

Viewpoints

Looking for leaders in a world of venomous politics

A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to meet Max Cleland when he came to Ogden to give the keynote address at a celebration to honor World War II veterans.

Cleland is a disabled veteran of the Vietnam War. He was awarded the Silver Star and Bronze Star. On April 8, 1968, Cleland was injured by an exploding grenade. The injury cost Cleland both legs and part of one arm.

Shortly after his return to the United States, Cleland ran for the Georgia Senate where he served from 1971 to 1975. Under President Jimmy Carter, Cleland was appointed head of the Veterans Administration; he was the youngest administrator to preside over that agency. Cleland was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1996. He lost his Senate seat in the 2002 election.

Cleland delivered a powerful speech to Northern Utah's World War II veterans. It was easy to see why Cleland had been elected to the U.S. Senate. It was harder to understand how he lost his Senate seat.

Indeed, several people in the audience asked when Cleland would run for elected office again. Cleland's answer was "never."

Top of Utah Voices



Michael Vaughan

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Commentary

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Cleland was emphatic that he would never run for elected office again. He said the 2002 election had extracted too great a personal toll on him, and he didn't want to experience anything like that again.

Because Cleland didn't provide more details, I did some research. It seems that in the 2002 election, Cleland's opponent, Saxby Chambliss, attacked Cleland's patriotism. Chambliss, who didn't serve during Vietnam, commissioned TV ads opening with photographs of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, that were rapidly followed by images of Cleland. The ads stated that Cleland didn't have the "courage to lead."

Regretfully, Cleland's decision not to seek elected office hasn't stemmed the personal attacks. Cleland is still called upon to give speeches and express opinions on political issues. This is enough to gather the wrath of those who disagree with him.

Here is what Ann Coulter wrote about Cleland after the 2002 election: "It is simply a fact that Max Cleland was not injured by enemy fire in Vietnam."

Coulter concludes, "He saw a grenade on the ground and picked it up. He could have done that at Fort Dix. Luckily for Cleland's political career ... he happened to do it while in Vietnam."

It seems a little unusual to describe the event which resulted in a triple amputation as lucky. Cleland never misrepresented his injuries, and his Silver Star was awarded for valorous action in combat several days before the incident with the grenade.

I can understand why Cleland lost his taste for political office. Lately, it seems as though politics and election campaigns have become too dirty and too personal. The winner may be the candidate who damages their opponent through personal attacks rather than focusing on meaningful



Former Sen. Max Cleland

qualifications and effective leadership.

Leaders are needed at every level of government: national, state, county and city. We need leaders skilled at listening to the needs of their constituents. We need leaders who can articulate a vision shared by the citizens. We need leaders who can build consensus.

Unfortunately, individuals with the skill to lead seem to be in short supply at every level of

government.

A few weeks ago, 39 citizens came forward to volunteer to fill a vacant seat on the Ogden City Council. This is several times the number of candidates who would file for an open council seat during a normal election. This suggests that the number of citizens willing to serve in political office is far greater than the number willing to go through the demands of a public election.

Concerns over venomous politics shouldn't be taken as a general condemnation of the electoral process. Candidates for elected office should be subjected to public scrutiny.

Yet, it seems that ad hominem arguments have increasingly crowded out cogent analysis in the political arena.

The case of Cleland provides a stunning example of a potential leader driven from elected office by vitriolic politics. Caustic politics also takes an invisible toll. It is unknown how many capable leaders have been deterred from ever considering political office. What is known is that communities are worse off when the political climate fosters and rewards malice over qualified and effective leadership.