

Free flow of information key to democracy

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By Kenneth F. Bunting

A good friend making a run for public office asked this past weekend how, besides stressing his character, background and experience, he could differentiate himself from others in a crowded field for the post he is seeking.

Pardon the bad baseball metaphor, but the question came across like a high fastball to a clean-up hitter. I offered an answer with little hesitation.

“Talk about accountability,” I advised. “Talk about transparency.”

Talk about creating a culture of openness in a local agency that has a history of being run by scofflaws with open hostility to the web of open-government and accountability laws that help Washingtonians keep an eye on the workings of their governmental agencies and the public servants, elected and non-elected, who work for them.

Thankfully, the advice I offered was well received by my friend. I am confident he will use it, and not just as campaign rhetoric. It will be an attitude he will bring to governing if he is elected.

What is sad, however, is that such an attitude can indeed be a point of differentiation. It ought to be the rule, not the exception.

America’s founding fathers recognized that the free flow of information was essential to a healthy and vibrant democracy. James Madison, the nation’s fourth president who sometimes called the “Father of the Constitution,” wrote in an 1822 letter to Kentucky statesman William T. Barry:

“A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

Americans are watching the post-election protests in Iran, and that government’s attempt to stifle free speech and cut off the free flow of information, with understandably righteous repulsion. As imperfect as our system of government can be, we cannot imagine an election so corrupt, a vote-counting process so secretive, nor attempts to stifle free expression so ugly, blatant and repressive.

That’s good. But it is also important to understand that among the reasons we can’t imagine those horrors here is because of founding fathers like Madison and insightful state leaders who sponsored the 1972 citizens’ initiative that gave rise to Washington’s public disclosure and open government laws.

The common bond that links those 19th century and 20th century champions to the challenges of 21st century citizenry is the understanding that democratic governments belong to the people they serve and represent. So do the written instruments and records of those governments – all of them, except for narrowly drawn exceptions.

Never ending, however, are attempts to expand that list of exceptions through legislative actions, legal actions and bureaucratic sleights of hand. The Washington Coalition for Open Government exists, and conducts events like tonight's forum, to educate the public about the importance of access to government information and meetings.

The public's right to know what their governments are doing to them and for them is a precious right that is at the heart of what makes our democracy special. It should never be taken for granted.

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