

## **The Last Word: Power vs. Pride**

**by**  
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*Tom writes the "Last Word" column for each edition of "The Rendezvous". This column will appear in the upcoming winter edition.*

### **The Last Word: Power vs. Pride**

For the last twelve years, as I have shared different thoughts and perspectives in this column, I have typically tried to place my ideas into some relevant historical context. Back in 2016 I wrote a piece for this newsletter entitled "*Neither Left or Right: Politics, Perspective, and Patience*" in which I tried to highlight the success that the Forest Service had achieved in its first hundred years in keeping the work of the agency above the political fray as much as possible. I also expressed worry about how politics had become so partisan, so, so, so, partisan, and how the repeated wider successive administration pendulum shifts complicate resource management in the long run.

But oh, how I wish we were back a few years or so now because what has unfolded in our country in the last month is so unlike anything any of us have ever witnessed in our government that I simply am baffled as to how to make a historic sense of it. Theodore Roosevelt, a president who is deeply admired still today for many reasons and is widely known as the father of the modern-day merit-based civil service, would be not only disappointed but shocked to witness what is happening in this country and what we have become.

In my opinion, one would be hard pressed to identify a time in the last hundred and fifty years when so much has changed so quickly and so dramatically shifted the cornerstones of who we are as a nation. As federal worker retirees, most of us understand how a change in administration every four to eight years usually results in a shift in emphasis, priorities, and even programs.

And yes, there have been times when events, like 9-11, have brought sudden change and uncertainty but in most of these we saw a coming together of our nation as we responded to a crisis not a deepening of partisan division to the extent that it seems we no longer have a representative government.

I also know that there are probably some, even among us, who may be perfectly ok with what is happening and believe it is exactly what they wanted or expected to happen when they cast their ballot last November. I hope, however, that they too might be a bit concerned with how callous, vengeful, and disrespectful most of this transformation is being made.

Without question there is a long overdue need for significant and lasting change in our country to reduce our growing deficit, but this should be done thoughtfully and with more respect and consideration for those who give so much and care so much that they have dedicated themselves to the work of the government.

Much of the focus thus far has been on the “federal employee” but there are so many different aspects of the situation we find ourselves immersed in. The who we are as a nation is being redescribed and recalibrated, with our foreign policy, our leadership worldwide in responding to global crisis, our credibility, our trust, our character as a nation, and how we are viewed by our friends across our borders or across the oceans.

My heart aches for those who are so personally and directly affected or will be eventually impacted in the weeks and months ahead both in our country and around the world. It especially hurts that so many of those fired already have been young folks with promising careers ahead of them who were full of hope and faith in their government.

I also am embarrassed that my grandchildren are witnessing such hate, disrespect, or apathy from our nation’s leaders just four years after a shocking January 6 assault on our nation’s capital. I am saddened that some connections many of us have with family and friends are being stressed and jeopardized as we line up on different sides.

There is much being written on almost every forum and one gets the impression that most who are writing are at a loss as to either to make sense of what is transpiring or what to do about it. Congress seems to have acquiesced to a major shift in power to the executive branch and the courts are trying to sort out constitutional questions as to how much they can or are willing to do. Power has not only shifted but seems to me to be exponentially abused and to be largely unchecked.

Never has a President shown so much disdain for his own workforce than we have seen in the first few weeks of this administration. For a leader to show such blatant disrespect for the people who carry out the essential business of the Federal government is very disturbing.

His appointed director of the Office of Management and Budget has openly stated “We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected...When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains ... We want to put them in trauma.” Can’t be clearer than that as the respect this administration has for the work of the federal employee.

So, my own frustration, disappointment, sadness, and even anger is frightening to me, but I am at least proud to say and know that making those who work for the government feel like villains will not be successful because of what they do and

why. We, or they, can be made to feel disrespected by this president, but they cannot make us feel like villains.

All of us, especially for those of us who worked for the Forest Service, understand that our choice to work for the “outfit” was not because of the money, the glory, or the status. We were proud to be carrying on the work that President Theodore Roosevelt and Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot started over a hundred years ago.

We chose this work because of the “mission” and the opportunity to yes “Care for the Land and Serve the People” and do what we could on behalf of the American people. And yes we experienced criticism for how we sought to balance use from politicians, from industry, from environmentalists, from ranchers, from loggers, from recreationists, miners, and on occasion even from our own employees, but in all of that we knew it was because people cared so much about the land and resources and their only disagreement was in how much of what and where things should be done.

I believe people who are still working for the Forest Service feel the same way we did and are doing what they believe is important work for the people and the resources entrusted to their care. They can be disrespected, and they can even be “fired” like those on the tv show, *“The Apprentice”*, but they are not villains, they are victims. History is likely to confirm that so many are in fact heroes.

Hopefully, out of this mess perhaps somehow, we can hope that we will become a stronger nation, but the “Fork in the Road” that has been taken is scary, chaotic, and treacherous. Never has there been a more critical need for governors, congressional representatives, non-government organizations, and industry representatives from all sectors to make their voices heard and hopefully heed Gifford Pinchot’s advice from many, many years ago. *“It is a far greater thing to be a good citizen than a good democrat or republican.”*

This is not just about firing federal employees, it is about the viability of the Forest Service as an outfit and the ability to use and enjoy the amazing public land we have today and in the generations ahead. How history looks back at this time in our history will be very difficult to understand and predict because as we experience it ourselves, we don’t understand it.