

Statesmen are seldom appreciated in their own time

Often Statesmen are only truly appreciated after their service is over, perhaps even departed this life. This is understandable because the Statesman operates on a longer time-frame, The Statesman is proactive rather than reactive. In democratic governance, the people — the electorate — tend to be more concerned with meeting felt needs than needs that may exist in the future. Professor Alexander Fraser Tytler, the Scottish historian, writing at the end of the eighteenth Century, warned of this when he is purported to have said:

A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves money from the Public Treasury. From that moment on the majority always votes for the candidates promising the most benefits from the Public Treasury with a result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy¹

The Politician will play to this sentiment because he quickly realizes that the best way to appeal to the electorate is to give them what they want — the most benefits from the public treasury. The Statesman has a difficult time in a contest against an opponent with this mindset. In contrast to the Statesman, the Politician is comfortable with this approach because he/she measures success in the short term.

Statesmen use a longer time-frame in measuring their effectiveness. The criteria of the Statesman are: Did I make life better for the people? Were lives better because of my service on their behalf? The Statesman, like the shepherd, is always looking ahead, asking what dangers are ahead for the sheep. Furthermore, the Statesman also ideally is seeking approval from our ultimate Master, our Lord the Creator, rather than man, although under our Lord's guidance, the people benefit immensely. Statesmen have in mind that they have another Judge even more important than the electorate who will evaluate their actions and their motivation:

For we will all stand before the tribunal of God. For it is written: As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to Me, and every tongue will give praise to God. So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.²

All of this creates the dilemma of the Statesman not receiving proper acclaim from those served. In fact, approval in our own generation may or may not come. As I cautiously identify Statesmen, in my mind, I include William Wilberforce, Abraham Lincoln and George C. Marshall and Nelson Mandela. Among Wilberforce, Lincoln and Marshall, not one of these Statesmen was universally appreciated in their own era. Wilberforce was a political outcast until late in his struggle to eliminate slavery. Lincoln was hated so much that he was assassinated. Marshall, although he received the Nobel Peace Prize, was largely overlooked in his own nation. If you were to ask an American today who George C. Marshall was, most would not be able to answer you. Statesmen, as I am defining them, do not always attain the highest office. Typically, they are more concerned with doing good than the political expediency necessary to be elected. The fourth Statesman, Nelson Mandela, was the exception in that he was immediately recognized for his amazing contribution.

This leads us to the question: If Statesmen are not fully appreciated in their own time, does democracy guarantee that we place in position leaders with the hearts to be Statesmen? Does democracy guarantee that we gain the best leaders? Is democracy more conducive to statesmanship than other forms of Government? When the democratic experiment was instituted in the United States, it was expected that the best and brightest would serve the people in Government. The challenge democracy presents is that it requires a political figure to be continually campaigning for the next election or a higher Government position. In this sense, democracy seems to reward Politicians. As such, it is difficult for one who has the heart of a Statesman to be elected to office through the democratic process. It will take wisdom on his/her part. It will also require a maturity on the part of the electorate.

As I consider Abraham Lincoln, I believe that abolition of slavery was a part of God's progressive revelation to him. Furthermore, I am convinced that if Lincoln had understood this from the beginning and made it a part of his campaign, it is unlikely he would have been elected. In 1860, at the national convention that selected the presidential candidate to represent his party, Lincoln polled a distant second on the first ballot. It was only on subsequent ballots where he began to emerge as the candidate of the party, finally winning the nomination on the third ballot.

Dag Hammarskjöld is perhaps the United Nations Secretary-General considered the closest to a statesman. President John F. Kennedy described Hammarskjöld as “the greatest statesman of our century.”³ He was only considered for the position of Secretary-General after other more experienced candidates were eliminated from the race by the veto-wielding nations of the U.N. Security Council.⁴ He was chosen as a candidate who would not offend the two Security Council nations leading the two sides of the Cold War. In other words, he was thought to be a Politician and that is what the selecting powers wanted. While in office, he refused to bend to those two super powers.

The dilemma is that God, when He designed Government, intended that every governing official be a Statesman. However, His creation's nature would dispose them to prefer Politicians. When the person with the heart of a Statesman achieves office, that individual must recognize that it truly was God Himself who placed him/her in that position and that we should continually look to Him for guidance as His instrument. The Statesman must understand that service to one's people is a calling from God and will always require God's wisdom to navigate the challenge faced in navigating the idiosyncrasy of democratic governance:

*Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without criticizing, and it will be given to him.*⁵

References

1. Alexander Fraser Tytler (1748-1813) in *The Decline and Fall of the Athenian Republic*, attributed.
2. *Bible*, Romans 14;10-12.
3. Roger Lipsey, *Hammarskjöld: A Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
4. Brian Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), pp. 9-16.
5. *Bible*, James 1:5.