

# The Importance of Character in Public Office

by Sir Knight James P. Gilmore

This is a subject which comes up often in casual conversation, is of major concern to all citizens, is vital to our survival as a nation, and is of great importance to us as Freemasons since we are very much concerned with the development of good character. I have heard individuals express the opinion that character means nothing in people who occupy public office. Such statements as , “His personal life means nothing when it comes to performance of his public office duties” are familiar to all of us. It is often said that personal life and morality in public office are not of concern to the citizens of our country; only performance skills in doing his job. Contrary to the foregoing, character is all-important in public service.

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We have all seen or heard a person say, "I don't care what an official does in his private life; I am only interested in his performance on the job." Such comments constitute a defect in basic reasoning which is widespread. We, as Freemasons, are character-builders, and hence we must be diligent in combating this trend of faulty reasoning. As a 54 year Freemason and therefore a member of an organization, which has for a major aim, character-building, I take exception to this way of thinking on the part of the American voter. In this, a general election year, it is important that our citizens give consideration to character when voting for candidates. We have all seen cases of persons forced to leave public office because of scandals of various kinds; all manifestations of character defects on the part of persons holding public office.

It has been stated that there could not be corruption in the national government in Washington without there being corruption in all levels of government, i.e. local, county and state levels. If this is true, we should assure that we have men and women of good character in every public office. We have a great weakness in our method of selecting candidates for public office, often leaving the voters with unacceptable alternatives. People are often elected to office based upon popularity or wealth rather than their capabilities. Having money or being a public icon should not be enough to get elected to public office. Both of these are violations of the basic precepts upon which our great nation is based. We need capable people with good character. I have never seen job descriptions for high level national officials which would show both the capabilities required to do the job as well as elements of character required. The voters cannot be left with choosing the lesser of evils. A character defect is all-pervasive in the sense that it impacts the personal life and political life as well; you cannot arbitrarily say that a man can be dishonest and immoral in his personal life and honest and moral in the exercise of his official duties as a government official.

On the contrary, his character colors all aspects of his thinking and of his life. We cannot permit persons with multiple standards to occupy offices of public trust. We need people in public office who not only have the abilities and skills to perform the duties of that position but whom, we the public they serve, can depend upon to be of strong character. We need people who are honest and who have integrity to represent us in the international interfaces as well as to run our internal affairs.

Some of the major elements of character of concern in public life are: integrity, honesty, virtue, fidelity, loyalty, justice and worth. Integrity includes uprightness of character, probity, soundness of thinking, justice and an unimpaired state. Honesty, among many other aspects, includes trustworthiness, uprightness, freedom from fraud, fairness, equity, morality, and just conduct. Character is extremely important in persons occupying public office for the following reasons. First, there will be more consistency in government policy.

A man of good character cannot be compromised in his decision-making process.

He is less likely to be impaired by errant behavior. He can be relied upon for integrity in all his relationships, either inward or outward looking. Honesty and integrity mean that we will know where a man in office stands at all times, i.e. reliability. The people can rely upon the decisions made and the actions taken as straightforward and in their best interests. People of good character are less likely to yield to pressure from special interest groups and make decisions which will act to the detriment of the majority of our citizens.

The obvious conclusion is that good character is all-important in those holding public office. We must consider character in addition to experience, background and capabilities when voting. It is extremely important in an election year to be aware of any character defects a candidate running for public office may have and to vote accordingly. Every voter is urged to give character consideration before pulling that lever or marking a ballot for his or her election.

All my brother Masons are urged to advise all voters to emphasize the importance of character in public office. Our nation is the greatest experiment in human relations in the history of mankind. Many of those who established it were Freemasons. It is now deteriorating, and I maintain that this is because we need more men and women of strong character in our government.

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