

Democracy, Alive and Well In Southern California

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If you've never been to a political event, you've never seen grassroots democracy in action.

The speeches, the mingling, the positioning, the give and take—these are the elements that when mixed in the proper proportions produce the spontaneous combustion known as democracy.

This Tuesday morning at a lovely tiled, patioed, and tiered private residence overlooking most of La Cañada–Flintridge, there was such a get-together: Benefiting the congressional candidacy of small businessman Russ Warner, Democratic opponent of Republican incumbent David Dreier, the backyard breakfast allowed concerned citizens to rub elbows with and tug the ears of local party activists, elected city councilpersons, assembly and congressional candidates, state political operatives, and the guest of honor—former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO and 2004 U.S. presidential contender General Wesley Clark.

This was a thoroughly inspiring experience, connecting those who would lead us with our most pressing concerns—from educating our young people and keeping them from dying in unnecessary wars (Warner's son Greg, with an appointment to West Point, has survived 17

months in the warzone of Iraq) to reigning in exorbitant profits in the oil and healthcare industries and nurturing the growth of small businesses, besieged by international behemoths sending jobs overseas.

As congressional candidate Warner told me, running a government should be like running a small family business: take care of your people while watching the bottom line. Running up massive debts and allowing human beings to fall through the cracks is not the way to do things.

This present contest—between Warner and Dreier—is important not only to the citizens of the 26th congressional district—stretching from La Cañada–Flintridge to Rancho Cucamonga and beyond—but also to the citizens of the United States as a whole: Our current congressman, David Dreier, as chairman of the House Rules Committee, exercises a stranglehold on all legislation appearing before the House; even on some bills for which there has been broad bipartisan support, Dreier has prevented the bills from ever coming to a vote, because they were opposed by the White House. As newspapers across the country have noted for years, David Dreier serves as George Bush's "hatchet-man" in Congress.

As General Clark said Tuesday, with his commanding, yet accessible presence: "This country is, right now, under the domination of a party that is captured by some obsolete ideas.

Democracy. Use it or lose it.

"They made some serious strategic blunders: like invading Iraq, which was an unnecessary, elective war; like running a huge budget deficit and leaving our children and grandchildren saddled with trillions of dollars of debt held by people abroad, not even by other Americans."

"We've got to get America back on the right path. To do that, we're going to need men and women in Congress who can look at the situation that our country finds itself in, listen to the needs of the American people—the rich, the poor, the middle class, everybody in between; people of every faith and denomination.

"We're going to need men and women who respect America for what it is and believe that every American should be given the opportunity to live his life or her life and develop their potential to the fullest.

"We're looking for pragmatic leaders, problem-solvers: people who can take ideas and turn them into concrete reality, people who can make it happen."

And we the people can make that happen.

Don't let the powers-that-be fool you. Just as most of the economic activity in this country is conducted by households, the lion's share of the political power in the U.S. is ultimately held by the public at large.