Paul Tsongas makes politics an art and a science

Is politics Art or Science? Former US Senator from Massa- chusetts Paul Tsongas displayed qualities of an accomplished artist and scientist in speaking to an LSC lecture Wednesday evening. For two hours an intelligent and knowledgeable individual talked about world affairs modulated among difficult issues. And it was charming. The charm came not only from a well-worn and good-natured personality grappling with tough problems, but from the senator himself.

Senator Tsongas began by setting a comfortable tone in well-crafted political style, acknowledging the audience as he joked about the microphone and the chalkboard. The audience became giddy in anticipation and in delight of the senator's detached humor.

With little fanfare the senator proceeded to outline his "key" theory of the political spectrum. This theory, somewhat resembling the theory of political sentiment, says that the vast American middle class is fairly comfortable and therefore gravitates away from political extremes toward a fairly stable middle ground.

In judging a political position on any given political era as left wing, liberal, moderate, conservative or right wing, it is to be viewed with respect to the mainstream of sentiment. The mainstream of opinion shifts around in response to events; thus, for example, an opinion on the defense budget should not be increased unless moderately, or increased was considered moderate at the close of the Vietnam war, liberal during the Iranian hostage crisis, and moderate or even conservative today after several years of the Reagan defense buildup.

Tsongas illustrated his points economically, writing merely the words, "Bellia" (Abzug) and "Le- se" (Stennis) to denote the left wing and right wing. MIT students who have read the senator's book, his logic is studied that flatter their intelligence. Through some combination of innate personal style and political instinct developed through years of having to appeal to crowds, the senator latched onto this key. Throughout the evening he left opinion unspoken and stated the obvious in a pointed way.

When asked whether he thought that an arms agreement would arise from the November summit meeting, he said (ignorant roughly), "There are two ways that a major agreement can come out of a summit meeting. First, it can be all planned out in advance by the negotiators and all the leaders have to do is to sign for a few days and then sign the document. The second way is for two extremely intelligent and knowledgeable statesmen to ruminate in the woods and hammer it out, make a memo, and come up with an agreement that their underl- ings were unable to [pause]. No arms agreement is being set up for the November meeting." The audience ate it up.

But the senator did not pander. On the contrary, he often ended up on odds with popular liberal thought as he gave honest and reasoned appraisals of a wide va- riety of issues. While Tsongas is far from a Ruskite-baerite, he em- phasized the merits of our open and pluralistic society in contrast to that of the Soviet Union, and he views the Soviet actions in Af- garistan as far more deplorable than recent US misadventures in Vietnam.

He espoused the virtues of capital- ism, and judged that the De- mocratic party has erred greatly in becoming associated with the view that it is evil to make mon- ey. Tsongas believes that the Unit- ed States has no business in try- ing to overthrow the popularly- supported government in Nicaragua. However, he is greatly disappointed in the Sandinista re- gime. He feels that they squan- dered an important opportunity to create an example, for other third world nations to follow, of a small country setting a moder- ate course after a revolution, de- clining entanglements with either superpower.

The only time Tsongas swal- lowed before coming straight out with an opinion was when he prised former President Nixon's wisdom in listening to foreign policy advisors who enjoyed a historical perspective, which resolved in, among other things, the establishment of ties with the People's Republic of China.

In the end, the senator's thor- ough familiarity with world af- fairs and the absence of dogma in his assessments appeared to win the audience's respect and admiration. Most of the ques- tions were serious and well- considered, and surprisingly few revealed axes to grind.

Not said the program was over did anyone lose control and yell out their opinions on some issue that the senator had addressed. In the presence of the authority carried by Tsongas' calm, in- formed reasoning coupled with his sufficient honesty and limil- ity to admit when he just did not know, impassioned outbursts would have had no place.

Notably, the one article of faith to which Senator Tsongas repeat- edly appealed was a fundamental belief in the American democratic tradition. He cited a number of instances in which the body of mainstream political sentiment has acted as a bowl keel and tem- pored the government's unwis- e actions or brought leaders back in line with American values. For example, American popu- lar opinion today just will not support US advocacy of a white minority government in South Africa, now that the issue has reached the forefront of Ameri- can collective consciousness.

But Tsongas, the experienced political participant/observer, ap- preciates the complexity and sub- tlety behind seemingly capricious American popular opinion. The situation in the Middle East is be- wildering to the average Ameri- can. Unable to tell the good guys from the bad guys amidst all the violence, he says, Americans adopted an isolationist attitude during the war in Lebanon.

Tsongas' faith in American po- litical democracies fits coherently with his rational beliefs in the openness of American society and in our competitive economic system. And with it all goes an attitude of dispassioned assessment just to make sure that he doesn't take it all too seriously. There is a certain beauty in watching an artist or scientist at work. They are craftsmen of ideas. They become familiar with a domain of knowledge encompassing facts, skills, beliefs, and faiths, and they work with it, they play with it. They can ad- dress problems in their domain. Paul Tsongas showed himself to be such a craftsman of world af- fairs Wednesday evening. It is heartening to know that such people as him are elected to the United States Senate.

Guest Column/Eric Saund

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