Aging Lifestyles: Byrd's-eye view on the graying of America

by Joe_Volz

It must have been a slow news day in The Associated Press Washington bureau so an enterprising reporter figured he would take on Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., who turns 90 this fall.

The AP dispatch in mid-June made quite a splash in the Charleston (W.Va.) Daily Mail, announcing, "Age is finally catching up with (Byrd) in the winter of his 54-year career in Congress. At 89, the longest-serving senator in history and the third person in the line of presidential succession has ceded major duties - such as handling appropriations bills on the Senate floor - to younger colleagues and aides."

The correspondent's biggest problem with Byrd was that "he increasingly seems an anachronism in an Internet-age Congress where some members are young enough to be his grandchildren."

Well, if the popular senator is an anachronism - he carried all but one county in winning an overwhelming re-election last year - then we need more "anachronists" in Congress.

Byrd speaks his mind. He was an early opponent of the Iraq War, for example, when such stance was extremely unpopular on Capitol Hill.

Yet, the correspondent frets about Byrd's physical problems. The senator "walks haltingly with two canes" and his hands and voice "quaver noticeably." And, even worse, the senator who doesn't play hooky missed a vote last January because he was sick.

Much of what was in the AP dispatch would not have been considered news, as Byrd himself points out, if he were 50 instead of almost 90.

So what's going on here? Is this a classic example of age discrimination? Byrd seems to think so.

He said on the Senate floor, "Out of 18,000 votes in my career, to miss one or two votes every now and then is excusable. Even old people can be allowed a sick day or two now and then, can't they?"

Patty Vandergrift Tompkins, managing editor of the Charleston Gazette, who is 31 years younger than Byrd, tells me: "Perhaps the people of West Virginia are a bit more tolerant and appreciative of older

Americans. We have an older population in the state."

She says that Byrd is "well-loved in the state" and voters have said he can stay as long as he wants.

Byrd, himself, normally pretty humorless, has lightened up about his age. He observed in his Senate speech that news stories in recent weeks have "pointed out the shocking discovery that I am growing older. I find it no surprise but then I have had some time to become accustomed to the increasing distance between the year of my birth and the current date."

He acknowledged his physical infirmities. "It is true that this year's signature looks like I signed it in a moving car. Some days, the benign tremor that I have had for years is worse than on other days, just as it is for the approximately 5 million other people who suffer from similar tremors. It is annoying but hardly evidence that I am at death's door.

"Nor should it come as a surprise that I use canes to help me get around or that I am not always as fast as I once was. I am not aware of any requirement for physical dexterity in order to hold the office of a U.S. senator."

Byrd launched a counterattack against those who fear his age.

"In this Internet-savvy media-infused culture, we have forgotten that people get older. Even, dare I say, old. Television is full of pretty young people. The few white-haired heads that one sees on television are made up and glamorous. In a culture of Botox, wrinkle cream and hair dye, we cannot imagine that becoming older is a good thing."

He adds, "I don't think our 36 million citizens over the age of 65 are disqualified from participating in the life of the country we helped to build."

Three cheers for Bobby Byrd.

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