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Politics: A Game to Win or a Challenge to Lead

by James A. Leach

“Studies that stimulate the imagination and nourish capacities to analyze and think outside the box are well-suited to the challenges of change.”

These are tough times and everyone knows it. The mood is sour. The Tea Party and the Occupy Wall Street movement exemplify public angst. There is a sense that the American people have been let down by partisan politics and Wall Street deceit.

Management of debt has become the dominant problem for the American family, the federal government, and most states and communities. There is a vibrant, not always well articulated, debate about how or whether the economy can be stimulated from Washington. Traditional Keynesian economists suggest that when government is faced with an economic downturn or a national security challenge, it should press the fiscal levers. Acolytes of Milton Friedman and the Viennese-born economist Friedrich Hayek, on the other hand, argue caution, especially on raising taxes.

Both sides of the policy debate are confronted with more limited options as the total debt burden climbs. At some point, debt accumulation becomes unmanageable. No economist knows where the breaking point is because in the final measure nation-states operate in a market economy. It is public confidence that determines the marketability and pricing of debt. What we do know is that the costs of government are bound to escalate as debt obligations place an increasing claim on national resources and as a higher proportion of the population reaches retirement age.

In addition, we know that the hangover from this past decade’s fiscal decision making cannot be ducked. For the first time in our or perhaps any country’s history, taxes were cut in wartime, and no shared economic sacrifice was called for. The cost of military intervention in two Islamic countries—our two longest wars—

as well as the cost associated with attacks from the air in four others have been passed on to future generations. The result is that a year ago we raised approximately 15 percent of the GDP in taxes and spent 25 percent. These are unsustainable figures.

This brings us to the increasingly surreal world of Washington politics and the fiscal decisions that affect all elements of the federal budget.



What is so troubling is that the judgmental differences that are worthy of respect are exacerbated by partisanship that undercuts the capacity of governing bodies even to make decisions. Too many are looking at politics as a game to win rather than a challenge to lead.

Under President Reagan, the last president to modify the underpinnings of Social Security, a combination approach was taken: the age of retirement was gradually raised, the formula for cost of living raises was adjusted slightly downward, and the income levels on which Social Security taxes are levied were moved upwards. The judgment in Congress and the executive branch at the time was that this combination approach entailed fair and balanced sacrifice on the part of working Americans and their employers who share the burden of paying

Social Security taxes, and retirees who depend on the dedicated transfer of tax dollars. Of all our challenges, the retirement income aspect of Social Security remains the most manageable. Unfortunately, in today's politics it is unclear whether a balanced effort akin to the kind arrived at in the Ronald Reagan-Tip O'Neill era can be repeated.

The bigger fiscal trauma is health care, a subject upon which I am far from an expert. But, it is self-evident that there are equity problems in health-care delivery and that the lack of discipline in health-care costs is weakening the overall economy. We are the only country in the world in which health-care costs are a double digit percentage of the GDP—now approaching 17 percent—a figure which contrasts starkly with the 5 percent of GDP that health care represented when John F. Kennedy assumed office.

I mention this subject and these figures because when defense spending and interest on the national debt are excluded, it is Social Security and health care that are the principal cost drivers of the federal budget, and it is Medicaid that is the single most bedeviling cost element in the appropriations process of most state governments. I also mention it because many businesspeople will tell you that it is health-care costs rather than salary considerations that often drive corporate decisions to outsource jobs.

These seemingly extraneous macro-economic considerations are noted to underscore the fragility of our country's economy and our government's fiscal picture. The assumption that jobs are the number one issue for most Americans is valid; a conclusion, however, that the liberal arts are not critical to job creation is mistaken. Indeed, such a conclusion could too easily lead to policy prescriptions that undercut American competitiveness and the national interest itself.

One of the myths of our time is that the humanities are good for the soul but irrelevant to the pocketbook. Actually, they are central to long-term American competitiveness. It is true that many jobs, such as in the construction trades, are skill based, but job creation itself

Change and its acceleration characterize the times.

requires an understanding of community and the world. Change and its acceleration characterize the times. With each passing year, jobs evolve, become more sophisticated. Training for one skill set may be of little assistance for another. On the other hand, studies that stimulate the imagination and nourish capacities to analyze and think outside the box are well-suited to the challenges of change. They make coping with the unprecedented an achievable endeavor.

