**Commentary: Sacrifices and Rewards of Public Service**

How do we make sense of the recent violence against public officials and the residual damage to their families and civilians? The cold-blooded attack on Representative Giffords and the deaths and injuries of her admirers in Tucson, Arizona, not only wreaked havoc in Arizona, it furthered an ongoing assault against those individuals who have answered the call of public service.

What school board member, county commissioner, or city councilor can forget the recent scene of a school board chairman held at gunpoint in Panama City, Florida? Here in Oregon, a jury recently handed out death sentences to a father and son whose anti-establishment beliefs led them to plant a bomb that killed two police officers and injured the police chief at a bank in Woodburn. These are but a few tragic reminders that public service often requires great sacrifice, particularly in the face of growing government bashing that recklessly throws around such slogans as "don't retreat, re-load" and "if ballots don't work, bullets will." Perhaps it is time to change our rhetoric.

Many will take this opportunity to point out our failed mental health system as the real culprit in these situations. That certainly is an area of great concern, and I write from painful experience. My mother was murdered 10 years ago by a crazed man who belonged in the state hospital. Only his violent final act landed him there permanently. Still, mental health services continue to fail those in need at an alarming pace. As painful and fresh as that memory is, I can't help but think that our collective attitude toward those who have chosen public service is an equally serious problem. This attitude manifests itself in a spectrum of actions ranging from spewing angry rhetoric toward public officials to acts of extreme violence by those who merely need a little encouragement in identifying a target.

I was among the tens of thousands of baby boomers who felt called into public service by John F. Kennedy's plea "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." He, too, paid the ultimate sacrifice for his country soon to be followed by other peace messengers, including Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. Still, we were undeterred. Some went off to military service, some to the Peace Corps, and some chose teaching or public administration. But, we had a common cause: to protect a society and a way of life that is grounded in a core set of values. One of those is the sanctity of civil public discourse. Another is the honor and privilege of public service.

What are we teaching our children today about civic engagement and public service? In the early years of my career as a planner and city manager, I was invited frequently by local schools to discuss basic civics with students. Those invitations stopped years ago as schools became increasingly burdened with state and federal instruction and testing mandates. But schools are not entirely to blame for today's lack of civility in public discourse.

Our instant news gratification is mostly satisfied by scenes of conflict rather than cooperation. We are quick to condemn police officers for use of force without understanding their experience. We give encouragement to anyone with a "throw the bums out" mantra, as if unseating the current politician or local government manager is the American thing to do, regardless of the person’s actual record of service. (I know at least three accomplished and respected city administrators who have fallen victim to this mantra in Oregon in the past few weeks alone.)

Still, I return to my optimistic roots and a faith in the ultimate triumph of democracy over tyranny and fear. I am proud to have a daughter who is a teacher and a son who is interning to become a public administrator. They continue to believe that their career choices can make a big difference in the lives and the communities that they touch. That, in fact, is the reward of public service, and we must honor and encourage those who choose it, especially in these times of turmoil. Communities like Tucson, Panama City, and Woodburn have rallied around their public officials in times of crisis. We can do the same in our communities, without the need for a tragedy to remind us that public service is a noble calling that deserves our appreciation.

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