

Former Iowa congressman despairs loss of better times

BERKLEY BEDELL remembers a nation that was not divided and paralyzed the way it is today.

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(Doak, the retired editor of the Registers opinion pages, is a lecturer at Iowa State University and an adjunct instructor at Simpson College.)

Former Iowa Congressman Berkley Bedell can look back on a long life of success and service. In an ideal world, he and the rest of his generation would be able to rest easy in the knowledge that America is a better place now than when they were young. But in some ways America is not a better place.

Bedell uses phrases such-as "it breaks my heart" and "I cry for our nation" to describe the country today. "I cry for our nation and for the good people that make up 90 percent of our population but are asked to survive on only 18 percent of the nation's wealth," he wrote.

Approaching age 93 (in March), Bedell remembers a country that was not as divided, not as unequal, not as paralyzed as today. It was an America that was able to do great things as a country. In a stream of blogs, writings and email from his winter home in Florida, he offers thoughts on what went wrong and urges America's young people to organize and get the country back on track.

He suggests, among other things, that wealthy people, including himself and Elinor, his wife of 70 years, should pay more taxes.

It has been nearly three decades since Bedell served in Congress, so most Iowans might be unfamiliar with his story. It is a story that gives him credibility in both the business and political worlds.

Bedell famously built Berkley & Co., the nation's largest fishing tackle company, starting with \$50 he saved from his newspaper route as a teenager in Spirit Lake. He made fishing flies and spent half of his \$50 for an ad in **Sports Afield** magazine to sell them.

The summer after high school graduation, he decided to add cable wire fishing leaders to his product line. He didn't know how to manufacture the leaders, but he nevertheless set out to sell them for 10 percent less than the existing manufacturers. He modified the seats in his parents' car so he could sleep in the vehicle and drove 3,000 miles through the Midwest calling on distributors.

"By the time I got to Louisville, Ky., there was a telegram waiting for me telling me I had better hurry home," Bedell told a group of students last year. "They had a lot of orders for cable wire fishing leaders that no one knew how to make."

Bedell learned how to make the leaders, got a loan from the local bank and launched the Berkley Fishing Tackle Co.

After service in World War II, Bedell returned to the business, building it into the national leader by continually investing in innovation. Among other things, the company experimented until it came up with its own brand of monofilament fishing line, "Trilene, in competition with chemical giant DuPont.

With the success of his company, Bedell said, "I decided I would like to do something about our nation's problems." He ran for Congress in 1972 as a Democrat in a Republican-leaning northwest Iowa district and lost. Two years later, he won and served in the U.S. House of Representatives for 12 years. He could have easily been elected to more terms but was weakened by Lyme disease and chose not to run in 1986.

Contrasting his service in the '70s and '80s with the acrimonious partisanship in today's Congress, Bedell said, "It breaks my heart." "The difference in how our government operates between the time I was in Congress and today is black and white, and an absolute disaster," Bedell wrote in an email.

"[Republican Sen.] Chuck Grassley is still a good personal friend, and [Republican Representatives] Tom Tauke, Cooper Evans and Jim Leach were all close friends. We would talk with each other about legislation. **I never once in 12 years ever felt that I needed to vote according to the position of the Democratic leadership.**

"I never spent much over \$100,000 in any of my campaigns. Today political contributions have exploded, and many members vote according to the wishes of their campaign contributors in order to get those same contributions for their next. election. Money runs our elections."

Campaign finance reform is among the causes Bedell advocates, to put the people back in control of their government.

Then there is the partisan gridlock that makes the country unable to come to grips with grave threats such as climate change, unemployment and income inequality.

Bedell traces the rise in inequality to the Reagan years. "I was a Democrat representing a Republican district where President Reagan was very popular," wrote Bedell. "When I voted against his tax cut that went mostly to the wealthy, some of my constituents were ready to lynch me."

"I believe that vote was the best I ever made because I knew the bill would start the ball rolling that would concentrate more and more of the wealth of our nation in the hands of folks who already were rich."

Bedell notes that in the 1950s when Republican Dwight Eisenhower was president the top marginal tax rate for the wealthy was 91 percent, and the economy did just fine. Those were also the years when Bedell was building his company, and the tax rates didn't hold him back. It was a time that has been called "the Great Prosperity."

Today, in times of not-so-great prosperity, the top tax rate is 35 percent, and the rate on capital-gains income is only 15 percent, which enables the super wealthy to pay a lower tax rate than their employees.

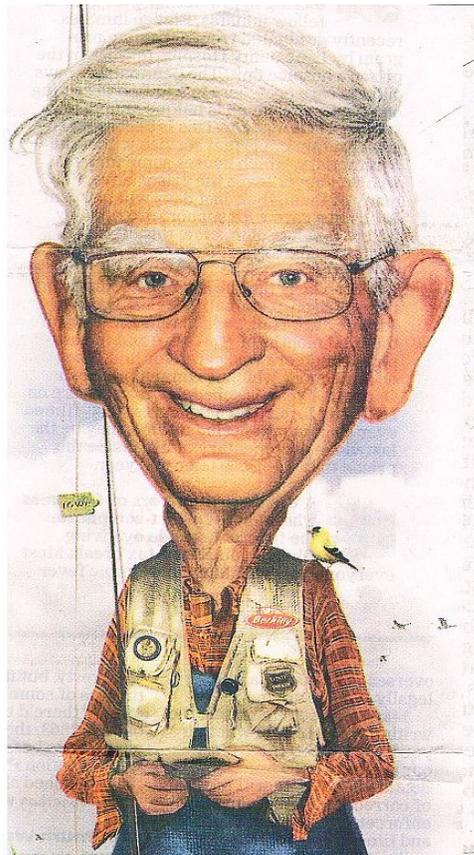
In 2011, Bedell published a book, "Revenue Matters: Tax the Rich and Restore Democracy to Save the Nation." The crux of his argument is that people should be taxed according to their ability to pay, as they once were. He contends the wealthy could easily pay more without diminishing their lifestyles one bit. The resulting new revenue could be put to good use eliminating the deficits and restoring the ability to do big things as a country. For instance, people could be put to work making the conversion to green energy, simultaneously tackling the problems of unemployment and climate change.

But Bedell despairs of that ever happening as long as Congress is under the thumb of money interests and nearly every Republican has signed a pledge to never, ever raise a single tax.

He suggests the only hope is for today's young people to rise up and demand change.

Today's generation of young adults, the Millennial Generation, is three generations removed from Bedell's Greatest Generation. Millennials have no memory of the Great Prosperity or even of a time when Washington was not dysfunctional. Can that generation of young people really be expected to restore America's capacity to function as a great nation?

Bedell might be right: They're the only hope.



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