

WHERE HAVE ALL THE ELDERS GONE?

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The current spectacle at the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee hearings to advise and consent on President Trump's nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court as an associate justice raises many issues and questions regarding not just Kavanaugh's fitness to serve on the Court but our ability to govern ourselves. In the past several weeks we have seen organized outbreaks of anarchy and warning signs of tyranny in the halls of Congress challenging our democratic republic and constitutional rights.

One question in particular captures our attention. Where have all the elders gone? Those members of Congress who intervene when the rhetoric and posturing get out of hand. Who respectfully and privately tell their colleagues when they have crossed the line and are engaged in behavior that has the effect if not the intent of dividing Congress. Who understand full well that the work of Congress is to find ways to put aside personal ambition whenever necessary in order to reach agreement. Who hold fast to the truth that subduing personal ambition does not diminish the integrity of members of Congress but allows them to preserve and enhance their integrity by intelligent and free service to the good of all Americans.

Personal ambition in political affairs is the equivalent of self-interest in economic affairs. Both are driving forces but both are fraught with danger.

In economic affairs, excessive self-interest can destroy a market economy by opening the door to serious abusers. Consider the role played in the Great Recession by mortgage lenders who persuaded persons and families whom they knew were at risk of default to sign on to mortgages which in turn were bundled and sold to other financial institutions that were unaware of the underlying default risk baked into those bundles.

In political affairs, excessive ambition can destroy a representative democracy when one party is able, willing, and successful in denying the other party the opportunity to speak, be heard, and be respected. Wherein discourse is foreclosed by a prior decision to concede nothing, by a refusal to listen, by an inherent claim by partisans that their firmly-held position alone is the true measure of justice. This all-too pervasive attitude is an expression of the excessive ambition of far too many members of Congress and exposes the will to power of the political leadership. This is how excessive ambition turns a peaceful movement into a self-righteous mob.

To be an elder does not require long years of service in Congress. What it demands is a willingness to act with courage, wisdom, and prudence. A special temperament that looks for opportunities to build consensus where no one loses and resists the toxic environment of "heads I win tails you lose." Those members of Congress whose careers prior to Congress were structured on winning at

all costs, even when it meant denying someone his due, have to learn the ways of accommodation. Shaking hands and genuinely caring for others have to replace finger pointing and spitefulness. Failing that, what you get is the disgusting incivility of the Judiciary Committee hearings where some members are willing to turn witnesses into pawns for their own personal advantage.

Elders never use other persons to advance their careers or personal agendas. Elders never raise their voices to interrupt or intimidate others. They never refuse to listen to others. They resist responding in kind to a personal insult.

Rather than excluding others, elders invite them into the discourse. Elders understand and accept the consequences of at times putting the needs and interests of the nation ahead of their own districts and states. They know and resist extending Gresham's law from economics to politics wherein bad behavior drives out good behavior.

Elders embrace the proposition that a person accused of a crime is innocent until proven guilty is not a courtesy accorded the accused that can be cast aside whenever it pleases the mob. Elders recognize that the presumption of innocence is essential to the sacred dignity of the accused. Shifting the burden of proof to the accused in a Congressional hearing is just one more way that the practice of identity politics deliberately demeans and uses a human being for partisan advantage and puts other like-minded persons at risk. Due process is due diligence where courage, wisdom, and prudence replace the fury of the mob as the proper means to discovering the truth.

Elders do not allow themselves, colleagues, staffers, partisan strategists or pollsters to use the media to parrot partisan talking points or to launch ad hominem attacks. Words matter. Lies and half-truths are inherently damaging to self-governance.

Media elders, especially on cable TV, must resist inviting partisan gunslingers to comment on current events even when leaving them off the schedule negatively impacts their ratings. Gunslingers are not there to dialogue. Driven by excessive ambition – notice how many of them are young -- they were hired to attack and destroy. Their deadly gunplay has the effect of spreading the toxin of identity politics and further dividing the country. Elders at cable news channels should not have to be told that there is no place for re-staging *Gunfight at the OK Corral* in their programming. Words matter because words can kill.

We don't have an answer for the question "where have all the elders gone?" What we do know is that the future of representative democracy cannot be left in the invisible hands of the pursuit of personal ambition at all cost. It has to be left in the caring hands of men and women who know how to rein in personal ambition when it begins to fuel the fires of anarchy and tyranny. Self-governance is not an assured thing. It is a precious gift that requires eternal vigilance.

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