

## Can Democrats and Republicans find perfect happiness together?

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First of all let me thank you all for coming to the campus today. It’s a pleasure to see you and to talk about marriage counseling between Democrats and Republicans. Clearly they need some help. The absence of civility in American politics is alarming. Before I begin, however, I would like to say that the answer to the question posed by the title of this lecture (Can Democrats and Republicans find perfect happiness together) is “yes—comma—but.” “Yes,” because there is no inherent reason why the two parties can’t work together; “but” because they both need to re-wire their brains first.

I mean that quite literally. I am going to suggest that one of the biggest obstacles to Democrats and Republicans cooperating more effectively is conceptual. Before I do that, however, let me set the stage a little. I don’t think I’m revealing any secrets, or even offering any particular revelation, if I say that the Democratic Party has been in slow decline for the last 50 years.

First it lost the south. Then, under Ronald Reagan, it lost labor. Now, from what I can see, it’s lost confidence in itself. Instead of reaching out to join Republicans in a wider intellectual discourse, the Democratic party has essentially given up. In the battle of ideas, Republicans seem to have won hands down.

On the one hand are folks who live on the east and west coasts and in universities. They define justice in terms of equality, they distrust religion, and they celebrate diversity. They tend to vote Democratic. On the other hand are folks who live in the heartland of America. They define justice in terms of freedom, they want to integrate their religious values into everyday life, and they value unity over diversity. They tend to vote Republican.

At the moment, there seem to be marginally more of the latter than the former. And they don’t appear to like each other much either. When Howard Dean recently said he hates Republicans and everything they stand for, he wasn’t exactly brimming over with good will. And I suspect a lot of Republicans have the same tender regard for Howard Dean that he has for them. At the moment, in fact, their interests appear to be about as irreconcilable as those of the proverbial butcher and the cow. There just doesn’t seem to be a whole lot of middle ground there. Meanwhile, the country is becoming increasingly polarized, and to some degree, paralyzed.

So I have a proposal. It is really very simple. It calls for both parties to go back to the basics. In this case, that is the well of ideas that nourished the founders of this republic, and that inspired Abraham Lincoln when the country was indeed tearing itself apart during the Civil War. They were committed not only to freedom, and not only to equality, but to both freedom and equality. Lincoln said it best, of course, when he referred to a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal—not a bad mission statement, actually.

To be sure, these ideals of freedom and equality have been honored in the breach as much as in the observance. Slavery was a scourge on the American soul the consequences of which are still with us. Nevertheless, the fact that we are all hypocrites doesn’t mean we have to be

cynics. We should measure ourselves by the nobility of our aspirations as well as by the failure of our deeds.

If that's true, then how did we get in such a pickle of incivility? I happen to think that it starts, in part, over a conceptual misunderstanding in the definitions of the two terms—freedom and equality. That's where the brain re-wiring comes in, and that's what I want to talk about briefly today.

If you define freedom primarily as an absence of constraint, for example, and if you define equality primarily as equality of condition, then the two will naturally be opposed to each other. An increase in one necessitates a decrease in the other.

Let me explain briefly what I mean by that. Let's say I want to insure everyone has equality of condition, an equal income, an equal car, an equal house, and equal vacation, etc. In other words, I want everybody to be equal in every material way possible. To do that I will have to severely reduce your freedom to make more money than someone else, to drive a fancier car than someone else, etc. The reverse would produce the same opposition. If I increase freedom so that some can make more money, live in fancier houses, etc., then I inevitably reduce equality.

This is not a new debate. To some degree, it's been going on since capitalism began. In fact it was the inequalities produced by the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century that gave rise to the socialist movement in the first place. Idealistic intellectuals saw a world in which the greedy prospered and the innocent suffered, and they blamed the system of capitalism. Socialists argued that equality was related to equity, which was related to fairness, which was related to justice, so that inequality automatically equated to injustice. Following Rousseau, they concluded that the source of this inequality, or injustice, was private property which, if abolished, would then eliminate inequality.

Well, we all know what happened after that. An intellectual by the name of Karl Marx came up with a whole theory of world history in which the driving force was economic struggle between those who are unequal. Since the cause of all human inequality and therefore of all human suffering was private property, he proposed to eliminate it. His theory was later picked up by a down-and-out Russian intellectual by the name of Vladimir Lenin, who made a few design modifications that justified totalitarian rule, and then went on to found the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, and then China, where Mao Zedong subscribed to the Leninist version of Marxism, proceeded to run their economies into the ground and kill more of their own citizens, by a large margin, than died in all the wars of the twentieth century.

A good part of the twentieth century, and a significant portion of the world's peoples, were then caught up in the ensuing conflict known as the Cold War, which was often understood by Americans as a conflict between capitalism and socialism, between freedom and equality, and between democratic and totalitarian government. This long struggle had the effect of polarizing American society, driving a wedge between a conservative heartland that loved freedom and a liberal elite that loved equality. My own father was caught up in this conflict during the McCarthy era. As a professor of history at WSU at the time, he was investigated by the Washington state equivalent of the House Un-American Activities Committee for having advocated the recognition of China by the United States. Fortunately he didn't lose his job, but he always said he sure found out fast who his real friends were.

Then, in the late 1970s, China embraced a market economy, and in the early 1990s, the USSR collapsed like a house of cards. Freedom, which we had for so long been told was in combat with equality, seemed to win, which meant that equality had to lose.

I mention all this because it seems to me that we are still crawling out of the intellectual rubble created by the Cold War. We had for so long seen freedom and equality as adversaries that we just can't seem to turn off that mind-set like a water faucet.

