

At Sidebar

NATHAN BROOKS

Our Shallow Disdain

IT'S NOT EASY to be a politician in this country. A call to elected public service unfortunately includes a career full of personal attacks and Internet rumors. Once elected, a public official can generally say good-bye to the privacy most of us take for granted. Speeches are graded not on substance but rather on the display of these officials' political

skill. We do with these individuals as we will, and we believe we have every right to do so because, as McGinnis once said, "The citizen does not so much vote for a candidate as make a psychological purchase of him."

Some commentators trace the current climate to a post-Watergate mistrust of all elected officials. Indeed, there can be no doubt that the scandals of that era altered the way in which citizens (and the media) view the nation's politicians. A closer look at American history, however, reveals that, from the very beginning, running for office exposed an individual to striking vitriol.

Some speculate that George Washington's decision to step down from the presidential podium after two terms came not out of a sense of democratic propriety but rather because of political fatigue. Moreover, the election that immediately followed is still considered one of the most intense in American history, as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson—in pursuit of their political ambitions—tore apart a friendship that had withstood the cannon fire of the American Revolution.

Luckily, in later years, Jefferson and Adams repaired their bond—to the extent that they both passed away on the same symbolic day, July 4, 1826. But these early experiments in republican government proved that public service in our nation's democracy could exact a serious toll on our elected officials.

On Saturday, Jan. 8, 2011, U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) was shot in the head while conducting one of her "Congress on Your Corner" events outside a supermarket in Tucson. Several others, including Chief U.S. District Judge John Roll as well as a nine-year old girl, were killed by the gunman, and even more were wounded.

While the shootings were the work of a deranged individual and should not be attributed to the level of political discourse in this country or in the state of Arizona, these terrible events offer us an opportunity to examine the way in which we view our elected officials more closely.

Too often we in the public feel that the democratic control we exert over the officials we elect includes a license to pillory and belittle them. No sooner do we elect someone than we turn that person into a banal caricature, devoid of integrity or moral sense. We ignore the myriad sacrifices (time, privacy, etc.) and risks associated with public service, and we paint all our politicians with the same conveniently broad brush.

Our history has taught us to be skeptical of government, and we are wise to submit to such lessons. But, at most, this should be a *presumption*, and we fail as citizens if we do not allow our elected officials the chance to prove us wrong. Our communities and our country need good leaders, but how are we to recognize (and re-elect) such people if we consign them to operate under a presumption of dishonesty that cannot be rebutted? As former Justice Felix Frankfurter put it, "One of the shallowest disdains is the sneer against the professional politician."

It's not that politicians shouldn't be scrutinized; they should. And it's not that power cannot corrupt; it undoubtedly can. But can devoted public service not inspire the public? And are we even able to recognize such service in today's world? **TFL**

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