

HUGH NIBLEY, WORLD'S WORST POLITICIAN

Alex Nibley

Hugh Nibley was a paradox.¹ He often quoted Joseph Smith's pessimistic appraisal of humankind's inability to govern itself, but he also participated in the political process with the same commitment and energy he gave to the military, another institution for which he had scant regard.

He had no patience with jingoism; but he always flew the flag on holidays.

In possibly the most Republican county of the most Republican state in America, he was (usually) an outspoken Democrat. When Democratic campaigns asked him to put a yard sign on his lawn, his standard response was, "You better give me two so I'll have a backup when the first one gets stolen."

On any given day he could express opinions that were anywhere from the extreme left to the far right. Though he generally leaned left, his closest friends—and the ones with whom he actually discussed politics most—tended to be far to the right. And they enjoyed their clashes of ideas; they were robust, energetic comparisons of ideas and ideals with little resemblance to the name-calling schoolyard squabbles that usually pass for human self-governance.

I remember well when I was first becoming politically aware at the age of twelve in 1968. Dad spoke out strongly against the election of Richard Nixon, wanted very badly for him never to be the president, and made no secret of his opinions, which he conveyed often with his trademark sharp tongue. He had a lot to say, and none of it nice, about the man who even before he became president was known as "Tricky Dicky." But the memory from that election that is strongest in my mind is when, soon after Nixon won, I was

astonished to hear Dad say, “The office itself often has a salutary effect on the man who fills it. I believe the presidency has the potential to have that kind of effect on Nixon, and we should certainly now support him and give him a chance to succeed.” In our family prayers there was always mention of political leaders and their need for special divine guidance.

By today’s political standards, Hugh Nibley was difficult to define. On our blog, HughNibley.net, a reader recently commented on a posting, “I had no idea [Hugh Nibley] was such an idiotic liberal.” But he has also been attacked in public as overly conservative. Often those who admire him are those who are furthest from him in political philosophy. He laughed at humanity’s puerile exercise in running things on their own, like teenagers left alone in the house for a weekend. But he was not nonpolitical or apolitical any more than he was a pacifist in World War II, though he hated the war and the military. He neither avoided politics and what he considered his duty as a citizen to be involved nor did he back off on beliefs he held when he came under fierce attack, as he did for his 1972 anti-war letter to the *Daily Universe*, BYU’s student paper.

As I wrote in the book we coauthored, *Sergeant Nibley, PhD: Memories of an Unlikely Screaming Eagle*,² he was a scholar who didn’t believe in war but who never expressed any regret for having enlisted, even though it meant enduring a long parade of horrors that included a front-row seat watching the worst of human frailty up close and personal from the beaches of Normandy to Dachau.

For me, as an observer of both politics and my father, the tensions of war raise difficult questions. In a world that seeks above all to divide everything into neat sets of polarities in opposition to each other, he doesn’t fit any category easily. We like things either Red or Blue. It makes it so much easier to know what name to shout in triumph and which to shout in derision. But one thing I learned early on was that my father was not interested in easy answers. I learned this because this guy who was supposed to know so much, the guy people came to see at our house on pilgrimages from all over the world to get the answers to their questions, rarely in his life ever gave me a straight answer to any question.

“What about this, Dad?”

“Well, the early Fathers thought this, but Aquinas said that. You can look it up here.”

“Dad, it’s in Greek.”

“Yes, but it’s very easy Greek.”

One incident stands out in my mind, and only in the light of the acrimony of our recent ultrapolarized politics have I come to understand the lesson of the time I discovered my father was the world’s worst politician.

I was a teenager, not old enough to vote but interested in the process, and I decided to accompany my father to the Democratic Party mass meeting in our precinct. I think today they would call it a precinct meeting. The gathering took place in Sister Cullimore’s living room just around the corner and across the street from our house in Provo, Utah. Sister Cullimore was a grand and elegant lady, a devoted Democrat who was also the wife of an equally devoted Republican who had once served as mayor of Provo. (They seemed to see no contradiction in a split-ticket marriage; it was almost as though they saw their differences as complementary rather than threatening.)

The Democratic precinct meeting on the south side of BYU campus in the early seventies included the aforementioned former First Lady of Provo, fewer than half a dozen students, and Hugh Nibley. I was there as a nonvoting observer.

It was a rarity that there were any real decisions at all, since even in those days when Utah had a Democratic governor, one Democratic senator, and a couple of Democrats in the House, the party rarely had a primary election decision to be considered in the mass meetings. But in this case, there was a race we were worried about. It was some county office, and we—Dad and I, that is—wanted very badly for our guy, an underdog, to get the nomination. We said as much to the gathering in Sister Cullimore’s living room. I had been active on the Provo High debate team, and I got my chance to take the floor and speak on behalf of our candidate and make the case for his nomination. Sister Cullimore was also for our guy, and the BYU students had no idea who either candidate was and probably no real interest in the county office, which had no bearing on their lives as students living temporarily in Provo. The

students shrugged and nodded and agreed they had no problem voting for our guy.

