

# TIMES TRIBUNE

## WHY THE BRIGHTEST SHUN POLITICS

By Michael C. Maibach

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As we contemplate this primary election, more than one citizen will grouse about the choices presented. "Can't we get better people to run?" Why is it that this society's best and brightest rarely run for public office? Because some aspects of American politics are unattractive to us, and perhaps especially to those who have reached the top of their professions. Among them:

**US politics lack burning issues.** Americans agree on the "basics." For the most part, we argue over the means, not the ends. While Northern Ireland and the Middle East are torn to the core, and the French move back and forth from capitalism to socialism with each new election, the US Congress passes the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings balanced budget bill. Naturally, US politicians find much to haggle about, but most often the issue is tax reform or toxic cleanup, not class struggle or religious oppression.

**Politics involves compromise and delay.** Outstanding individuals are action oriented. They are used to making tough, up-or-down decisions – often on their own or with a few others - and then seeing those decisions put into effect. Politics is just the opposite. It is a world of inches, not of miles. Incrementalism prevails. And everyone gets into the act - elected officials, news media, and interest groups. It is a messy business, likely to leave natural leaders frustrated.

**Politics enriches one's patience, not one's pocketbook.** In this commercial republic, most exceptionally gifted people can earn far more in business, law, or medicine. The highly paid must accept substantial financial loss to run for public office.

**Campaigns are superficial, undignified, and costly.** With a commercial economy (and the mass media) has come the selling of candidates. Name ID, good looks, and catchy phrases too often prevail over substantive debate of the issue. Candidates feel compelled to spend more time raising funds for TV ads than studying and speaking out on issues.

**Political life brings public criticism, loss of privacy.** With public office, the higher one rises, the less privacy is to be had. And no one likes being criticized publicly, especially those who are used to years of respect as leaders in their professions.

Considering this, it is a wonder anyone chooses public life - the nation's elite, or the fellow next door. We owe a measure of respect and appreciation to those who have what it takes to place their good name on the ballot election day. But why do our country's best, in particular, seldom enter public life?

The factors above play a role, yet it may be that something even more fundamental is at work. I believe it involves the nature of the American regime itself. The Founders crossed the Atlantic to be rid of unlimited, centralized governmental tyranny. The result was a system of "checks and balances" - the three branches of

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government were designed to ensure no action rather than hasty action, to the end of keeping men free. The state is now the servant, not the master. Talented people thus freed from government service, as well as over-regulation, pursue a myriad of interests, enriching their lives through inventions, literature, and the advancement of science. Commerce and the arts flourish, with government acting as the arbiter of disputes and the protector of rights.

Only rarely does government take center stage. It does so in times of crisis, such as depression or war, and when critical issues demand our full attention. And at those times our best leaders come forward and serve. We have only to think of America's greatest challenges to recall our greatest leaders: the War of Independence (Washington), the Founding (Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton), the Civil War (Lincoln), the Depression, and World War II (Roosevelt, Truman).

And so to those concerned about sending ordinary citizens to the halls of government, take heart. As Alistair Cooke has remarked, "America is a place where ordinary people do extraordinary things." And in times of grave crisis, we will continue to find among ourselves to match the challenges before us.

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