

by Susan_Estrich

He was positively infuriating. I e-mailed his then-girlfriend, as the crowd was applauding him at Madison Square Garden in 2004, that I hoped she wasn't dating the (expletive deleted) anymore. She was.

Ron hammered me about that e-mail: Did I like a friend less because I disagreed with him on politics? Did I doubt the sincerity of his beliefs? Did I think there could be any reason other than an honest passion that would support his being there? No, absolutely not.

He was committing career suicide, I told him, during one of those flights back from a debate somewhere. You better hope George Bush loses, because if he wins, they'll blame you. Ron wasn't sure whether it would be better or worse for him, professionally speaking, if Bush won, but he was quite sure, as was I, that it would be bad either way.

It's one thing to support George Bush in 2004 because you always support people named Bush — that is, because you're a Republican. But for an outspoken backer of President Clinton, a longtime liberal activist and the New York guru of the Hollywood lefty Creative Coalition to be picking Bush over Kerry on prime time was a sure-fire way to ensure that you'd never work in this town again.

Ron believed what he believed. He was happy to debate with you about which of you was right until the waiters wanted to go home or the cows did, but he believed firmly and passionately and did not believe in compromise about that. He had to stand up for what he believed in; it was who he was.

And he did. Around the time of supporting Bush, he said and did all kinds of things that made liberals who didn't know him dislike him very much. And that he did it as a staunch defender of Israel, something many of us fancy ourselves to be, made it all the more annoying. He was not popular in this town or its dominant business as a result.

He paid the price professionally, as if he had done something terribly wrong — only mega-stars can get away with that. He was punished for his honesty about his politics and because what he said mattered. How's that for irony? Just another actor could have gotten away with it. But he was definitely punished. Bias? For sure. In his memory, it should be said.

Ron was a great and celebrated actor: Tony-winning, Emmy-much nominated, one of the few who ever moved between stage, television and film with the same fluidity with which he crossed from the creative to the political worlds. He delighted in politics. He believed passionately, but he also enjoyed it a lot. An actor who's actually respected cuts a very good path. That his buddy Netanyahu should be putting it together in Israel as I

write this only underscores the randomness of this living business.

Ron is survived by his parents. Go figure. It is not the way it should be. But how much is these days? No whines: Ron had a great life. He was a great actor, father, friend and advocate. He had a lot of fun doing it. He had more to teach us, more to say and more to do. A great man who lived a great life. It was just the terminal cancer part.

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