What is needed in a world in flux is a new understanding of the meaning of the basics in education. Traditionally, the basics are about the three *R*'s, which in Iowa City are sometimes defined as “readin’, ‘ritin’, and ‘restlin’.” However defined, they are critical. Nonetheless, they are insufficient. What are also needed are the

studies that provide perspective on our times and foster citizen understanding of their own communities, other cultures, and the creative process. To understand and compete in the world we need a fourth *R*, which for lack of a precise moniker might be described as “reality”—which includes not only relevant knowledge of the world near and far but the imaginative capacity to put oneself in the shoes of others and creatively apply knowledge to discrete endeavors.

Rote thinking is the hallmark of the status quo. Stimulating the imagination is the key to the future. As individuals we all try to make sense of our own odysseys through life. Our “universe” is small in relation not only to the solar system but to the communities in which we live. But wherever we might be, we are affected by global events, whether related to the challenges of national security or the global hiring hall. In this insecure geopolitical environment, a deeper comprehension of the fourth *R* (reality) has never been more important. It is essential to revitalizing the American productive engine and inspiring thoughtful citizenship.

A skeptic once suggested that the humanities are little more than studies of flaws in human nature. Actually they uplift on the one hand and warn on the other. The power of a few to commit acts of societal destruction and the contrasting capacity of a few to precipitate uplifting change has grown exponentially in the past century. Two contrasting examples provide contemporary illustrations, Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, points out that little strikes greater fear in the hearts of despots than the humanities. They are anathema to tyrants because they liberate the mind. It is not surprising that in the wake of civil unrest several years ago, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that humanities



courses in Iran must be purged to reflect only government-approved dogma.

To watch what appears to be an historic progressive revolution take shape in Cairo's Tahrir Square this past year is to understand why oppressors have such reason to fear the humanities. To them, the danger is self-evident:

The minds and souls of people have to be better understood.

a free thinking people will be tempted to lead their leaders. One liberated mind, a young college graduate, Gigi Ibrahim, was interviewed on the *Daily Show* about why she became involved in the protests against her government. The answer she gave Jon Stewart was that she was inspired by taking a class at the American University in Cairo on social issues and reform movements. Ideas manifested themselves into ideals; and history, she found, provided the power of example. Individuals with convictions could stand up to tyranny.

Precedents can be instructive, but less so when the world in which we live has so many unprecedented problems, political as well as economic. Civilization, for instance, is on trial from two extremes: the looming prospect that weapons of mass destruction could be unleashed, and the reality that the more advanced and open a society, the more vulnerable it is to terrorism. Seldom, therefore, has it been more important for individuals in public life to appeal to the better angels rather than the baser instincts of the body politic. Whether the issues are social or economic, domestic or international, the temptation to appeal to the darker side of human nature must be avoided. The stakes are too high. The duty of public officials is to inspire hope rather than to manipulate fear. The health of

nations is directly related to the temperance of statecraft.

It is also related to the depth of knowledge applied to decision making. This is no time to put the brakes on humanities studies or toy with anti-intellectualism. In reviewing, for example, our decision to go to war in Iraq, it is apparent that inadequate attention to cultural issues may have cost lives as well as money. Yes, there was an "intelligence" failure related to misjudgments about Iraq's nuclear capacities. But the greatest "intelligence" failure was our lack of understanding of the region, its people, and their religions.

For instance, despite having gone to war in the Persian Gulf a decade earlier, Congress and executive branch policymakers understood little of the Sunni/Shi'a divide when 9/11 hit. Likewise, despite the French experience in Algeria and the British and Russian in Afghanistan, we had little comprehension of the depth of Islamic antipathy to foreign occupation. Nor, despite the tactics of a Daniel Boone-style patriot named Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox, who attacked British garrisons at night during the Revolutionary War and then vanished in South Carolina swamps during the day, we had little sense for the effectiveness of asymmetric warfare.



