

## Random Thoughts on Current Politics

Ronald Reagan (A Time for Choosing 1964) said: “It’s [politics] not left or right. It’s up to mankind’s age old dream of individual freedom, consistent with order, or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism.”

My (Ben Enis, Jr.) interpretation of that statement is that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who put people in categories and those who don’t (joke). Seriously, the Reaganesque categories are those who want to tell other people what to do, and those who resist being told what to do—the former are driven by totalitarian dreams; the latter by freedom-inspired results. Examples of totalitarians: teachers, cops, community organizers are somewhat totalitarian (but very useful to society if kept in check), more totalitarian-impelled are politicians, even more criminals who voluntarily participate in “victimless” crimes (smuggling, prostitution, drug sales, i.e., bone fide exchanges to expected mutual advantage that a society labels as against the public interest), and ultimately down to complete totalitarianism run by dictators and their cadre of admirers and enablers.

Totalitarianism goes by many labels: modern [as distinguished from classical] liberalism, progressivism, utopianism, puritanism, fascism, socialism, feudalism, theocracy, communism—all are no more than variants of the same impulse: the desire to tell others what to do, and the belief that their particular ideology equips them with the superior knowledge and sense of moral righteousness to determine what is best for others. And since many of those others resist, the “elite” (Sowell’s term) must inevitably resort to government-sanctioned force, as Reagan noted, to achieve their desired result. But unintended consequences of the elite’s use of force always occur. It is the “fatal conceit” (Hayek’s term) of the elite that they can in fact control the behavior of all in society that leads inevitably to the collapse of the totalitarian society. Examples: Rome, medieval England, Plymouth Colony, the USSR, Nazi Germany, and on to societies on the verge of collapsing but not yet gone—modern China, modern Europe, Iran and Syria, possibly Obama’s America. In Margaret Thatcher’s bon mot: “sooner or later they run out of other people’s money”.

Those who value individual freedom include those who work for themselves, small business owners, entrepreneurs, etc. Further up toward freedom we get those risk takers who cut corners, bend rules, etc. in order to achieve results within society’s concept of order. Then come those who break rules and laws (go above Reagan’s “consistent with order”); after all, they are pursuing their own freedom, by committing crimes that society prohibits (in the valid pursuit of order): thieves and extortionists, assaulters and batterers, murderers and rapists, pedophiliacs, and those who enforce their side of victimless crimes—pimps, leg breakers, bribers, etc.—by violence. And at the very extreme of individual freedom practitioners is the anarchist, who is clearly beyond the limits of societal order.

Philosophically, totalitarians live in Plato’s world (see the misnamed *The Republic*—a viciously totalitarian tract including a theoretic ruling elite, and bread and circuses for the proletarians. The Platonic vision is a world of ivory-tower theory, of intentions rather than facts, of the world as they believe it ought to be; this is the world of politics, of win-lose, of dividing whatever resources are at hand. Pursuers of the dream of freedom, on the other hand, inhabit the world of Aristotle—a practical

view of the world as it is, of facts and evidence, of believing what is seen; this is world of economics, of voluntary exchanges to expected mutual advantage, of creating more resources. People in Aristotle's world value equality of opportunity not equality of results, of advancement by merit not cronyism or birthright, of lifting every individual up even though some climb higher than others, rather than driving everyone down to the same level (NB: people cannot be made more equal by raising all up; they can only be more equal by leveling all down).

To illustrate this set of categories, consider the Psych 101 experiment—the Rorschach Test—in which the experimenter presents to the subject an image of an inkblot and asks, “what do you see?” The Aristotelian, believing what he/she sees, will respond: “That’s an inkblot”, because the Aristotelian relies upon common sense, perhaps sharpened by knowledge of scientific method, to seek facts, evidence, congruence with previous real-world experience. The Platonic-driven person, however, will see what he/she believes: that’s daddy beating mother, the referee’s mistake in the big game, or some horrible childhood experience. Such visions are not seen by the Aristotelian observer, but the Platonic is not deterred by this “lack of vision”; rather he/she is driven to correct, even to the use of force, the Aristotelian’s blindness.

Now apply these thoughts to the current political scene: the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress is often accused of “doing nothing” because relatively few laws have been passed this session. This accusation confuses action with improvement—as acting Platonically rather than as Aristotelians. As Einstein remarked, “not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted”. To wit: might the next Congress actively work diligently to repeal laws that produce societally-damaging unintended consequences (think Obamacare), and to reduce the impact of overregulation and taxation. Could such a Congress be accurately labeled as “do nothing”? Or would that Congress be more correctly seen as pursuing Reagan’s age-old dream of increasing individual liberty?