I am going to argue, by contrast, that both parties are right. Samuel Taylor Coleridge is once supposed to have remarked that people are usually right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny. To apply that insight to the problem at hand, one could say that the Republicans are right in affirming the value of freedom and wrong in denying the value of equality, while Democrats are right in affirming the value of equality and wrong in denying the value of freedom. In other words, they each are committed to a partial truth, which together form a complementary whole.

I pose the issue in this way for a very specific reason. The physicist Niels Bohr once wrote that the opposite of a truth is likely to be another truth. After trying to understand for all my adult life why reasonable people can't get along when they are both right, I have concluded that we live in an age of the partial truth. In this age, everybody sees the world around them in binary terms, black and white, right or wrong, winner or loser, either/or. If I win, you lose. If I'm right, you're wrong. If you're not with us, you're agin us. It isn't just G.W. who thinks this way. We all do—myself included. I have discovered in 30 years of marriage, for example, that if my wife is right, which happens more often than I care to admit, it automatically means that I am wrong. Which calls to mind the philosophical conundrum about whether a tree falling in the forest makes a noise if there is no one nearby to hear it. The corollary of that is the following: if a husband says something in the forest and his wife is not there to hear it, the question then is, is he still always wrong?

So where does this propensity to see the world in terms of a partial truth come from? I believe that this habit of thinking in terms of a partial truth goes all the way back to the Enlightenment, for those of you interested in intellectual pedigree. Enlightenment thinkers were resolutely skeptical, secular, and rational. They were focused on rights, they worshipped science, and they believed in the autonomy of the individual. They were so extreme in their commitment to these truths that they provoked a reaction in the form of another set of truths, which came to be called the Romantic movement. This group, focused on faith, not skepticism, on the sacred, not the secular, and on the emotional, not the rational. They emphasized responsibility, not rights, they distrusted science, and they believed in the value of community over the individual.

This polarized view of the world still permeates our own outlook. For example, it was during the 18th century that Pietism arose in Germany and Holland, which emphasized the emotional conversion experience and developed a profound distrust of science. Those views crossed the English channel and then the Atlantic in the form of the evangelical churches, who to this day still distrust science. It is a thing of wonder to me that the reasons why G.W. is talking about cutting funding to the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health go back to intellectual battles fought more than 200 years ago. We are still chewing on the intellectual cud of the 18th century—that bovine metaphor, you understand, comes naturally to someone raised in eastern Washington, especially at Moo U.

But let's assume, against all the evidence, that we can actually liberate ourselves from the shackles of the 18th century and imagine a world in which husbands and wives—or Democrats and Republicans—can have different views and still both be right, and therefore cultivate the deeper sense of respect for each other that is a prerequisite for genuine dialogue and cooperation. More specifically, let's assume that freedom and equality can be redefined in terms that make them not only fully compatible, but completely indispensable to each other.

So here we go. Instead of defining freedom only in its negative sense, as an absence of constraint, let's define it in a positive sense, as the choice to develop one's potential. And instead of defining equality only as equality of condition, let's define it as equality of opportunity.

In this case, an increase in one actually produces an increase in the other. It's a non-zero sum game. More equality of opportunity means more choices, or freedom, to fulfill one's potential. Although equality of opportunity is easy enough to understand, a positive definition of freedom is more difficult. So let me give an example.

When we raise our children at home, or when we educate them in school, we make them study because we want them to grow up to become responsible and productive citizens. We want them to have choices—or freedom—in the future to fulfill their potential. But typically kids don't always want to study. They want to play. So we nail them to their chair to do their homework. We reduce their short-term freedom (defined in its negative sense as an absence of constraint) in order to enhance their long-term freedom (defined in its positive sense). Because we know that if they grow up to be illiterate, their choices will be severely limited. That's what Anatole France meant by the satirical remark that in Paris even the rich have the freedom to sleep under the bridge at night. What he meant was that freedom is an empty promise if people are so poor, and have so little opportunity, that they cannot exercise that freedom.

Another angle on this question is to see that both freedom and equality, even by themselves, can also be abused. Virtue, according to Aristotle, exists midway between two extremes—a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess. Take courage, for example. Too little courage is cowardice. Too much courage is foolhardiness. With respect to foolhardiness, for example, when I was growing up in eastern Washington, guys would take a couple of old pickup trucks out to some road in the wheat fields, and drive them toward each other at high speed. Whoever veered off first was, yes, you guessed it, chicken. That's called foolhardiness. It's also called stupidity, but we won't quibble over the details. In any case, when you apply that principle to our case, too much freedom leads to chaos, too little leads to tyranny. By the same token, too much equality undermines freedom, too little undermines justice.

They each reach their highest expression, therefore, only in balance with the other. We have to re-wire our pre-frontal cortex to enable us to move beyond our obsession with a partial truth.

For Republicans to mock "liberals" because of their commitment to equality is to deny one of the basic principles of all human ethical and religious truths, namely that every human being has an equal claim to be treated with respect and dignity. By the same token, for Democrats to mock Republicans for their commitment to freedom is to deny an equally basic principle of our common humanity, which is a yearning to be free to find and express our own

individuality and identity.

In closing, let me just say that on the deepest level, it is through accepting constraints, not escaping them, that we become truly free. To be fully human is not to be free to shop until you drop, but to accept responsibility for a life of service and compassion. This country has been a beacon of hope for so many people in the world for so long not only because it offers more jobs, but also because it offers what all people have yearned for since the beginning of time—a life of freedom and equality of opportunity. But we are in danger of squandering that legacy in our refusal to respect views that differ from our own, to substitute, in other words, our own personal piece of the truth for the whole truth.

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