

Pirkei Avot and Politics

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"Be wary of the government, for they get friendly with a person only when it suits their interest; they appear as friends when it is to their own advantage, but they do not stand by a person in time of his need."

This dismal teaching is from Pirkei Avot (usually translated as "Ethics of the Fathers," more accurately translated, as Jacob Neusner proposes, as "Lessons of the Founders"). It came to mind the other night while I was listening to the Democratic response to Newt Gingrich's talk to the nation. Given my feelings about Gingrich -- a combination of fear, contempt, and loathing - I was ripe to cheer his rebutters, Dick Gephardt and Tom Daschle. I hoped they'd zero in on the truly scandalous aspect of the Gingrich dispensation, the readiness at one and the same time to increase the number of poor people and to decrease the support available to them. But these days, the politicians have concluded, there's no percentage in calling attention to the poor. It's the middle class, stupid.

Still, Gephardt and Daschle said the right things about the indifference of the Gingrich program to middle class interests, about its radical tilt towards the rich. The more they talked, however, the less compelling they were. The words seemed rehearsed, derived less from the heart than from the findings of the last batch of focus groups, policy as a pastiche of hot buttons the research people tell you about.

Or, more precisely, posturing rather than substance. And the fact that the posturing was in a direction I favor was inadequate to overcome its shallowness.

Given the ways of contemporary politics, one might conclude that Gephardt and Daschle didn't do as well as they might have in Sincerity 101, that all they need is more time with a good drama coach. But I fear there's something more endemic here, a built-in occupational hazard that is beyond the reach of trainers and coaches, a tumor that comes with the political territory and that only rarely proves benign.

Specifically, the combination of the personality characteristics of those who opt for a political career and the job description of the politician makes it likely that our political echelon will be riddled with unreal people, people incapable of conducting a normal conversation. (The tendency

to bloated rhetoric is, of course, magnified when the "conversation" is between the politician and a television camera.)

This is a problem related to but not identical to what Jack Kennedy used to call "the insolence of power," related as well to the "inside the Beltway" syndrome that we hear so much about. But it's not about how our governors in Washington lose touch with the rest of the country, the country beyond the Beltway; it's about how they lose touch with themselves. It has to do with what happens to people when they live with applause when they become their roles, when circumstances conspire to make them take themselves too seriously.

Some members of Congress manage the hazards gracefully. Carl Levin is Carl Levin, not The Senior Senator From Michigan. So, too, even in the face of all the publicity, Barney Frank. And others. In some at the other extreme, the tumor has so badly metastasized that even in private conversation it seems as if they are holding forth to an adoring audience of thousands. Many, perhaps most, fall somewhere between Mr. Smith (aka Jimmy Stewart) and Senator Claghorn. Their public face -- more precisely, their public mouth -- is, unconsciously, a con.

This makes a hefty case for term limits, and were term limits not a recipe for transferring power from our elected officials to their faceless staff people, I might favor them. But they are, and I don't. The real case it makes is for Rabban Gamaliel, who wrote the words about being "wary of the government."

That may these days not sound like much of an insight. Who is not wary of the government? All we've heard for the past two decades and more is that the government is to be distrusted. That's the thrust of the current Republican message, and it is imitated enthusiastically by Democrats from the president on down.

But read farther in Pirkei Avot, and you come to the well-known caution of Rabbi Hananiah: "Pray for the welfare of government, for if it were not for the fear of it, one person would swallow another alive."

On one reading, that's a pretty grim assessment of human nature, a humbling Hobbesian reminder that, among other things, we need restraints. In the passage that immediately precedes Hananiah's warning, we read the words of Akavyah the son of Mahalalel: "Know from whence you came, whither you are going, and before whom you are going to have to give a full account of yourself.

From whence do you come? From a putrid drop. Whither are you going? To a place of dust, worms, and maggots. And before whom you are going to give a full account of yourself? Before the King of kings, the Holy One, the blessed." Talk about humbling.

On the reading that seems most pertinent in this season of the Contract, we need to read the one passage together with the other: Be wary of government, including those with whom you agree as well as those you detest -- and pray for its welfare, too. Pray, I suppose, that all of them withstand the temptations to posturing that come with high office; pray that they understand not only the limits of government but also its responsibilities; pray, finally, that they keep always in mind now before whom they will be called to account. '