

Up Front/Commentary: Good government, like golf, takes right attitude



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By William L. Spence | [2 comments](#)

Here we are at the 18th green, late on a gorgeous Sunday afternoon, staring at a 20-foot putt to win the U.S. Open.

Do we make it, or do we choke?

Back when I actually played golf with some regularity, I almost always choked. It was so disappointing. Over time I came to think of it as a character flaw, a weakness in my moral fiber. It was like sin.

That one chance I had to shoot par for nine holes? Missed it. Setting a personal best at Glen Abbey, site of numerous Canadian Open tournaments? Missed it. The time I heroically drove the last green and needed a short, curling birdie to halve the match? Missed it.

No matter how hard I practiced I could never convince myself I was a great putter. And so I wasn't. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Such prophecies aren't limited to sports, of course. In the first conversation I had with Lewiston Rep. John Rusche four years ago, he said if lawmakers think government is bad, they'll never try to use it to do good. Nothing I've seen since then suggests he was wrong.

In broad terms, the Idaho Legislature - and Congress, I suspect - can be divided between those who want to use the power of government to address social ills and those who want to limit its scope, between those who see government as a means to improve everyone's situation and those who think freedom is the way to maximize individual and collective potential.

Giving free rein to either of these perspective creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: Either government can't do any good, so we tear it down to a point that ensures its ineffectiveness; or it's the best mechanism for helping one another, so we build it up to such an extent it smothers individual initiative and responsibility.

Ideally, an effective Legislature would reject both outcomes. Like great athletes, it would work to eliminate weakness in every aspect of its game and seek to provide the best tax structure, best social programs, best regulations and best tools to help citizens succeed.

How to define "best" is something each voter needs to decide. Does it mean bigger government? Smaller? Or just different?

Each of these alternatives has its merits - but whatever the answer, shouldn't "best" be the primary focus of the election?

If a candidate doesn't think government can putt, if he or she lacks faith in the institution and doesn't believe it can come through in the clutch, it never will. "Best" is off the table before the game even starts. ---

Spence covers politics for the Tribune. He may be contacted at bspence@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-9168.