We Need Political Courage

Say what you will about George Washington, but he was a giant of a man. He has lately been vilified in some quarters because he was a slave owner like many of the wealthiest of his time, which was 250 years ago. But how many men, having been President for two terms, and offered a third, would say, "No thanks"? Upon receiving word of Washington's deciding to walk away from power, King George III of England was reported to have said, "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world,"

Thus began a long tradition of peaceful transfer of power between U.S. Presidential administrations, something almost miraculous.

But walk away Washington did. And to burnish his resume, he gave a heartfelt and prescient going away address. His speech warned of regionalism and two-party politics, and cautioned about foreign affairs. We now can see that regionalism resulted in a civil war, and our country was able to resist foreign alliances at least until a shrinking world and the Second World War left no choice. As for the two-party system, well, here's a little of what he said: "It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one party against another…" No kidding. Our communities are so agitated that it is difficult to find people willing to get involved in self-rule for fear of offending one or another person.

Not that this is anything new. In the drama *Inherit the Wind*, a fictionalized version of the Scopes Monkey Trial, we find the owner of a country store in rural Tennessee being asked by a curious reporter for his opinion on human evolution, to which the storekeeper replies, "Don't have any opinions. They're bad for business." Well, *that* at least makes sense. Picking sides on a hot topic can gain or lose you a good percentage of your customers. Just ask the brewers of Budweiser beer.

But what is it that is causing people in communities such as ours to shy away not only from participative democracy, but also, abandoning party affiliation? Are we now ashamed of our political beliefs? Are we afraid of being pigeonholed? Has our community, as Washington foretold, become agitated "with ill-founded jealousies"? Has this polarization of late "kindled animosity of one party against another" to the extent that people fear being associated with one or the other? Watching the news can stoke that fear. When a commonplace interaction between neighbors suddenly and unexpectedly turns deadly, is it any wonder that some of us become fearful? There are those who would say, "Oh, that would never happen in Sprague." Witness a town meeting, in which a neighbor stands up, presumably to speak his piece on an issue, you know, like that classic Norman Rockwell painting of one of the "four freedoms." But instead, unprovoked, our neighbor immediately launches into *ad hominem* attacks on his neighbors. That happened. In Sprague. Don't say "This is not who we are." This is exactly who we are and where we are. And while it is not the only reason people do not want to share opinions or openly participate in democracy, it certainly has to be considered a possible factor.

What else causes timidity or diffidence in an individual who would like to participate in public service? Why would a person decline to run for election under a major party affiliation, even with the likelihood that both parties would endorse the candidacy? And this is not an anomaly; there are others of like mind. This is a troubling pattern for those who believe in democracy. This is a problem for democracy. Period. How do we persuade citizens to take their place—indeed, take the reins—in self-governance? How do we persuade them that the strength of democracy lies in the participation by the greatest number of its citizenry? Because it is with that broader participation that comes the diversity of ideas and opinions necessary for healthy debate. The diminution of participation is a direct diminution of the effectiveness, support, and confidence in our ability to continue as a democracy.

We hear more often lately, words associated with more restrictive forms of government. Mark Twain wrote that "God created war so that Americans would learn about geography." It seems that lately, Americans seem to

want democracy to die so that they might learn the practical application of words like autocracy, fascism, totalitarianism, coup d'etat, putsch, despot, tyrant, dictator, and caudillo. Experience can be a hard way to get an education.