Policymakers have to recognize that political traumas of the moment are surface issues that can be understood only in relation to underlying cultural bases: the customs, history, literature, philosophy, religion, and sometimes myths of a country or people. Such considerations are critical to devising approaches to avoid conflict, to prosecuting a war if conflict cannot be avoided, and to ending any conflict in such a way as to lessen the prospect of a similar conflict emerging again.

For decades, military strategists have wisely talked of the need to think through the hazards of exit strategies when war is contemplated. But concerns about how to end a war seldom get more than passing attention when planning for war commences. To the degree exit strategies are initially considered, the theoretical planning generally encompasses institutional and logistical concerns more than cultural considerations. Yet, to lead the world in this century it is the human condition, the culture and history of countries, the minds and souls of peoples that are going to have to be better understood.

National security involves more than military preparedness. It begins at home, not only in relation to the making of policy judgments but with regard to the respect or lack thereof accorded diverse cultural groups. The advancing of mutual respect is central to relations between states and peoples. As an immigrant society with family ties to every country across the globe, we are watched closely. How we speak about others and assimilate elements of our own society affect whether peoples around the world view us as a beacon of hope and opportunity or a wellspring of prejudice.

For many, concern for civility seems either unimportant or sanctimonious. Actually, civility is an enduring virtue of civilized society. At issue is how individuals interrelate in community and how societies make decisions that can



affect life on the planet. For the ancient Greeks, civility involved a bond of *polis*, a sharing of principles and a commitment to live justly within a city-state. Today, civility remains the heart of civilization. It provides the prospect of avoiding, dampening, even resolving conflict, whether in the neighborhood or in the international arena.

Civility is not simply or principally about numbers. And it doesn't mean that spirited advocacy is to be avoided. Indeed, argumentation is a social good. Without argumentation there is a tendency to dogmatism, even tyranny. What civility does require is a willingness to consider respectfully the views of others, with

We are all connected and rely on each other.

an understanding that we are all connected and rely on each other. Seldom is there only one proper path determinable by one individual, one political party, or one nation-state. But public decision making does not lend itself to certitude. And that is why humility is a valued character trait and why civility is an essential component of civil society.

In an American setting, citizens should be expected to disagree vigorously with each other and take their differences ultimately to the ballot box. But the outcome that matters most in the wake of an election is whether, despite rival ambitions, the prevailing candidates have the fortitude to work together for the national interest. A government of, by, and for the people is obligated to conduct the nation's business in a manner that respects contrasting views and those who hold them. If all men and women are created equal, surely it follows that all citizens are entitled to have their views respectfully considered in the public square and, after elections, to have the representatives they choose be open minded and in a position to reflect credibly the judgments of their constituents in governmental decision making.

Politics has high and low moments. Higher moments have been characterized by expansions of political tolerance; lower moments by debilitating political discourse, often accentuated with racial, ethnic, and religious overtones. In the history of the Republic, there have been more troubling challenges than we have witnessed in recent years; and in world affairs, more egregious words have incited humankind to greater misdeeds than America has experienced. Nevertheless, the caustic labeling of public officials as "fascist" or "communist" and the polemical toying with



history-blind radicalism—the notion of “secession”—is deeply troubling.

One might ask, what problem is there with political hyperbole? Plenty! Words reflect emotion as well as meaning. They clarify—or cloud—thought and energize action. When rancorous rhetoric is manipulated to divide the American family, the logic becomes the warning. If 400,000 American soldiers gave their lives to defeat fascism, if tens of thousands were lost holding communism at bay, and even more died in a civil war to define and preserve the union, isn't it a citizen's obligation to apply perspective to words that contain warring implications?

There is, after all, a difference between holding a particular tax, or spending, or health-care view and asserting that an American who supports another approach, or is a member of a different political party, is an advocate of an “ism” of hate that encompasses gulags and concentration camps. Some frameworks of thought define rival ideas; others, enemies.

The poet Walt Whitman once described America as an “athletic democracy.” What he meant was that the politics of his era was rugged and vigorous and spirited. Anti-immigrant, especially anti-Catholic, sentiment and toleration for human degradation implicit in slavery characterized more than a little of 19th-century American thought and many of our social structures. Indeed, violence was part of 19th-century political manners. In 1804, Vice President Aaron Burr shot dead our greatest Secretary of Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, for suggesting that Burr was “despicable” in a duel, which might be described as a brazen act of legalized incivility. Half a century later, Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina wandered over to the Senate floor and caned unconscious Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts who

was holding forth on the immorality of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and its sanctioning of slavery in an expanding part of the union. Uncivil behavior is nothing new.

