

Blowing in the Wind

My Republican physician brother-in-law probably said it the best, when I talked to him on his cell phone, “anyone who doesn’t believe in climate change now needs to have their head examined.” Dr. K has no power and no phone service at his home. He is living in the basement of his son-in-law, who happens to have a generator. Overnight, this erstwhile family member has become a convert to Al Gore’s way of thinking. One of the Democrats in my family retorted, “See, Al Gore was right all along and no one appreciated him.”

The time for a political food fight over Hurricane Sandy is not far off. It cannot seriously be debated that climate change is not occurring. Some claim that the warming of the earth and the intensifying of storms is merely part of a cycle denoted by the fact that we are still coming out of the last ice age. Others will say that the changes in the planet’s climate are directly related to hydrocarbon emissions created by mankind’s piggish lifestyle. Science seems to say that both of these points of view are correct.

The author of The Clockwork Universe, Edward Dolnick, writes convincingly about the time in world history when science evolved from superstition and alchemy to physics and calculus. People like Isaac Newton believed in the literal truth of the Bible at the same time that they were inventing the system which led to the greatest challenges the Bible has known.

Regardless of one’s point of view, no honest observer of the current condition can seriously argue that our planet is not fundamentally changing. We are part of that change. We have poisoned the atmosphere and we continue to utilize fossil fuels in a way that will only create enhanced global warming. Storms will become more severe, and the damage to life and property will be immeasurably enhanced.

My focus is not so much on the debate between hot and cold, but rather how we are going to protect our infrastructure. Our interstate highway system was built in the 1950’s. The New York City subway system is 100 years old. The water delivery system of many cities is between 75 and 120 years old. We are literally rotting from within. We have spent our national treasure in both youth and money on foreign adventures, starting with the Korean War, continuing through Vietnam and involving Iraq and Afghanistan. We have failed to stem the fundamentalist Islamic hatred against United States’ interests, while spending an unseemly large amount of money enriching what President Eisenhower characterized as the “military industrial complex.”

Everyone, both Democrat and Republican, agree that national debt is obscene and unacceptable. That debt largely comes from funding foreign wars, bailing out big business, and funding programs which are not actuarially sound. Even when we do have a program capable of standing on its own feet financially such as Social Security, we borrow that money from that fund for other purposes unrelated to the necessity to safeguard the Social Security trust fund.

The politicians of both parties have a very difficult time looking the camera in the eye and telling us the truth. The Simpson Bowles Commission bravely attempted to chart a course to financial well-being and was promptly rejected by both parties. No surprises here.

We need to cut our spending and enhance our income. If you are a Democrat, you can simply reverse the order but regardless of party affiliation both approaches are going to be a prerequisite to our national survival. It is not enough to close tax loopholes, to make sure everyone pays their fair share and to eliminate tax incentives to move businesses overseas. Likewise, it will not be sufficient to claim that privatization of Medicare will solve all of our problems. All of our so-called entitlement programs, meaning those programs where money must be spent according to law, must have sufficient funds on a yearly basis to pay the bills or the benefits must be cut. The same is true for Social Security and every other program.

Doubtless, a split government of Republicans and Democrats are needed to hammer out a reasonable compromise. Thus far, that has not been possible since the Clinton administration. Ideology and the drive to be reelected has been stronger than the willingness to tell the people the truth. Profiles in courage was John Kennedy's attempt to tell the story of politicians who braved the wrath of their constituents in order to articulate the difference between right and wrong. Many of those politicians paid for their courage with their careers.

Hopefully, the citizens of the United States chastened by natural disasters and the ability to come together during difficult times will demand better of their politicians. We could only hope that the politics of division becomes the politics of unity.

When I was watching the debates between President Obama and Governor Romney, I could not help but think how bright and capable both of these men were. There was a time in our history when the loser in the presidential election automatically became the Vice President. That system did not work out very well since Vice President Jefferson did everything he could to undermine President Adams. In fact, there are many historians who believe that Jefferson behaved in a manner, in terms of his relationship with the French, that by today's standards would be considered treasonous. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to have a system where somehow Republicans and Democrats were forced to work together for the benefit of the people. Maybe we cannot go back to the original intent of the Founding Fathers, but at the very least we should perhaps consider what our Founders may have had in mind.

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