

**I**T WAS ELECTION NIGHT, 1904. Theodore Roosevelt was poised to win the White House by an unprecedented landslide. In that moment, at the height of his political power and popularity, he committed one of history's greatest political blunders.

Roosevelt had come into office upon the assassination of his predecessor, William McKinley. Subsequently he had enjoyed more than three years of a popular term, was robustly healthy and, at forty-six, still in the prime of life. In those years, there was no legal limit to the number of terms a President could serve. The Twenty-second Amendment to the United States Constitution, which would have limited Roosevelt to only one elected term, after he had assumed such a large portion of McKinley's term, would not be ratified until 1951. So, though the *tradition* had been that a President not run for more than two terms, Roosevelt was free to run for two more full terms—or more.

Yet, that night, with his flabbergasted wife and supporters standing off to the side, the President declared to a roomful of reporters that

...he would consider the three-and-a-half years between September 1901 and March 1905 as equivalent to a full first term, in the sense

that George Washington had understood such things. "The wise custom which limits the President to two terms regards the substance and not the form," he continued. "Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for, or accept another, nomination."

With that one sentence Roosevelt signed his political demise, turning himself into a

lame duck President before even beginning his first elected term.

Later, to Hermann Kohlsaatt, Roosevelt reportedly said, "I would cut my hand off right there," laying his finger on his wrist, "if I could recall that...statement." For you see, he *had* said it, said it publicly, and he would stand by those ill-fated words. Though he may have had moments in which he regretted the utterance, there was never any thought given to renegeing on the promise; it simply wasn't an option.

In a letter to his friend, Owen Wister, Roosevelt later wrote:

It is a peculiar gratification to me to have owed my election...to Abraham Lincoln's "plain people"; to the folk who work hard on farm, in shop, or on the railroads, or who own little stores, little businesses which they manage themselves. I would literally, not figuratively, rather cut off my right hand than forfeit by any improper act of mine the trust and regard of these people. I may have to do something of which they will disapprove, because I deem it absolutely right and necessary; but most assuredly I shall endeavor



**INTEGRITY**

not to merit their disapproval by any act inconsistent with the ideal they have formed of me.

(This and preceding quotes from *T.R.: The Last Romantic* (BasicBooks, 1997), by H.W. Brands.)

## Commonplace

This kind of integrity has become almost obsolete. In this world it has become nauseatingly commonplace for people to do quite the opposite of what they have promised. From the hardware store clerk to the mail-order catalog company, from the utility service representative to the plumber who reams out your pipes—we live in a world where a person's word is only as good as the lawyer one finds to sue them for breach of contract.

Sadly missing now is the kind of integrity demonstrated by Joseph when he was tempted by the sensual enticements of his master's wife—

So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. It came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against

God?" As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her.

Genesis 39:6-10

—or the forthright commitment to his civic responsibilities shown by Daniel to King Darius.

Then this Daniel began distinguishing himself among the commissioners and satraps because he possessed an extraordinary spirit, and the king planned to appoint him over the entire kingdom. Then the

My son, if you will receive my words  
And treasure my commandments within you,  
Make your ear attentive to wisdom,  
Incline your heart to understanding;  
For if you cry for discernment,  
Lift your voice for understanding;  
If you seek her as silver  
And search for her as for hidden treasures;  
Then you will discern the fear of the Lord  
And discover the knowledge of God.  
For the Lord gives wisdom;  
From His mouth come knowledge and understanding.  
He stores up sound wisdom for the upright;  
He is a shield to those who walk in integrity,  
Guarding the paths of justice,  
And He preserves the way of His godly ones.  
Then you will discern righteousness and justice  
And equity and every good course.  
For wisdom will enter your heart  
And knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;  
Discretion will guard you,  
Understanding will watch over you.

Proverbs 2:1-11

commissioners and satraps began trying to find a ground of accusation against Daniel in regard to government affairs; but they could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him.

Daniel 6:3-4

## Commitment

Even in the simple, more mundane commitments people make every day—"I'll call you tomorrow," "I'll pick you up at six o'clock"—we are a society in which integrity has become something to snicker at—as one would chuckle at the backwoods naiveté of an unsophisticate. To be only fifteen minutes late is now to be on time; to have something more pressing prevent your arrival all together is not to be rude, but agreeably fashionable.

Jesus taught us to follow through on what we say. He said not to depend on trite, meaningless oaths, but for us to just mean and do what we say.

"Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil."

Matthew 5:36-37

For many today, this is asking too much. Commitment and courtesy to others has now been replaced by a commitment to self, courtesy shown only to one's own desires. The standard for all of society has now become that of the class-conscious high school girl who, at the last minute, breaks her date with the pimple-faced dweeb, because the captain of the football team has just asked her out.

Character and integrity, like all good things, come down from above. They are not built into us from the depraved clay of our substance, but are instilled in us by fathers and mothers, teachers and pastors, and, most of all, by a patient, attentive, righteous God. ds1