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#### JACK OHMAN

The Oregonian's award-

## Recalling the case for mediocrity

by Kenneth Janda, Guest opinion

Tuesday October 14, 2008, 8:47 PM

The late Senator Hruska, once the butt of jokes, has found support for his view of democracy.

Until retiring in 1976, Roman Hruska served more than twenty years as a hard-working conservative Republican senator from Nebraska. But most politicians remember him for one embarrassing remark on the Senate floor in March 1970.

Sen. Hruska rose to defend Richard Nixon's Supreme Court nomination of Judge G. Harrold Carswell, whom Democrats regarded as mediocre and unfit for service on our nation's highest court.



Sarah Palin, right, mingles with voters at a Dallas Mavericks basketball game.

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by [JBac](#) 10/15/2008  
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10/15/2008 5:30 p.m. PT

Playing on her regular gal theme in her vice-presidential debate with Sen. Joe Biden, she talked informally, saying "darn," "heck," "gonna," and "Oh, yeah, it's so obvious I'm a Washington outsider."

To many voters, Palin's averageness constitutes her appeal. They like voting for a candidate who is "like them" rather than for someone with exceptional knowledge or accomplishments, someone in the "elite."

As Sam Harris noted recently in Newsweek, voters tar presidential candidates for being among the elite -- the best or most skilled members of a group -- despite valuing elite status in its athletes, troops, and pilots.

Hence, Barack Obama never admits in campaign speeches that he has a law degree from Harvard, was editor of Harvard's prestigious Law Review, or that he taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago. These accomplishments are arguably relevant to serving as president, but they smack of elitism.

Meanwhile, Sarah Palin touts her role as a mother and John McCain points to his period as a P.O.W. Those accomplishments are arguably less relevant to be president, but they are not elitist.

Politicians understand the appeal of appearing ordinary, which is why they run as "Bob" Dole, "Dick" Cheney, "Bill" Clinton, and "Jimmy" Carter.

Some political theorists go further than politicians in valuing the ordinary. They bolster Sen. Hruska's claim that mediocre people "are entitled to a little representation" by linking it to a strain in democratic theory which claims that average citizens should serve in public office. Granted, this view is not a widely held, but it is expressed in "Random Selection in Politics" by Lyn Carson and Brian Martin.

Most democratic theorists, however, recognize that effective government requires extraordinary knowledge and skills not shared by average citizens. They subscribe to the view that citizens should choose candidates who are highly qualified to discharge the responsibilities of the office they seek.


Which viewpoint do you prefer? Think about your friends and neighbors. Most of them, presumably, are average, ordinary citizens. Would you choose any of them to run the country?

If you think that's a dandy idea, you have a soul mate in Sen. Hruska.

*Kenneth Janda is Payson S. Wild Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Northwestern University.*

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The senator did not challenge their charge but questioned why mediocrity, in principle, should disqualify a citizen for high public office.

Hruska said, "Even if he were mediocre, there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers. They are entitled to a little representation, aren't they, and a little chance? We can't have all Brandeises, Frankfurters and Cardozos."

The press jumped all over him for defending mediocrity as a qualification for public service. Sen. Hruska's name was associated with his remark throughout his life and even followed him after death in his New York Times April 29, 1999 obituary (which also noted that the Carswell nomination was defeated).

Somewhere up there, Sen. Hruska must be smiling, comforted by his party's nomination of Sarah Palin as its candidate for vice president of the United States.

Like Judge Carswell, Sarah Palin too has public credentials. Carswell was judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit when nominated for the Supreme Court. Palin served as mayor of Wasilla, Alaska, and currently is a first-term governor of Alaska.

As a state governor, Palin is by definition not an average citizen. Nevertheless, her qualifications for world leader, like Judge Carswell's qualifications for the nation's highest court, are mediocre -- i.e., middling, ordinary, average.

Like most Americans (about 90 percent), Palin had virtually no foreign travel experience prior to being governor, and like most Americans (about 70 percent), didn't even obtain a passport until last year. Like many U.S. citizens (about a quarter), she earned a bachelor's degree but, like most Americans, has no graduate or professional degree.

In fact, Palin billed herself as "your average hockey mom" when accepting her vice-presidential nomination at the 2008 Republican convention. She did not address her qualifications to be president if she were called on to fulfill her Constitutional responsibilities.