

ON POLITICIANS

Where there is tyranny, there are no politicians. Gengis Khan was no politician; neither was Hitler; neither is Brezhnev. Politicians are a democratic invention. So why do they have such a bad name?

There is, to be sure, some confusion about the word, which comes from a Greek root meaning "citizen." When there are citizens who have a voice in government, they express that voice through "politicians." Politicians are engaged as brokers or negotiators among the different groups of citizens in a community. A democracy could not exist without politicians.

But look at the Webster dictionary, which adds to the basic definition: "frequently used in a derogatory sense, with implications of seeking personal or partisan gain, scheming, opportunism, etc." Many people use the term "politician" only in that derogatory sense. But, in so doing, they are not defining politicians; they are describing qualities which some politicians have. They are indeed the same unfortunate qualities that grace an equal proportion of lawyers, doctors and businessmen -- but politicians live in more of a fish bowl.

It's time to rehabilitate the word. Abraham Lincoln was a politician. Golda Meir was a politician. There are good ones and bad ones, but the vocation itself is eminently honorable. To say otherwise is to deny the possibility of a democratic society.

That is one reason that the event on the night of April 5 is so significant. A broad cross-section of the Jewish community is coming together that night just to say to Congressman Phil Burton and to Sala Burton that we appreciate their many years of service in Washington D.C. This dinner event does not have a politically partisan purpose, a promotional purpose or a fund-raising purpose. It is just a matter of citizens pausing to say "well done" to a politician who has done honor to his profession. It is one way to recognize the stature of the profession, as well as of the man and woman.

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The sponsors of the meeting, not all of whom are of Phil Burton's party or subscribe to all his political persuasions, believe that there are special reasons for the Jewish community to single out Phil and Sala Burton. To begin with, there is no one in Congress who has been more supportive of Israel. That support has not been routine.

There have been two kinds of Congressional supporters of Israel. One kind has been primarily motivated by a special emotional attachment to Israel, for various reasons including their participation in the war against the Nazis. Another kind has no special emotional attachment, but understands the significance of Israel for America and the free world.

The tendency has been for Congress to have fewer and fewer of the first kind; and more and more of the second kind. In a way, that may be healthy -- but it carries with it certain hazards. We may be seeing one of those hazards in the present impulse to over-arm Saudi Arabia, a mistaken strategy for strengthening American interests in the Middle East. Someone with some feeling for Israel itself would be less likely to make such a mistake.

Burton has both an emotional attachment for Israel itself, and a deep understanding of Israel's significance for America and the free world. For that reason, he has been a key leader in garnering Congressional support for Israel throughout the years.

Many of Burton's other values on political freedom have paralleled the consensual values of the Jewish community. He has been a leader against any "Christianizing" legislation in Congress. He was instrumental in getting the national Holocaust Commission established. He and Sala have both been active on behalf of Soviet Jewry; Sala organized Congressional wives for Soviet Jewry activities. And so on.

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That's why members of the Jewish community are going to express themselves to the Burtons on the night of April 5. If you want to join in, phone 474-0701 for a reservation. It's a way to stress the values we like to see in Washington, rather than just to sit around and complain about "politicians."

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