What are new are transformative changes in communications technology, in American politics, and the issues facing humanity. While

America has entered a period of intensifying polarization.

not as passionate a rupture as existed in the 19th century, evidence is mounting (and polls confirm) that America has entered a period of intensifying polarization. Citizens have lost confidence in many institutions of society and are becoming more disrespectful of their leaders, of other faith systems, and of each other. Feisty position taking in the media reflects angst-ridden views of the public and, in turn, gives license to socially divisive assertions across the land. This reinforcing phenomenon—a press increasingly pandering to political constituencies, and constituencies increasingly polarized from each other—accentuates attitudinal rifts in the body politic and invigorates the activist wings of the political parties.

In legislative primaries where a small percentage of the electorate—usually less than 5 percent—control the choice of candidates for the two major parties, the ideological edges routinely overwhelm the citizen center. The consequence of nominating candidates at the edges of the political spectrum is particularly traumatic as legislative bodies become bereft of voices reflecting the concerns of middle American political and social thought. The capacity of legislators to reach common ground is brought into doubt when money concerns and partisan pressures

to maintain ideological consistency are dominant considerations. Compromise may have once been the art of politics, but intransigence is the new art of political survival. If an elected official in today's environment chooses to compromise on an issue, that official becomes vulnerable to a primary challenge. Activists will insist that a “real” liberal or “real” conservative represent their preferred party. The inevitable result: an increase both in radicalism and the frequency of leadership swings.

In Western civilization's most prophetic poem, “The Second Coming,” William Butler Yeats suggests that the center cannot hold “when the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity.” Yeats was reacting to the seemingly senseless carnage of World War I trench warfare. But the chaos of modernity has



produced a crisis of perspective, as well as values, that give his words contemporary relevance. Many of today's traumas stem from the fast-changing nature of society, which has so many destabilizing elements. But some of the responsibility falls at the feet of politicians and their supporters who use inflammatory rhetoric and

irresponsible advertising to divide the country. Candidates may prevail in elections by tearing down rather than uplifting, but if elected, they cannot then unite a splintered citizenry. And more insidious than the pervasive public incivility of many modern campaigns is the polite, private incivility that is common place on Capitol Hill. The electoral process, after all, is about more than what happens on Election Day. It is also about what happens between elections. To paraphrase Carl von

Clausewitz, law making is the continuation of politics in another forum. Electoral politics never stops. It is just interrupted every day or two to count ballots.

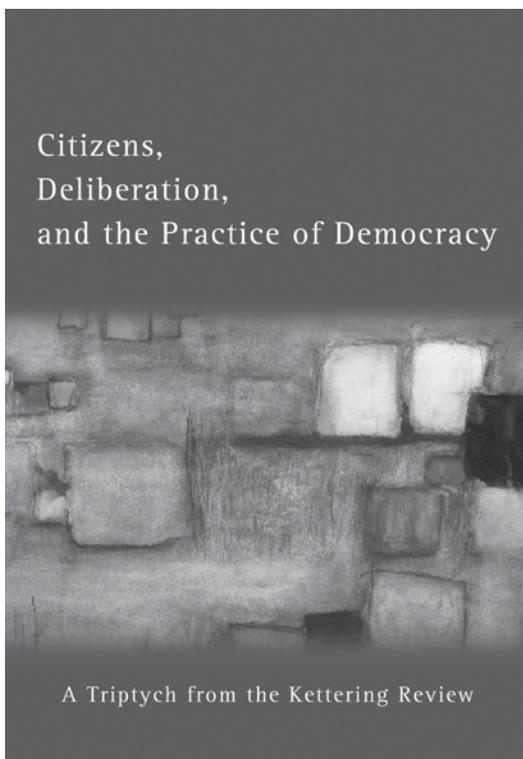
Uncivil speech dispirits the soul of society.

Following a long and distinguished career as a representative in the United States Congress, James A. Leach now serves as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



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