Hearing No Call to Public Service

by

James W. Skillen©

“The US federal government faces a massive talent drain in the coming years as many senior government officials reach retirement age and fewer bright young people opt for careers in public service.” So begins an article in the Financial Times (2/5/07) on fears for the U.S. public sector.

An article in The Washington Post three days later (2/8/07) began this way: “Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told congress yesterday that more than 40 percent of nearly 300 State Department positions to be added in Iraq as part of President Bush’s new strategy will have to be filled by military personnel.”

What, if any, is the connection between these two articles, and is there anything in the structure of American public life that lies behind them? Here is my hypothesis after nearly 40 years of studying and participating in American politics. Citizens of the United States by and large love America, but they don’t have a very high view of government and civic responsibility. They love America the nation for its opportunities, personal freedom, and promise of prosperity—the American way of life. But they are doubtful about, or even disrespectful of, government. Often, even those who enter government or run for an elected office do so for a purpose that is not necessarily governmental. Government is at best considered a means to other ends, and at worst an inefficient, untrustworthy institution for solving problems.

The source of these attitudes is not only the Founders’ opposition to monarchy and suspicion of central government but also the very political philosophy that Americans take for granted—the philosophy behind both liberals and conservatives. That philosophy’s first principle is that humans are not political by nature. We are entrepreneurial creatures who seek prosperity and accumulate property. Yet because my neighbor has a tendency to take what is mine, tempting me to respond in kind or even with violence, we have agreed to
establish an umpire who will keep us in line, protect our lives and properties, and punish those who violate the law. That umpire, according to the agreement, is government. Government is not natural; it is artificial. We create it to protect what is natural—our lives and properties. A republic of citizens would not exist if we didn’t need a protecting umpire. This is part of the reason why it is difficult to imagine that there is a real vocation in a job that is not naturally human, a job that is simply a means to other ends.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” the teacher asks her students. The answers will be many: play baseball, work as a television news reporter, become a doctor, make money, or perhaps become a teacher. Few teachers have ever heard a student say, “When I grow up I want to become a public servant—perhaps in the U.S. foreign service or perhaps in my state’s agriculture department.” The world of government and public service is a largely unexplored black hole for most students in high school. An office of government is not something to which anyone really aspires or is encouraged to aspire to. American young people do not, for the most part, hear any call to public service.

But what about the military, you might ask. We have an all-volunteer army and apparently Secretary Rice can call on military personnel to help fill in the gaps at the State Department. Doesn’t that suggest that at least some areas of public service represent a high calling to young people?

Go back with me for a moment to America’s liberal/conservative philosophy. The one responsibility that is indeed preeminent in the contract to create government is that of protecting the lives and properties of those who have given up some of their natural freedom to the umpire. Government’s police, military, and criminal justice departments are central to government’s task. Sometimes the job of a police officer can appear glamorous, especially on TV, but seldom does the job of prison guard or a judge have a strong attraction to young people. The allure of the military, on the other hand, when military service is alluring, is closely tied not to government but to the “love of America.” To fight communism or terrorism, which might destroy the American way of life—the American nation—is a calling that many can hear, yet for most people military service is not considered part of government—the institution we love to hate.

This brings me back to the dilemma faced by Condooleezza Rice. Her office is supposed to be the highest one in the president’s cabinet, serving as the U.S. government’s face and voice to the world. Yet the Department of State draws only a pittance of a budget compared to the Department of Defense. President Bush or any other president can appeal to Congress for billions upon billions of dollars for defense, even for a war that American citizens and members of Congress object to. Because the last thing that any American leader or elected representative wants is to look unpatriotic because he or she questions funding for the military. Secretary Rice, therefore, has to ask the defense department (which is not very happy about her request) to loan her some military personnel to help her do what the president’s new strategy calls for. Mind you, she needs only 300 new people, but she can barely find half of what she needs. Almost six years after 9/11 and four years
after the invasion of Iraq there is either not enough money at her disposal or not enough interest and ability among American citizens to allow her to fill the positions. Yet even though the military services are themselves in near crisis over the need for troops, President Bush is likely to be able to get Congress to put up tens of billions of additional dollars to pay for more than 20,000 troops to bulk up the contingents in Iraq.

Most Americans these days are not preoccupied with the question of how to get good people into public offices. Even the president wants Americans to be busy buying and selling in order to keep America’s economy growing. That’s their job. That is what people are supposed to do, by nature. That is what the American way of life is all about: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But what about the calling of government to uphold the common good, to protect the general welfare, to ensure that our children will not be taxed to death to pay for our debt-multiplying excesses today, to make sure that the poor can get a real education and have access to jobs? What about the high calling of government to establish justice?

Anyone who is interested in promoting and participating in the high calling of government and civic responsibility will need to find a different public philosophy than the liberal/conservative one that undergirds American politics. To hear the call to public service one needs to believe that political community is part of who we are, part of what God created us for, that it belongs to us by nature. Public service is an authentic human calling, a vocation from God to uphold justice in human community—the political community.