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Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

October 1st, 2009

October ASO Magazine Column **Defining a Representative's Job**

The other day, a constituent emailed me a question concerning our Tazewell County 2010 Budget. Without going into much detail, the main point was to question if we had enough money to be handing out raises to our employees. Over the course of three to four emails, we tossed numbers and facts back and forth and in the end he complimented me on being open and honest, and pointed out my availability and ease of conversation compared to others he had tried to contact, but also ended by stating that his position was right and was what the majority of the people believed. He reminded me that if we don't listen to the majority, they will simply vote us out in the next election.

That got me thinking about what is my role and what was I elected to do. In a democracy, it would be clearly what he was talking about; the majority is right. But our system was not setup as a true democracy. It was setup as a Representative Democracy. All right, the title is different, but still what is the difference in what we expect our representatives to do? Is it still majority rule or does it mean something else?

Some believe that we elect these individuals to look over all of the facts and then cast a vote they think would be in our best interest. Okay, if this is true than can those facts point to something different than what the majority believes? Definitely, and this is where the conflict lies.

So what do I do? Well, whenever faced with an issue like this in the past I have tried to step back and see what the greats have done. In this case, what did Lincoln do? For only one term from March 4th 1847 to March 3rd 1849, Abraham Lincoln was elected and served as the United States Representative from Illinois. At that time he was a member of the Whig Political Party and his time in Congress was cut short by his stance on the Mexican War. While the public was behind going to war with Mexico, Lincoln could not overlook the reasons, the facts, for going to war.

Lincoln's most famous stand against then President James Polk over the war with Mexico was in his Spot Resolutions: The war had begun with a violent confrontation on disputed territory claimed by both Mexico and Texas, but President Polk had insisted that Mexican soldiers had "*invaded our territory; shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil*". Lincoln demanded that Polk show Congress the exact spot on which blood had been shed, and proof that that spot was on American soil. Congress never enacted the resolution or even debated it. With the general population clamoring for war, including Lincoln's home of Illinois, his stance did not go over well and rather than loss in the upcoming election, Lincoln choose not to run.

History and time have showed that the land Lincoln was questioning was Mexican Territory, not American.

So back to what should I do? What can be learned from this "Lesson from Lincoln"? I believe my job is to do the best I can to research and understand the facts surrounding the bills I am asked to vote on. I believe it is my job after reviewing these facts, to vote for what I believe the majority of the people in my

political district would have voted for had they reviewed the same facts I did. I also think it is my job to articulate and discuss these facts with the people I represent. Part of electing people from districts is not only to make sure someone from each part of the political district (be it a county, state, or nation) is in office but also to make sure that people throughout the political district have the same opportunity to have all of the facts presented to them.

In other words, it is my responsibility as an elected official to explain why I am voting the way I am. It is not good enough to place a vote and if they do not like it they can decide not to elect me later. The job requires information coming to and from the representative if it is to work properly. In this day and age we have all of these incredible communication networks with availability to information at levels never before seen. And yet many still argue that you can not get the right information out.

Many representatives have been quick to come out with fancy campaign websites. Many have started utilizing messaging systems like Twitter and Facebook. But now is also the time for the voters and constituents to start demanding real answers with all of this technology. Rather than sites full of wonderful fluff pieces and statements, it is time for real facts and positions to be presented. It is the representatives job to provide the facts he/she is using to place their votes and explain why they are voting the way that they are. It is wonderful that when it is election time they get these communication tools and utilize them to get their message out, but then after they are elected it is also their job to keep the information flowing back to the district and this is one area where we have lowered the expectations bar too low.

True, this may mean that the same individuals do not always achieve that goal and may not always then be the best individual to be representing the people, but that is all part of the job. Lincoln understood this and had the integrity to do what he saw was right. Time has a way of working itself out and I believe following Lincolns example will be the course for me.

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