

Perspectives

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I

“Reflections on the Role of Public Service”
by United States Congressman Lee H. Hamilton

*An Address Delivered at the
School of Public and Environmental Affairs
Indiana University Bloomington*

I want to first thank Dean Barnes for inviting me to speak to you tonight. It is always a pleasure to visit with IU faculty and students.

You and IU can be very proud of SPEA. For 25 years now, SPEA has been sending bright and talented people into government service at all levels—and into private sector employment often closely associated with government affairs. SPEA alumni have improved the quality of service given by government, and thereby enriched the quality of life for all of our people. I am very grateful to SPEA, and wish it many more years of service in the public interest.

I want to talk to you tonight about public service and the important role that it plays in communities and in our national life.

The Quiet Crisis

You have heard a lot about the urgent need to do something about several crises facing America: the stagnant wages of American workers; the breakdown of the American family; the fraying of the moral fabric of our country; the increase in violent crime among young people; and, of course, many others.

Let me add another crisis to the list. It is a “Quiet Crisis.” It is not in the headlines, but it should be. The quiet crisis is this: government may no longer be able to attract the kind of quality people it will need to do the essential work of our country in the years ahead.

Government continues to have many remarkably dedicated and competent employees. Even so, my impression is that talent is getting harder to attract and retain.

I am alarmed by: how far morale has fallen in our federal workforce; how many government managers discourage young people from pursuing a career in public service; and how few of our top students express an interest in a public service career.

Even as interest in public service has waned, the need for quality workers has increased. Budget cuts and downsizing have, to a certain extent, limited opportunities in government, but we still need topflight people to negotiate treaties; ensure airplane safety; oversee the banking and securities systems; inspect our food and water; and conduct AIDS and cancer research.

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Simply put, we need the best and brightest to address our most difficult problems.

Government has its faults, and the proper role of government remains the great question of American politics. But all of us can agree with Alexander Hamilton, who said: “A government ill-executed, whatever might be the theory, is in practice poor government.” All Americans, ranging from the strongest supporters of government action to its harshest critics, have a stake in seeing that government is not only kept in bounds, but also works.

There are several explanations for the difficulties in attracting young people to public service: the comparatively low pay; the enormous student loan debts they must pay down after graduation; the relentless public criticism of government and government officials; the level of dislike—often hatred—directed at those who hold elective office; and the stifling bureaucracy and limited opportunities for advancement.

We could talk at length about possible reforms that would make public service more attractive, such as better pay and debt relief for students, but that is a topic for another time and place. Today, I want to focus my remarks on a more fundamental problem.

Public Attitudes Toward Government Service

I find troubling the deep cynicism many Americans feel toward government and government service. The single most difficult problem that a government official confronts today is this pervasive cynicism.

Anger at the government and disgust with elected officials have increased, causing voters to jump in different directions. Americans believe government fails to deal adequately with crime, economic insecurity, and other of the country’s biggest problems.

It has always been true that people in this country have been skeptical of power and have cherished the right to beat up on their leaders, and, in many respects, that attitude is healthy.

But most elected officials, including me, believe today that public cynicism is severe, intense, and stronger than it once was. We are told by the experts who measure public attitudes, that people do not trust one another, that they do not trust institutions, and that

institutions do not trust people they serve and employ—as much as they once did.

Three decades ago a majority of Americans believed that most people could be trusted. Today, two out of three believe the opposite. In that environment, restoring confidence in government actions is a daunting task. Until we address this problem, we will continue to have difficulty attracting the best and brightest to public service.

When I entered Congress, public service was still considered an honorable calling. It was a time when people trusted government and believed elected officials would do right by them. They do not today.

Sometimes I wonder how far we can erode confidence in our government, and other institutions, and still have a country that works. It is important to remember that in the end, we as a nation cannot thrive or survive without public faith in our institutions, our destiny, and our values.

I got a letter once from a prominent constituent who, because of my long years in the Congress, proclaimed to the local newspaper that I had never worked a day in my life. At first my reaction was one of anger. I wanted to invite him to follow me for a week and stack my hours against his. But then I really began to feel sorry for him because he so profoundly misunderstood the democratic system and what those who participate in it, and try to make it work, must do.

The Challenge of Public Service

Public service can be a proud and lively career, as President John Kennedy said. Few things can give you greater satisfaction than public service. Its greatest attraction is the sheer challenge of it: to engage the toughest problems of our time, and seek solutions for them; to try to think boldly about them; to make hard choices; to not fear the disfavor of the crowd; to explain again and again before all kinds of audiences what the problems are and what must be done; to encourage a politics that reflects, not particular groups or lobbies, but the common good; and to exercise power responsibly.

I have never thought of politics as a dirty business. I know many Americans do. I am aware that politics makes great demands on human integrity and that none of us solves those demands completely. But I

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do not find politicians a lying, intriguing, backstabbing group. It is probably true that we do not always answer every question bluntly. It is true that those in politics need to use tact and good taste and courtesy and civility.

I do not find it true that people of high principle avoid politics. I do find it true that people of high principle wrestle with the demands of politics. Politicians have to work hard to keep an elementary sense of justice, to see things as they are, and not as things often appear to be. They have to strive: to get a sense of responsibility; to sympathize with the enormous problems that people have; to figure out what to do about those problems; and to understand that for a large number of Americans, life is essentially a struggle.

