

Brent Hill

Senate President Pro Tempore, Idaho

An Idaho native and graduate of Utah State University, Brent Hill is a retired certified public accountant and certified financial planner. He was appointed to fill a vacant Senate seat in 2001 and was elected president pro tempore in 2010. Hill and his wife, Julie, are celebrating their 45th wedding anniversary this year. He is the author of "A Matter of Principle" which recounts his political and personal philosophies.

How did you go from being an accountant to being in the Legislature?

I've always been fascinated with the political process, even as a kid. I love our government and the way the Constitution is set up. But quite frankly, I was too shy as a kid to ever consider running for public office. And in Idaho we meet from January until the end of March or into April, and that's the busiest time for tax accountants. But later in my life, as our children were grown and my career was more secure, it became an opportunity to fulfill that dream to serve. I think we all have a yearning to serve, whether that's in our family, church, service clubs or government.

What advice do you give to new legislators?

I think we all know that integrity is important, but I don't know if we realize how extremely important it is when you're in public service. Your integrity, that's all you have.

What's the biggest takeaway from your book?

There are two. One is the importance of integrity and being true to those you work with as well as yourself. We are held at a higher standard because we have been elected by the people. We don't do the very minimum of what's required in ethics. We need to be striving for something much higher. The other principle I stress is the concept—or truth—that most people are good. And the good far outweighs the bad. It's so easy to become cynical. There are many things to complain about regarding our federal government, as well as other levels of government. And it's not that we shouldn't focus on those things. We should, and we should try to solve our problems and become better. But we have had problems in the history of this nation and we've always risen to become better.

Which authors inspire you? I love American history, particularly since I've been more involved in the political process. David McCullough is one of my favorite authors. The book that's sitting on my bedstand right now is "John Adams." I'm on my third time through it. Another one of my favorite authors is Doris Kearns Goodwin. And Edward Larson wrote a book called "George Washington, Nationalist." I try to pattern my leadership style after George Washington's more than anyone else's. The lessons we can learn from the successes, challenges and failures of previous leaders are invaluable. To transform them into today's world and into my life, that's a challenge, but it's an exciting challenge.

What have your 19 grandchildren taught you about the future?

The most valuable lessons in my life I've learned from my own children, and now, my grandchildren. There is wisdom that comes from the innocence of a child. And there's an optimism that comes from seeing how they learn and grow and develop. The youth of this world are just incredible, at least the ones who are striving to be good. I think they're going to be better prepared leaders than my colleagues and I were.

What would surprise people most to learn about you?

How incredibly shy I was in my younger years. When I was 14 we moved four miles, but it might as well have been 4,000, because I had to change high schools. I went into that with a strong determination that relationships were more important than material things. And so I put more effort into building friendships. It wasn't easy, but I knew it was something I needed to do.

What final words would you like to leave with our readers?

Look for the goodness in people, including politicians. When I first went to Boise, I was going to "drain the swamp." My impression of politics came from talk show hosts and movies and speeches, all of which were very critical of our political process. My most pleasant surprise was that there were a lot of people who were there for the right reasons. They wanted to make Idaho a better place to live, raise families and do business. Cynicism is one of the greatest enemies to a free society. We've become so cynical, but we need to see the good and then make the good even better.

Jane Carroll Andrade, contributing editor, conducted this interview, which has been edited for length.