of the obligations of public servants:

[W]hen at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each of us, recording whether in our brief span of service we fulfilled our responsibilities to the state, our success or failure, in whatever office we hold, will be measured by the answers to four questions: First, were we truly men of courage ... Second, were we truly men of judgment ... Third, were we truly men of integrity ... Finally, were we truly men of dedication?

Those four questions, rephrased to include women, apply to each of

tinued for lifetimes of poverty. Although she considers herself to be "apolitical," nothing could be further from the truth. In the sense that we each have our own politics—our own approach to public affairs—Suzanne is a tremendously courageous, successful "politician." By switching students from a track of educational failure, poverty, and crime to one of literacy, success, and, perhaps most important, social responsibility, she has altered our community for the better in ways that we can never fully comprehend. Her work in the service of individuals, their families, and our community has been the actualization of her personal values—making for a life of extraordinary dedication to serve those most in need.

Our communities, our nation, and our world need Ted Mosses to lead in setting rational, humane public policy and Suzanne Weisses to accomplish good works. We cannot educate our children well if public policy does not support our schools; yet, without great teachers, all the good policy in the world will not make any difference in our children's lives. And all the best education will not make much difference if our children do not have nurturing homes and safe neighborhoods. We all play vital roles in the well-being of our brothers and sisters—in our homes, our communities, our nation, and throughout the world. Once we realize our responsibility to serve, we can assess what needs to be done, what we can do, and how to go about doing it. Then we can do it honestly, well, and with good cheer.

TEACHING OUR CHILDREN WELL

From the nihilism rampant in an age of unfulfilling consumerism and narcissism, we should have figured out by now that the happiness we want for ourselves and our children will not come from lives of self-indulgence. Satisfaction comes from involvement, honesty in our relationships with one another, and service. It's good to speak to our children about these things, but the only way to teach these values is to live them ourselves and be models for those who follow us.

Although study and life experiences have added some subtlety to my philosophical views and ethical judgments, the fundamentals are rooted in my childhood: learning to pray at my mother's knee for the underprivileged; a *Children's Friend* story about standing up for what we know to be right against the taunts of others; and my father's remarkable example as a role model through his consistently generous, gracious, and honest dealings with every person who crossed his path.

After moving from Logan to Salt Lake City at age seven, I began the third grade at Morningside Elementary School. My most vivid memory of that time is going with my mother to a meeting with the principal, Dr. John Fitzgerald, before the school year started. Dr. Fitzgerald radiated a

warmth and sincerity that I had seldom experienced. Without being preachy or talking down to me, he spoke from his heart about the Golden Rule and how it provides wonderful guidance in our dealings with others. That discussion was worth a thousand Sunday school lessons—and certainly has had greater impact on my views (and, I hope, my conduct) than the many hours spent during college and, since, reading about religious, political, and ethical theory.

We each are in large measure the products of our childhood experiences and the influence of adults we admired. If we can keep that in mind whenever we have any contact with children—our own or others—we will contribute a great deal to them by providing examples of committed adults, involved in our communities, doing our best to serve. By setting that example, we also serve the future.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Integrity in politics is simply a component of integrity in one's life. Integrity is wholeness, honesty, and dedication to what is right. There can be no integrity without a commitment to honesty in assessing moral choices, to action, and to service. Yet there is no single formula for a life of integrity. There are those who recognize the serious harm we are causing our planet and who act to reverse the damage. There are those who know what a difference education makes in the quality of lives and communities, and who dedicate themselves to being exemplary teachers. There are those who know that genocide and other human rights violations occur around the world, and who take some action—perhaps simply making contributions to relief agencies or supporting political action—to ease the suffering. By their *actions*, they demonstrate integrity—a wholeness of their personal values and the manner in which they live their lives.

In politics, as in every other facet of life, we must ask what it really means to "win." Do racists, sexists, homophobes, and other bigots who win elections "win"? Do those who lie to win elections "win"? Do those who win elections simply by trying to fit what pollsters say is a "winning profile" "win"?

The true winners are those who earnestly seek the truth about moral choices and then *act* on those choices in the service of others. Those are the women and men who provide real leadership and inspiration—and who make a difference on our small planet during our short lives. And they are the people, whether engaged in electoral politics or their own personal politics, who prove that politics need *never* be "as usual." They demonstrate through their values and actions that good people can indeed make our world a better place.

A Response

Merrill Cook

THE EDITORS OF *DIALOGUE: A Journal of Mormon Thought* asked me to write about Utah's 1996 Second Congressional District race, deciding to publish an essay by me. I am grateful, and frankly a little intimidated by the editorial board I have always admired. But I have read Mr. Anderson's essay with great interest and left me with a renewed respect for the editors on key points, as you would expect. I do not want to waste this opportunity offered by the race run nearly two years ago. I do not find it fulfilling at this point to anyone but myself. Instead, I want to share my analysis of the race, what I think we can expect from the 105th Congress. Given the dramatic impact the 105th Congress has on Utahns, I think that discussion will be of interest to readers.

Second-generation products, which are often touted as maintaining the status quo while eliminating most of the original problems, describe the 105th Congress as a second generation inheriting the vision that swept Republicanism from Democratic control, while losing the vision that led to confrontations with the Vietnam War and public criticism.

The public has been the beneficiary of the 105th Congress. House Speaker Newt Gingrich's sons in a floor speech he gave that day, and the passage of the 105th Congress.¹ The Founding Fathers

1. In "Concurrent Resolution on the Status of the House of Representatives," *Congressional Record*, 20 May 1997.