Those of us in politics get plenty of advice—some of it good and some of it awful. But we must continually try to get at the heart of reality on the basis of our own personal experience.

In the end, the politician has to rely on his or her own personal instincts and judgment. The data and information all but engulf you. You must sift through it as best you can. At the end of the day you have to put your feet up on the desk and look out the window and ask yourself key questions like “what is really important to people?” and “how does this proposal affect people?” We have to try harder to understand what’s going on about us and then to explain it and to try to formulate solutions or at least approaches to the problem.

Many Americans are frustrated with the democratic process. I share that frustration. It takes so much effort to move the process along toward a solution. The path is often shady and bumpy, the collisions are frequent, and policy gets trimmed along the way. Nothing ever seems to be finally settled. Issues become battles, fought once, fought twice, fought many times, and never permanently settled.

This system of ours doesn’t move easily. Some of the founding fathers, I believe, sought to fashion a government for inaction, and in many ways they succeeded. On thousands of occasions I’ve wrestled with the question of how much to compromise and accommodate. Some people deplore those processes but without their exercise the country wouldn’t work.

I know that government service is unfashionable. There are few groups attacked with greater gusto than politicians and bureaucrats—and some of that criticism is, of course, justified. But, time and again, I have seen people provide exceptional public service. They are some of the finest, most competent, and most committed people I’ve ever met.

It has been my good fortune to know many government officials who never seek fame, whose names are unknown to most Americans, who seek and prefer public positions—not for power—but for what they can accomplish to make the world a better place.

I heard last year from a staff person at the Bureau of Labor Statistics—the government agency that puts out statistical information on our economy, such as the employment rate or the number of housing starts.

He told me that after the government shutdown that occurred in the last Congress, his office held a meeting for all the staff to discuss the situation. The shutdown had lasted quite some time; people had missed paychecks; morale was low.

But what did people talk about? Not their pay; not their benefits; not the disruption in their personal lives. They talked about how the shutdown had affected the quality of their statistical data, and what they could do to get out reports, delayed for about a month, as quickly and accurately as possible.

That is dedication.

I am pleased that our government workforce is a talented bunch. I know it is fashionable to decry government, but I don’t think I would want to live in or under a government marked by mediocrity.

People often say to me, “Just get government off my back.” They say that—until a child dies from eating a tainted hamburger, or the earth cracks open and wreaks chaos, or until they want a bridge built, or the education of their children improved, or their country defended.

Just think what we depend on the government to do: to keep us safe in a dangerous world; to secure justice and domestic order; to maintain infrastructure and social services; to educate our children; to provide health care to a large segment of our population; and to solve a whole host of problems pressing upon us, such as drug abuse or the diminishing ozone layer.

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I don't want second-rate people dealing with those problems.

I sometimes walk through the halls of the National Institutes of Health. I'm pleased that we have there present and future Nobel Prize winners in medicine who for a fraction of the salary they can earn on the outside are engaged in some of the most exciting medical research taking place in the world today.

I have talked to hundreds of people who have served in the federal government and then gone on to careers of great reward in the private sector. Almost without exception they look back on their public service years as the most challenging, rewarding, and satisfying of their careers. Those are the years they talk about and those are the years they remember.

Dean Acheson said, "To leave public life is to die a little." In my view, public life gives one the opportunity to live fully.

Government by Consent

Government by consent does not exist once and for all, but must be steadily created. Ultimately, we realize that we stake our future in this country on the capacity of each of us to play our part in the democratic system and to carry our share of the load. So far, the gamble has been worth the risk.

Democracy places an extraordinary demand for discipline upon each of us. Each of us must seek to restore in our own lives a sense of the common good. Each of us must worry less about what happens to ourselves, and to the organizations we happen to cherish, and focus more on how to advance the common good. Each of us must restore our basic respect for the law and try to help our fellow citizens.

If we do those things, the resolution of our common problems may prove to be less formidable than we think.

Thomas Jefferson had it about right. He said, "There is a debt of service due from every man to his country, proportion to the bounties which nature and fortune have measured to him." That's pretty good advice—even for 1997.

I think it may sound a little grandiose—even naive—but I think most Americans do want to do something to serve their country. They find it exciting, challenging, and rewarding to be on the inside

when important decisions are made. They want to contribute to the direction and success of a free society.

Someone asked me not long ago why I have continued to serve in public office for so many years. I guess the short answer is I still think there are some exciting and worthwhile things that can be done. As I reflect on my years in Congress, I believe that America is a better place than it was when I came here in 1965. The Cold War is over, and we are at peace.

We are the preeminent military power in the world today, and the U.S. economy is the world's most competitive. The new global trading system means new challenges and a host of new opportunities. The Internet brings a world of knowledge to the most remote classroom or home. Programs like Social Security and Medicare have greatly improved the lot of older Americans. Women and minorities have had new doors opened to them like never before. And most importantly, this is still the land of opportunity—where everyone has a chance, not an equal chance, unfortunately, but still a chance—to become the best they can become.

Congress did not singlehandedly bring about all these changes, but it played a major role in each of them.

Looking back on more than 30 years in Congress, I am not cynical, pessimistic, or discouraged, but optimistic about Congress and the country. I am grateful for every day I have been a part of this body. I do not know of any place else in all the world that I would have preferred to be. I believe that inch by inch, line by line, I have had a small—very small—part in making this a more perfect union and making this country stronger, safer, and freer.

What more could anyone want?