I was thrilled. I had just won my first political contest. We were going to get a unanimous decision for our underdog candidate through good old-fashioned grassroots activism. The taste of victory was sweet.

Then . . .

“But wait,” says Dad. “No one has spoken for the other candidate.”

What?

“We can’t hold a vote until we’ve heard the arguments for both candidates.”

Dad! We just won! Don’t you get it? The election’s over. It’s in the bag. We did it for our guy. Shut up!

“Is there anyone here to speak for the opposition?” Dad said.

There was not.

Whereupon my father took that obligation upon himself and proceeded to enumerate all the arguments the overdog opponent to our underdog was using to aggrandize himself and portray himself—falsely, in my opinion and, so I thought, that of my father—as the superior choice for the office in question. He dutifully rolled out all the talking points we had discussed at home, the points we went to the meeting prepared to refute, to discredit, to banish into a wilderness of scorn. Yes, there was my father, reciting all this better than the candidate himself ever could.

After Dad’s speech, Sister Cullimore called for a vote. She and Hugh Nibley cast their votes for our candidate. But the BYU students had been persuaded by the eloquence of the professor. They all voted for the man Hugh Nibley spoke for and voted against. Our candidate went down in crushing defeat, beaten by the man who went into the meeting with the intention of bringing him victory.

That’s when I learned my father was the world’s worst politician.

As I’ve thought about that incident over the years, and as I’ve observed the decay of political discussion in America, I have never changed my opinion that my father was the world’s worst politician. That opinion hasn’t changed in nearly four decades since I went home from my first political meeting fuming with anger at a humiliating and unnecessary defeat. My opinion of his political



Ted Wilson for U.S. Senate

"This election gives us the opportunity of declaring independence from the public relations industry by looking farther into things than the surface displays and slogans of the candidates, and to enjoy the luxury of integrity in fulfilling the oft-enjoyed obligation to exercise free agency in politics as in all other things. We have been told to seek knowledge and exercise judgment, a process which has led me to welcome the candidacy of Ted Wilson — A Breath of Fresh Air."

— Hugh Nibley

"I'm supporting Ted Wilson because he stands for the values that preserve the heritage of this state."

— Robert Redford



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Figure 1. Hugh with actor and activist Robert Redford and former Salt Lake City Democratic mayor Ted Wilson during Wilson's US Senate campaign, 1982.⁴

acumen hasn't changed, but my evaluation of that opinion has evolved a lot.

My father was the world's worst politician. And boy, am I glad. I'm glad I got to see close up that it's possible to believe the process—the process itself of people governing themselves—is more important than the horse race and who wins or who gets an ego boost by identifying with a “winner.” I'm glad I got to see an example of pure, naive, stupid, optimistic faith in the process of human government, and that from a man with firsthand knowledge of how Germany, a country he had proselytized, loved, and ultimately invaded, was reduced to rubble by voters who gave an insane politician the power to destroy it. That incident has served as a vivid contrast to what I have seen since then from the inside and from the outside of American politics, where romantic notions like open discussion and comparison of ideas are seen through the dirty lens of cynical spinmeisters that reduces them to quaint fairy tales or obstacles. Either one of these is something to overcome or manipulate rather than a fundamental principle by which to live.

I can't remember now the names of the candidates we voted for or the race that was so important to win. Somehow, despite this political catastrophe, Utah County has not disintegrated. The people continue to govern themselves, as incompetently and ridiculously as ever Joseph Smith foresaw. There have been valiant public servants as well as scoundrels and incompetents. Sometimes they've been the same people.

What I saw on that evening in Sister Cullimore's living room was the living application of the principles Hugh Nibley wrote about in *Beyond Politics*³—the idea that the question “How will the human race govern itself?” is more important than the answer. This struggle to create a more perfect union, the process of open discussion, the willingness to allow all points of view in a way that not only listens but gives genuine consideration and even honor to the differing ideas and values of all the diverse members of the polis, is one human activity that can show true respect and love for the God of all of us who allows us, for the time being, to play our little game.

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Notes

1. This chapter was reprinted with permission from Alex Nibley and Hugh W. Nibley, *Beyond Politics* (Hugh Nibley and Associates, 2013), <https://books.apple.com/us/book/beyond-politics/id605790137>.
2. See Hugh Nibley and Alex Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley, PhD: Memories of an Unlikely Screaming Eagle* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2006).
3. See Hugh W. Nibley, "Beyond Politics," in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 279–305. Corrected reprint, Hugh W. Nibley, "Beyond Politics," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 23, no. 1 (2011): 133–51, <https://scholar.sarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1841&context=msr>.
4. See Boyd Petersen, "Truth Is Stranger Than Folklore: Hugh Nibley—the Man and the Legend," *Sunstone*, December 2002, 22. Composite made out of two photos by Stephen T. Whitlock, from Petersen Collection, box 7, folder 1, and box 10, folder 1. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-Box7Folder1Digital-W0000247-Box10Folder1-.jpg.