

Can any good thing come out of Washington?

By Dean Merrill

As this election campaign heats up, there's one sure way to get a laugh from your friends or co-workers: Take a shot at those running for office.

We Americans have become a society that despises its government. Bumper stickers and wisecracks abound. "The District of Columbia is 40 square miles surrounded by reality," says one line. It matters not whether you're a liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican. The practice of Washington-bashing has become a national pastime.

Washington has indeed made any number of questionable decisions in recent years. Politicians too often forget the values they were taught — or even the values they preached during their most recent campaign.

And when they do, we let them know — vociferously. That is part of the American way, we believe. It's like yelling at the umpires of a baseball game; I paid my ticket, and now I get the privilege of hollering about anything I don't like.

But for Christians, how does this square with Ecclesiastes 10:20: "Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing

may report what you say" (NIV)? Today's critics often want the (satellite) birds of the air to beam their words far and wide.

How do we get around Paul's words to the church in Rome — the Washington of that day: "The authorities that exist have been established by God. ... Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe ... respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (Romans 13:1,7)?

The *tone* of our comments says much about our faith. If we spin the facts to make a candidate look murky, if we are careless with his or her reputation, if we are uncharitable in our tone, we have not represented our Lord well.

Our political system is actually quite fragile. While dictators may force compliance by raw power, we in a democracy have to talk to each other. We have to come to consensus.

No wonder George Washington sent out a prayer to the state governors on June 8, 1783, that read, in part: "Almighty God, we make our earnest prayer that Thou ... wilt incline the hearts of the citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to government, and entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another. ...

"And finally that Thou wilt ... dispose us all to ... demean ourselves with that charity, humility and pacific [i.e., calm] temper of mind which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation."

If I may be so bold as to paraphrase the founding father, what I hear in this prayer is: "Dear God, please help people to calm down and give government the benefit of the doubt — or else this new country simply isn't going to work." He knew

instinctively that resistance, irritation and mistrust had the power to wreck the American experiment.

Is it not dangerous, in fact, to teach our children that Washington is a mess, judges are crooked, politicians are liars, and even the police are dimwitted? It leads to anarchy. Without duly constituted au-

thority, imperfect though it may be, we will find ourselves with worse lawlessness than we have now.

No one is saying the senator or the governor is above questioning. These people are members of the fallen society just like the rest. Their errors should not be papered over, but that is not the same as calling them idiots and fools.

Washington, in the eternal perspective, is only one governmental center in one nation on one continent of this one planet in one corner of God's great universe. God cares about what goes on there, but He is not in the least stymied by its machinations. His far greater purpose in the world will be carried out by people who exercise their citizenship responsibly — all the while remembering who is truly in charge. ■

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