

The Military Politician¹

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Reinforcements vs Resignation

The other day someone asked a friend of mine, a General in the Marine Corps who was a candidate for the US House of Representatives, why military men have such a hard time adjusting to life in Washington. My friend immediately rejected the premise, saying he did not see that military men had such a difficulty, citing those such as Washington, Eisenhower, and Grant. There are others. Jackson, Taylor, Eisenhower, Truman, Kennedy, Carter, and both Bush's. In fact 31 out of 44 Presidents served (70%).

Still the question haunted me. What, I wondered, are the traits of military men, especially those in leadership positions? They are men of action, honor, and boundaries. A military man can be inserted behind enemy lines with little to go on, other than his wits and training, and emerge victorious, learning along the way and applying what he learned to his advantage. No, wait, not to his personal advantage but to the advantage of the mission. Military men are not in the military to further their own ends. They are not there to serve the ends of others. They are there to serve the Nation.

A military man knows what he can and can't do, but more importantly, he knows his boundaries. He knows what he should and should not do. The Constitution is framed with boundaries. Power is divided into many more than the three branches of government your civics teacher told you about. Divided power cannot be supreme. To guide the nation, several divisions of power must come together along the same path. To step outside the boundaries is to violate the oath of the soldier. To do so in elected office is to step outside the boundaries of the oath of office and of the constitution.

A military man fights his battles toe to toe, face to face and with his personal honor at stake. In Washington, battles are often fought with lies, deceit, and trades of what rightly belongs to the people: Trades of the vote. In Washington, honor takes a back seat to agendas. The mission of service to the nation has become a mission of self service. The game has no rules. Washington has adopted the mantra of Lombardi: "Winning is the only thing."

To put a military man in that situation certainly has its challenges. Some fail. Some adapt. Some adopt the rules of the game and abandon self respect. But something still bothered me. What am I missing? One thing is a shift in that percentage I noted earlier. Of the first 22 Presidents, 80% (18) served in the military. Of the last 22 (the second half) only 60% (13) had served. A trend disturbingly similar to the trend in the erosion of honor in Washington.

My friend had rejected the premise. My logic to this point only examines the military man as a misfit into Washington's nightmare of institutionalized ineptitude. In considering my friend's response, I realize that he is right. The premise is wrong. It is not just the military men who have trouble in Washington: It is a challenge for any man of honor and character who finds it necessary to enter that world. Still, some of them survive without losing their way.

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Where this leads is to this suggestion: Instead of sending men who know the game and can play it well, we ought to send reinforcements for those men of honor and character, military or not, who are currently outnumbered in our Capitol city.