

The Role of Opposing Viewpoints in the Decision-Making Process of the Statesman

King Solomon left for us the benefit of his wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Let us look at some of his advice as it relates to making decisions within government:

Plans fail when there is no counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. (Proverbs 15:22)

Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory. (Proverbs 11:14)

You should wage war with sound guidance — victory comes with many counselors. (Proverbs 24:6)

Prepare plans by consultation, And make war by wise guidance. (Proverbs 20:18)

King Solomon advocated broad consultation in the decision-making process, apparently drawing upon the broadest array of thinking available. Although Solomon operated in a monarchical system, his advice applies to democratic governance.

I was privileged to have one friend, who was at the time Foreign Minister. He related an experience from his childhood immediately after independence. His father had been Leader of the Opposition during the early days after independence. In Parliament, he fiercely opposed many policies of the Prime Minister. My friend was confused when, after returning to the capital from visiting their home village, his father would take bushels of produce to the Prime Minister's residence. In private, the Prime Minister and his father were best of friends. They disagreed on many policy issues, but they deeply appreciated and respected each other.

Lincoln impressed me when he brought into his cabinet several strong politicians who had opposed him in seeking the presidency, for example, William Seward as Secretary of State and Salmon Chase as Secretary of the Treasury. Lincoln knew that he was inviting risk because there was the likelihood that they would use their positions of authority to challenge him for the leadership. However, he was convinced they were the best available for their responsibilities. Mid-way through his term, the risks materialized. Chase attempted to dislodge Seward, apparently as part of his challenging the President. The easiest way for Lincoln to resolve this dispute would have been to dismiss one or both of them. Lincoln decided that he needed both of them in his cabinet so he dealt with the conflict in this way: He requested and received resignations from both of them. Then, Lincoln rejected both of the resignations. The conflict died and never resurfaced.

A dear friend who served as Prime Minister of his nation for 20 years, and whom I consider a Statesman, as we have been defining, was pushed out of office by his Deputy Prime Minister. The Deputy argued that the Prime Minister had had his time in office and it was now time for the Prime Minister to step aside and allow the Deputy to rule. During the

several months while this challenge unfolded, I asked the Prime Minister what his thinking was in placing this man in such a powerful position within his government. Paraphrasing, he said “I knew I could be inviting a challenge, but I felt he had enough to offer to make it worthwhile to take the risk.”

A difference of opinion does not need to mean an adversarial relationship. We often learn much more from our critics than from our supporters and allies. A healthy democracy requires dialogue with the broadest segments of a society. In fact, the leader is charged by God with unifying the nation and moving the whole ship ahead, not just the majority component. A true understanding of democracy does not require that we be adversaries with those of differing views, especially politically. The Head of Government has been given the mandate to give direction to the government, not to strangle all others or to stifle those with differing perspectives. The Head of Government must recognize the opposition precisely as that: those who see the problem and/or the solution in a different way. It is sad that we could make such a person into a personal enemy and, from there, into an enemy of the State.

While he was President, I was heartened to see Nelson Mandela apply this principle. On one occasion when he had to travel out of his country, he appointed his rival Mangosuthu Buthelezi as Acting President. I am convinced that too much energy is wasted in the polarizing of the political camps. After all, it is not our party that is so important; it is our nation. And I am convinced that no nation can achieve the quality of life God intends for it until this principle is applied.

A commitment to the important relationships with cabinet and opposition requires that one recognize that he/she does not have all knowledge. This is humbling but it is realistic. The unique principle that our Father brings into governing is that of **persuasion**. This is illustrated by the Apostle Paul when he testified to King Agrippa who responded: “Are you going to persuade me to become a Christian so easily?” (Acts 26:28). Elsewhere, Paul taught: “Therefore, because we know the fear of the Lord, we seek to persuade people.” (2 Corinthians 5:11).

Behind this is an attitude of appreciation for each other, regardless of our viewpoints.